

The *Malleus Maleficarum*: Rationalism vs. Superstition?

Alexandra W. Albertini

University of Corsica, Corte, France

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) by Henry Institoris and Jacques Sprenger was written in order to help inquisitors identify, persecute, and prosecute witches. The book is well-known but not studied as much as one could think, and is sometimes confused with another treatise written in 1669, which includes works by demonologists, such as Jean Nider, Bernard Basin, and Bartolomeo de Spina. This can be explained by the fact that several successive editions were published, which changed the essence of the first essay, until the 17th century. My argument is that the first edition was paradoxical and not as strict as one could imagine. The book was a “bible” for the inquisition about the subjugation of witches, but in the same way, the book seemed to be far too rationalistic when confronted with satanism and superstition. Indeed, we believe that the thesis of the *Malleus Maleficarum* was also a new way of conceiving of knowledge, fighting against superstition by using the tools of early rationalism at the end of the 15th century. The witches’ knowledge that is investigated in the book is confronted with theology, as well as with reason. There is significant evidence of the writers’ rationalistic view about occultism and belief.

Keywords: rationalism, superstition, witch, inquisition, religion

What is the *Malleus Maleficarum*? This book is known as a treatise on demonology written in Latin by two German inquisitors, Henry Institoris (Krämer) and Jacques Sprenger in 1486, in order to identify, persecute, and prosecute witches. Its main arguments seem to be articulated first with irrational and diabolical beliefs that are normalized in a useful guide for those concerned with fighting demons. It was considered a “demonological summa”, and Amand Danet (2014) said in his introduction, it was the “most used guide”, as compared to *De La Démonomanie Des Sorciers* by Jean Bodin (1580) (p. 11)¹, and was considered a “crusade from the inside” (p. 42). The *Malleus Maleficarum* was originally titled *Maleficas et earumhaenesimutphrameapotentissimacomereis* (i.e. contereis).² This was perfectly acceptable within the context of the religious beliefs of that time, and it seems to set aside any possibility of rational debate.

The writers seek to distinguish true witches from false witches, and they try to find criteria within their experience in order to identify devil worshippers and find a way to subjugate them. In other terms, the treatise seems to base its research on rationalistic tools and reason that are combined with justice and religion. The witches’ knowledge investigated in the book is confronted with theology, and also with reason. Theirs is rather an enlightened subjugation, one that is particularly attentive to truth. The argument is articulated using a real

Alexandra W. Albertini, Dr., Associate Professor, Faculté des Lettres, Langues, Arts, Sciences Humaines et Sociales, University of Corsica, Corte, France.

¹ *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, Bodin is known to be the most rationalistic of the demonologists and he based his writings on the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

² The Hammer of Witches: fighting against witchcraft and heresy of the time as a powerful lance. English version for quotes: <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org>. NB: The word “comereis” in the title means in fact “contereis” in latin. All other English translations by Alexandra W. Albertini.

method to provide legitimacy to the inquisition, hunting, and persecuting witches. The book gives a number of examples to assist the reader, a demonologist who needs a sort of guide to help him identify and prosecute enemies of Christian faith. It uses rationalistic reasoning to prevent charlatanism, and separate true prophets from false ones concerning divination, according to the Bible. The Holy See (Pope Innocent VIII) ordered the *Malleus Maleficarum* with the papal bull *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* in 1484. This book's arguments about witches must be rigorously and concretely justified to be a serious and effective tool for contemporary demonologists.

We can legitimately wonder if it is only a guide for justice and the inquisition.

It is based on the rigorous traditional medieval method of scholasticism, especially in terms of the outline of the treatise, which takes the form of a series of questions. The first section: justification for the persecution of witches by the inquisition; the second section: the inquisitors' practical experience; and the third section: prosecution and justice. This follows the model of using rationality to talk about Christianity in the 13th century, as Olivier Boulnois (2010) explained. But we can look deeper into the rationalistic way of thinking, explore new paths to understand how these thinkers are paradoxically rational about the subject as well, at a time where people saw demons everywhere (ubique daemon was the password for every church in Europe until the 17th century). It was nothing new to discuss the casuistry of persecuting witches, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, as according to the Bible verse: "you shall not permit a sorceress to live" (Exodus 22:18-28). But perhaps we can question the true cause behind the persecutions at the end of the 15th century. The idea is to reappropriate this mysterious book for posterity and to demonstrate how it advances rationalistic views that are absolutely incompatible with its irrational thesis concerning witchcraft.

We shall first begin by recalling the context:

At the end of the 15th century, a fascination with demons emerged with malefic overtones, after a few centuries where the devil had been mocked, had little influence, and was seen as a sort of lesser demon. The belief was that he had been put into chains by God for 1,000 years, according to the Bible, and he was seen as a sort of spirit that God sometimes allowed to punish people. This image was not really frightening, and led to the emergence of superstitions. The demonization of women created an outlet for all the fears and miseries of the world. The female witch became responsible for everything, which paralleled the rise of the new science of persecution and the wars against heresy, as heretics were considered to be sorcerers as well (Lea, 2004). This was an infamous period of high stakes for witchcraft, rationalistic views and heresy (This same period saw the persecution of the Waldensians at the end of the 15th century, and of Savonarola, who was burned alive in 1498).³ The inquisitors presented witches as guilty women who were devoted to demons. They were thought to be sexually and mentally submissive to them. Chapter 4, Part 2, the first question in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, reminds the reader of witches who lived in olden times, 1400 years B.C., who were raped by demons without their consent, according to the book by Johannes Nider entitled *Formicarius* and the work by Thomas de Brabant, *Bonum Universale De Apibus* (Fumaroli, 2001; Nider, 1475; Thomas, 1259).⁴

This context of "satanic fever" (to use the expression from Vandenbroucke) that gripped the imagination of the time encouraged persecution all the more as it was also a period of eschatological fears. One can see the old beliefs in the definition of witchcraft (Baroja, 1972). But it is not enough to simply justify the phenomenon.

³ Waldensians: a proto-Protestant group that broke away from the Catholic Church. Savonarola said he was a prophet and attacked the immorality of Catholicism. He was tried and burned.

⁴ *Fourmi* (ants) used to designate Moderns, and *Abeilles* (bees) used to designate Ancients.

One must also include the evolution of theology, which incited the connection between reason and faith in the 14th and 15th centuries. This meant that theology was looking for logical arguments to convince people about irrational religious beliefs. “The theologian is a theologian”, says Olivier Boulnois (2010), in discussing this new way of viewing theology as science (pp. 1300-1301). This Propaganda Fidei aimed to restore religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy. So, we must wonder about the reason used in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, where the writers juxtapose diabolical science and human science. We wonder what kind of witches the authors believe in, when we know that human science is particularly feminine.

This is a difficult question because of the phenomenon of ecstatic women during that time (since the beginning of the 14th century). The paradox is that these women were more or less accepted by the church as true prophets (Ruscano, 2010, p. 1333). Indeed, they were charismatic women who made predictions, and some of them had even been canonized, such as Hildegard von Bingen, called the Sibyl of the Rhine, predicted the end of days, and shared the inquisitors’ point of view about the risk of heresy (Gouguenheim, 1996). This sort of millenarian radicalization increased until the 16th century, conflating any irrational practice or science with heresy. So, we should not be surprised by the inquisition’s confusion between certain types of knowledge and witchcraft (which they had been authorized to prosecute since 1326). There was a sort of general public debate about the end of time (for example, in Cologne, in 1479, it was seen as pathological symptom of the misery of the world by modern scientific criticism [Danet, 2014]). “After 1484, the Papacy tried to organize a general and systematic witch-hunt” (Nieto Soria, 2010, p. 1374). The fight against demon worship, in this context, is both a fight against women (maleficarum [feminine] and not maleficorum [masculine]) and against evil. Crowds were galvanized against witches by inquisitors: People helped to subjugate and denounce women (Lea, 2004). It is clear that women represented the church of Satan and embodied a close and familiar subject, as the “priestesses of the unfortunate”, to use the term from Julio Baroja (1972, p. 99). They were damned in the Bible, and because women had been seen as guilty since the original sin, they were immediate targets for being burned on the sacrificial pyre and providing an outlet for these fears (Albertini, 2019).⁵ Henry Charles Lea (2004), a historian of the Inquisition, wrote “it was better to sacrifice 100 innocent people than to let one guilty person go free” (p. 293). So, prosecution for witchcraft targeted women (75%, compared with 25% men) (Briggs, 2010).

The *Malleus Maleficarum* had this sort of casuistry, and furthermore gave absolute power to the inquisitor, as a “spiritual and impartial father” (according to Lea [2004]) to confiscate the property of the convicted person. So, there were many reasons for persecuting witches, codified not only in terms of object but also in terms of moral and religious justification. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, therefore, is very careful to distinguish between

⁵ “...des bûchers humains pour purifier la religion des hérétiques (ceux qui font une erreur de choix par rapport à la vraie foi, selon l’étymologie grecque *haireisis*). Le choix du bûcher chrétien s’appuie aussi sur l’analogie avec la foudre céleste qui vient châtier les pécheurs. La Bible de Sacy (1685) dit en effet: ‘Il [le Roi, cad Jésus] dira aussi à ceux qui seront à la gauche: Retirez-vous de moi maudits! Allez au feu éternel, qui est préparé pour le diable et pour ses anges’ (Mathieu, 25-41). Le feu du bûcher prélude aussi au feu de l’Enfer auquel on rend les suppôts de Satan. Le bûcher pour sorcellerie est donc naturel depuis le Moyen-Âge [...] Le feu devient l’exutoire du satanique, mais cache une persécution plus sexiste. Il a sacrasuistique: le mal pour le mal, celui des diables qui torturent l’Enfer” (...human pyres to cleanse the religion of heretics (those who err in their decision with regard to the true faith, according to the etymology of the Greek term *haireisis*). The choice of the Christian pyre is also based on the analogy with the heavenly flame to punish sinners. King James version of the Bible says: “Then shall he [the King, i.e. Jesus] say also unto them on the left hand, ‘Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels’. (Matthew 25:41)”. Being burned at the stake also foreshadows the fires of Hell, to which Satan’s servants will return. Burning as a punishment for witchcraft has therefore been a natural choice since the Middle Ages [...] The pyre is an outlet for Satanic evil, but it conceals a more sexist form of persecution. It has its own system of logic: an evil for an evil, that of demons who torture souls in Hell).

true and false witches. Whether honest or not, inquisitors must give “good reasons” to subjugate witches who are women, or women who are witches. Here, then, is the limit of excessive rationalization about the inquisition’s procedures concerning irrational beliefs. The debate is ambiguous in the treatise. What is really being persecuted through the witch-hunt? Behind the women, goods confiscated, edification of the church, and later the battle of the counter-reformation, what is likely hiding is a fear of knowledge (which is diabolical by definition [see Ecclesiastes]) which uses its tools with reason and logic. In fact, it implies a fear of others, and their power through science. Thus, these others are seen as the enemies of the faith.

Logical Demonstration in the Treatise

How does the logical demonstration function? I will just touch on this briefly, because Amand Danethas demonstrated the rigorous outline of the treatise so thoroughly already. I will just cite a few stylistic examples to complete the rhetorical analysis. First, there are a few rhetorical elements, whose object is questionable but which are paradoxically efficiently rational. We often see the art of syllogism, and it is well known that syllogism can be both rationalistic and absurd. But it gave serious scientific support to the treatise at the time. Syllogisms are often very long and complicated and can, in fact, cloud the issue for the reader. One example is when the inquisitors argue about the power of devils, in contrast to their discarnate condition. There is a long demonstration that explains how the voice functions, how people speak through a physiological phonatory system inside the mouth, with the help of air and the tongue (II, 1, 4). Then, the authors acknowledge that a demon (who is made up of air) cannot have this phonatory system. So, they conclude that “they cannot really speak” (II, 1, 4). But the inquisitors show us concretely how there is another way of understanding the situation. According to Aristotle’s *On the Soul* and its theory that fish scream when they die out of the water (the syllogism is here accentuated by the weight of the argument from a philosophical authority), demons can find other ways to speak. This is strange, but they use a few tricks. Demons can speak in the same manner as Aristotle’s fish, casting sounds through the air. Or they can talk through bodies they inhabit through possession, using the organs of the people they have subjugated.

Denials are common in inductive demonstrations and seem to give a rational causal connection to the intention. They use argumentative connectors, connecting the reasoning step by step to be extremely precise. Witches have made a pact with the devil, lose their freedom, and act on his orders, and as the inquisitors write here: “It is not reasonable to conclude from the particular to the universal” (I, 2). However, they use induction when needed, explaining cause and effect based on the lone example of one witch, subjugated by a demon. At the beginning of the “first question” (Part I), they base their demonstration on the causes of concrete problems. They speak, for example, about male impotence (this treatise is truly fascinated by this subject, as it is argued that it empowers witches), and concludes with a “harmful and protean superstition” (I, 1). There is here a false link between cause and effect, or between sign and effect (as with superstition) (Albertini, forthcoming). Step by step, the connection is made between the male impotence and witches’ power, without resorting to the irrational explanation of magic. We understand that the inquisitors use this argument to incriminate women as witches who cast spells. These women finally give men the illusion they are bewitched, and in this case impotent. Reality can confirm this, because we know how one’s psychological state impacts the functioning of the body in sexual matters, and how a man can quickly become impotent when he has an emotional blockage. This is an empirical demonstration, but when the authors say inductive reasoning is not allowed in some cases, this may in fact be a strategy to prepare for the subsequent rebuttal of doubtful evidence. The purpose is legitimized to confirm, by

contrast, the more solemn deductive demonstration, starting from the inquisitors' general theory (and their prejudices), combined with the concrete examples drawn from their significant experience. Furthermore, the inquisitors base their thesis on biblical or religious arguments with a selected exegesis to support their thinking. And when there is a lack of evidence to support their claims, they use deduction, ending with a general and universal pronouncement. For example: "one did not already clarify that...one showed that...one also showed that..." (I, 8). In the name of God, the inquisitors appeal to the readers' trust and logic:

we pray the reader look to God, to not look everywhere for a demonstration when just a probability is required, concluding to be true that which is derived from personal experience by sight and hearing, or which is reported by reliable witnesses. (II, 1, main question)

This remark is quite the opposite of a rational view, but functions throughout the demonstration as a logical analysis with help of rhetoric, albeit with subjectivity. These "reliable witnesses" could be anyone who saw something strange about a woman.

I will cite one specific example. The inquisitors want to explain how witches have relations with demons (incubus), but they want to argue using logical reasoning. This is paradoxically because of the subject of the testimony, which is the sexual union between a woman and a not-incarnate "bad angel". But the authors want to use reason in order to be clearly understood. They never mention the Witches' Sabbath, which was invented at the end of the Middle Ages. The Witches' Sabbath seems to be far too unrealistic. They first argue that demons are made up of a sort of condensed air; they cannot really be seen. They appear as a sort of brown vapor above a woman when they are in a sexual union with them (II, 1, 4). The inquisitors quote examples from the towns of Ribeaupierre and Rastibonne, often mentioned by the husbands themselves (II, 1, 4). This is termed "experience" by the authors. "As much as the experience taught us", "The experience, mistress of life, taught us" (II, 1, 4). Experience, in the form of evidence from witness testimony, may seem real, but we can see that it is in fact subjective interpretation, and a truly bad reading of reality, all the more so when the husband accuses his wife. The inquisitors believe what the husband of the supposed witch says about his wife, but the reader understands that this man is afraid of being persecuted himself and will confess to anything in exchange for forgiveness (II, 1, 2).

These examples seem to underline the fragility of my own demonstration about the rational point of view in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, but I use it to show in particular how the Inquisitors employ bad faith with a pseudo-rational rhetorical demonstration. Indeed the rational view is embedded not only in the outline of the treatise, but also in its arguments. It is not important to examine whether or not they believe in irrationalism, they just want to defend their church and faith against heresy, and they use superstition to do it. They are interested in focusing on the prosecution of witches as a logical procedure. They do not want to prove that evil is active here; they want to scare people about witches, particularly demonologists who receive this inquisitorial guide, and about the dangers of deviant human behavior. The writers use rhetoric to argue against witches, in an attempt to legitimate their persecution, but, in fact, they recognize that witches are subject to God's power as well. "The power of God is stronger than the power of the Devil, and his actions too" (I, 1). The authors repeat this many times, which could render the demonstration unnecessary. What is important is to prevent people from believing this. So, the demonstration wants both to attack women and to emphasize God's power, and not simply justify the persecution of witches.

Women are indeed the subject of abominable examples throughout the treatise. Some rhetorical questions invite indignation from the reader. The book is an anathema against women who are abused by the devil to

demonstrate, on the contrary, the glory of God. Evil is an accessory within an argument for Christianity, and women are the scapegoats (I, 12-14). The first question in the treatise is “Do witches exist?” (there are 78 questions to discuss the subject throughout the book). Inquisitors do not quite answer yes, but they do state that to believe the contrary would be absolutely heretical. This is an example of litotes and a syllogism at the same time, buried inside a rhetorical question.

God placed man between good and evil, and man has the freedom to choose. So, the demonization of witches is a strike both against evil and for God’s glory (II, main question). God’s glory is underlined in this parenetic literature, according to a cosmology of unity, which is the opposite of satanic disorder, not testifying to God’s power. Human nature is tested here through the evil actions of witches with God’s permission (I, 12). The list of sins (I, 14) incites man to recall the dangers of superstitions that are forbidden by the Bible (see Leviticus XIX, 26, Deuteronomy XVIII, 10-22).⁶ The rational use of rhetoric in the treatise is questionable in terms of meaning, but useful to demonstrate the power of God, the malignancy of evil and its intermediary, represented by the woman-witch (and here not the witch-woman). Witchcraft is considered to be a power that resists political and official authority (still seen as paganism versus Christianity), which historian Robert Muchembled (1987) describes as a “sociology of authority” (p. 227).

Authentic Illusion: Witchcraft as a Necessary Ambiguity

The reader is presented with a broad logical and rational demonstration about the nature of evil, to enable them, paradoxically, to distinguish between true and false instances of witchcraft. They are produced either by charlatans (this is the first rational interpretation) or by science (the second rational interpretation), or by demons (I, 9). In the case of demons, we know that Christianity believes they exist, and this is not a truly irrational view but more a religious observation. The question is to determine what the inquisitors themselves believe. They think, as did Alexandre de Hales,⁷ the famous English philosopher and theologian of the 13th century (I, 9), that the witch is subject to the “illusion of the devil”. The inquisitors note here the mental influence of witches who believe in and make people believe in their evil charms. The writers employ the term “illusion” to refer to magic. Illusion is a rational explanation of magic, because of the power of human auto-suggestion, even if there is the possibility of its creation by demons. Demons who are very much real for demonologists. Nothing irrational here! Demons work to mislead Christian believers with superstitions. The authors particularly

⁶ Bible, King James Version, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/kjv/>.

Leviticus 19:26, “Ye shall not eat any thing with the blood: neither shall ye use enchantment, nor observe times”. Deuteronomy, 18:10-22: “**10** There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, **11** Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer*. **12** For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee. **13** Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God. **14** For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the LORD thy God hath not suffered thee so to do. **15** The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; **16** According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. **17** And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. **18** I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. **19** And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him. **20** But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. **21** And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? **22** When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him”.

⁷ English philosopher and theologian, 12/13th century, quoted by Johannes Nider.

emphasize this many times in the treatise. However, they generally employ the feminine term “witch” in the document, rarely the masculine “sorcerer”, “warlock”, or “wizard”, and their powers are analyzed in terms of severity (I, 16).

Concerning the ability to disappearing into thin air, for example, the authors specify that “they [the witches] give the illusion of magical disappearance, although it is not real” (I, 16). Magic is confronted with reality, and the demonstration also touches on possession and lycanthropy, which are justified as illusions through dreams (I, 1). This is a rational interpretation. Either the person imagines witchcraft, or the devil makes her imagine witchcraft. This a rational approach, based on religious beliefs about the devil, not about magic. It foreshadows the modern psychological theory of auto-suggestion (along with the *Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton [1621], with the discussion of religious melancholy, which is in fact superstition). How the transfer of power works is analyzed in the second part. The list of witches’ powers is frightening: They cast spells, do magic, are transported through the air, and all of this is explained rationally, step by step. In fact, human senses are troubled by witches. They use some words or potions to influence the mind’s perception of reality. Even worse are midwives, because of their role in abortions! (II, main question). We note that medical science is condemned here, and considered to be criminal heresy. We recall how science is seen as dangerous in the Bible (Ecclesiastes 1:18: “For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow”). Pain is a euphemism here. Knowledge is considered to be either heresy or doxa. Women are always guilty where evil is concerned, ever since Eve and the tree of knowledge in *Genesis*. The inquisitors use a frightening hyperbole “no one should imagine having a complete knowledge of these practices” (II, main question). Women are viewed as monsters, not because of magic, but because of crimes that are tied to magic. Indeed, abortions lead to satanic ceremonies where stolen babies are sacrificed to the devil. They are not baptized, and the belief was that their soul would go directly to hell. The crime is here not irrational, it is real. But it inspires enormous fear, if one believes in magic. Emotion, then feelings, is confused with reality, and indeed reality appears to be witchcraft. But this is a psychological reaction of the imagination, based on feelings. The writers understand this mechanism well: They explain that the soul is influenced by fear, and influences the body to change its reactions, causing disease or even death (I, 2). It is a description of psychosomatic disorders before its time, and it is really a rational theory. The inquisitors explain that a simple stare from a witch can produce this effect “through the organ of the imagination” (I, 2). Superstitious behavior provides a rational explanation for witchcraft. The person contaminates their own emotions, and then contaminates the people who speak with them about their beliefs, “through the air” (I, 2). To confirm this point of view, the writers mention an example where blood flows spontaneously after a murder, which they connect to the crime committed by Cain (I, 2). By extension, people can believe in anything, such as the nonsense of the influence of the stars or the power of amulets. Irrationality is not in the phenomena itself, but in the belief in the phenomena. These superstitions are kept up by demons, inventors of the malefic arts, to draw people away from God and good (I, 2), so they call the Demons Artifex (II, 1, 4). The more evil humans are, the more demons prosper (I, 2). We thus understand the Inquisitors’ interest in demonizing witches.

Ambiguous Utility of Reservations to Rationality

Yet some reservations are useful to the rationality of the treatise. Though in appearance the beliefs are irrational, we have just seen an underlying rationalism in the inquisitors’ demonstration. But sometimes their theses are difficult to understand. One example is when they speak about the transportation of witches. They say

it is possible, even if it is complicated to explain, which is contrary to the Canon *Episcopi* that posits that witches are “transported only in imagination” (II, 1, 2).⁸ But the inquisitors try to understand how witches travel bodily through the air, examining rational ways of transport and saying at the same time “they give illusion of magical disappearance, although it is not real” (I, 16). They say they believe that this is possible, but they do not know how witches do it. They want to find a rational explanation, and yet at the same time they are ambiguous. How contradictory! Here, we understand that the Inquisitors seem to not believe in magic because they are looking for a practical explanation, or an explanation based on illusion.

So, we may wonder how the inquisitors believe in witchcraft without truly understanding it, and why they believe the “confessions” of witches who admit to using their power and their magic in order to impress them, when these confessions are not rational (II, 1, 2). But we know that witches are women who are afraid of being tortured and who are often mad and willing say anything. Finally, the inquisitors base their theory on the writings of Johannes Nider, who believes in the transportation of witches, but without any real arguments.

In fact, the inquisitors are in doubt: They believe that a horse may carry the witch (II, 1, 3), even if it is a demon in that form. And they believe this because they have heard about it. “On chasse le bruit commun” (We hunt the common rumor), as says Muchembled (1987, p. 207). The argument behind the rumor is not indisputable, but it is not irrational. In fact, the Inquisitors cannot be certain, but they want people to be superstitious about this. So, they present that as “sufficient evidence” (II, 1, 3), and add a Biblical reference about Jesus being transported through the air by the devil, as told by Matthew (4:1-11). The rhetorical question “Did not the devil take up Our Saviour, and carry Him up to a high place, as the Gospel testifies?” clumsily belies the fragility of the argument. We believe that the authors know that, based on their rhetoric. It is an argument of religious authority, appropriated to benefit their thesis.

They abuse of this type of argument in the treatise, firstly because it was common at the time, and secondly because it would impress the reader, who is therefore obliged to agree with the demonstration, based on the religious source. Nobody would dare to argue against Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas, or the Bible itself. That would be considered heresy! It is a warning when the Inquisitors write, for example: “We say, as did Augustine: it is true that all superstitious practices come from the partnership between men and demons” and they call these practices “fanciful or damaging superstitions” (II, 1, 4).

Finally, they remain ambiguous in saying that “the power of the spirit is greater than the body” (II, 1, 3). Either they mean to say that spirit makes the body move, or they want to suggest that the spirit makes the mind believe that the body moves. And their imagination makes them believe that the spirit makes the body move. But the authors remained rational, explaining that it is impossible for demons to move bodies because they do not have this power (I, 3). In fact, the inquisitors want people to doubt; they want people to be superstitious enough to be afraid of witches and the devil, and to stay with the Christian church. They conclude by speaking about people: “it would be a matter of small importance if such men were left in their error, were it not that this error tends to the damage of the Faith” (II, 1, 3). We understand that the Inquisitors want a doubt to remain about the transportation of witches. They further add about witches and their sins:

the cause is not Evil, but human will [...] this can also be proved by reason: sin comes from free will. The Devil cannot be the cause of free will; that would be against the idea of freedom. So the Devil is not at the origin of any free will, nor of any sin. (I, 5)

⁸ The *Episcopi* is considered to be heretical. It is a religious and rational text which considers witch transport to be impossible. This text disturbs all the beliefs on this subject.

This is an explicit demonstration.

So, we can see show rhetoric is used to manipulate the reader about transportation, and the rationale used shows us how the inquisitors want to spread faith through doubt and fear. In fact, the inquisitors had no more the power of analyzing magic.

In 1330, John XXII prohibited Inquisitors from learning about magical arts (Lea, 2004).

Conclusion

To conclude, we understand that a rational demonstration is needed to solidify the thesis for other inquisitors against witches. So, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* must alternate between beliefs and superstitions to make the readers afraid of the evil behind the fear of women, and vice-versa, while at the same time being persuasive.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* needs reason to convince its readers of its thesis. Talking about the malfeasance of the witches is not enough.⁹ The authors have to prove, through rhetoric and examples aimed at demonologists, that the witch is a threat to order, no matter if her actions are irrational or not. And even when the inquisitors speak about magic, we see that they want to classify it using reason. They want people to believe this. They themselves are even in doubt, when, for example, they speak about divination, explaining that it is not really magical, but perhaps due to demons (I, 16). Those who do not agree with them are suspicious: some laypersons, “some experts” who go so far as to deny the existence of witches (I, 18). The writers of the treatise themselves recognize that they must adapt their ideas in order to be understood by readers and to be persuasive. They want everyone to understand that subjugating the devil contributes to the demonstration of the perfect world created by God. Only inquisitors, true religious practitioners, and those who are blessed by angels can escape the evil (II, 1, 5).

There is a paradox when Inquisitors believe the witches’ confession, while she is under the thrall of the devil, known as “the father of lies” in the Bible (John 8:44).

Another paradox is that the knowledge of learned women is derived from evil, while the knowledge of the inquisitors is derived from God.

And the ultimate paradox is that the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which deals with witchcraft and the persecution of witches, implicitly demonstrates that reason is required to believe in the illusion of magic, and that reason is needed to prove that Inquisitors must eliminate these woman-witches who are guilty of bad luck, influenced by the devil.

The emphasis on rationality shows us how the inquisitors’ ultimate aim is to spread the Christian faith through doubt and fear. It is not a question of a rational point of view against irrationalism, but rather rationality that uses superstition as a justification to persecute and prosecute women, knowledge and heresy all at the same time. Remember that in the beginning, the inquisition was a Dominican organization within the church. The Dominicans were an intellectual religious order focused on studies and sciences. And they wanted to keep knowledge on their side in order to reassert the power of the church. Frances Yates showed how the *Malleus Maleficarum* gave new meaning to Christianity (Yates, 1987), with the power of redemption through the prosecution of witches, as explained by the historian Michel de Certeau (1970).

Finally, it can be said that persecution of witches, according to a manual, like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, paradoxically confirms the rise of rational views through a casuistry based on rationalistic rhetorical tools. The

⁹ In this time of new knowledge and superstitious fears, we can see that people who consult witches are at the same time devout Christians.

distinction drawn between superstition and magic underlines the psychological aspects of superstition in the conflict between rationality and pagan beliefs.

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