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The human inclination to seek explanations for the strange and unusual is as old as human civilization. The supernatural has always provided a convenient rationale for forces that are beyond human control and understanding. War, disease and other natural phenomena are misfortunes that have been ascribed to the influence of witchcraft, of a force directed by a malevolent intelligence bent on subverting the harmony of a godly universe. Patriarchal European society has historically assigned witchcraft a decidedly feminine cast, an image that was formalized during the Middle Ages by the church and in print. The result was centuries of gender-based persecution, torture and violent death. In 1487, the church certified publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which gave momentum and an ominous shape to an old, misogynistic impulse.

Background –

The inscrutability and “otherness” of women has been a common theme throughout history. In ancient Greece, the philosopher Plato categorized women somewhere between fully developed man and the “brute beasts” of field and forest. Plato wrote of the “viscera” of women, which were “physically enlarged because of their cupidity, whereas men, because of their prudence, had bigger heads.” Subsequent characterizations have been equally superficial, with women alternately described as frail, small and easily moved to acts of evil. Seen in this light, females became suspect for their difference. To many, they were beings motivated by forces that men could not fully comprehend. This gave rise to suspicions that turned into something insidious.

Contemplation of the differences between men and women took on a sinister overtone in the pages of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a book which asserted the “innate guilt” of women. This contention, it was claimed, was confirmed in the Book of Exodus (22: 18), which commanded “You shall not permit a sorceress to live.” It is interesting to note that the *Malleus*’ authors, Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kraemer, the men who compiled and gave authority to common folk beliefs from Central Europe, were themselves no mere peasants, or provincial church laity. They were scholars, academics from the University of Salzburg and the University of Cologne, two of Europe’s most renowned universities. Kraemer and Sprenger were also Dominican inquisitors, for whom witchcraft, and the identification of witches, was a specialty.

In the *Malleus*, Kraemer considers the enigma of women who, though the weaker sex, are more prone to evil than men. Kraemer asks, “Why are there more workers of harmful magic found in the female sex, which is so frail and unstable, than among men?” As in Exodus, the *Malleus* responds that the answer comes from the Bible, from the Book of Genesis, which tells the story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s chest rib which, when removed, curved in the opposite direction of a man’s rib. The authors of the *Malleus* conclude that the deceptiveness of women can be accounted for by the fact that they are physically “incomplete,” lacking the same anatomy as a man. Incompleteness and weakness were, apparently, but a short step from evil and witchcraft.

The *Malleus* became the accredited “blueprint” for dealing with witches in Europe. Protestants and Roman Catholics alike regarded the *Malleus* as a

potent defense of the Christian faith, as well as a “ how to” manual for combating witchcraft. The book itself is composed of three parts, the third of which spells out the legal forms for prosecuting a witch trial and for using torture to extract confessions. Church and secular officials are urged to work together to help identify and capture witches and combat Satan’s attempts to gain a foothold in the soul of men. In her treatise on the Malleus, Elizabeth Mack points out that the book’s authors were willing to bend facts to suit their own purposes. The Malleus’ authors dubiously atomized the word “ femina,” breaking it down into the compounds “ fe,” meaning “ faith,” and “ minus,” meaning “ less.” Mack points out that the “ etymology used by Kraemer is interesting because it is not the orthodox etymology, to say the least. Most would say femina derives from a word meaning ‘ to suckle.’ By using his interpretation of the word’s origin, Kraemer could further his opinion of women.”

The Malleus’ publication arose from societal factors generally that were conducive to a belief in folk magic, popular superstition, astrology, and demonology. This was to be expected in a culture deeply rooted in fervent spirituality. “ The fetishism of relics, the veneration of saints, the performance of medieval mystery plays, in addition to the mystifying effect that the ceremonial recital of the Roman Catholic liturgical mass must have had on the unlearned laymen were just some of the elements which helped to create a profoundly spiritual dimension to the everyday lives of average people.” In other words, the idea of practical magic, or the application of magic, was common in Medieval Europe. In such an environment, it was not unusual to

happen upon instances where folk magic was combined with elements of Catholic devotion, such as the recitation of Ave Marias or Pater Nosters in an attempt to influence the natural world or the will of men. Such rituals were offered with innocent intentions, but the adaptation of Catholic spirituality could be easily misapprehended. “ Resultantly, the accounts of folk magic although representative of the perspectives of the commoner have come to us in a form distorted by the intellectual biases of the learned elites.”

Distortion and misinterpretation are common by-products of superstition, particularly when superstition and religion intersect. The Malleus includes many accounts of “ practical” applications of magic: “ There are those who on Palm Sunday keep and raise up among the grapevines and standing crops the Sign of the Cross or boughs or flowers that have been blessed, claiming that while the crops on all sides were harmed by hailstorms, the crops in their fields remained unharmed.” If one were to leave out the Cross, or the blessed flowers, it would be reasonable to see such a ceremony as witchcraft. Thus, the line between “ blessing” and “ cursing” could easily become blurred, and intention be misinterpreted. This was the environment into which the Malleus, with its stigmatizing of women, was introduced. As such, it is unsurprising that countless innocent women, such as midwives, should have been so readily victimized.

Hint of skepticism

Under such circumstances, it is surprising (not to mention ironic) to find that some sought to uphold a semblance of justice in the prosecution of witches. A public document published in London in the late middle ages called for a more scrupulous adherence to the law and a greater reliance upon common

sense. “ The Grand Errour of these latter Ages is ascribing power to Witches, and by foolish imaginations of mens’ brains, without grounds in the Scriptures, wrongfull killing of the innocent under the name of Witches; unto which Idolatry and blood-guiltinessmen are ledviolently.” This pamphlet mentions a book published early in the reign of Elizabeth I by a “ Mr. Scot,” which was quite influential among members of the clergy and the Magistracy, but notes that “ since that time England hath shamefully fallen from the Truth.” This pamphlet criticizes the reckless practice of rushing to summary judgment because many “ Witches are not such as are commonly executed for Witches.”

that witchcraft could not possibly exist, and that all such prosecutions had no basis in fact. The author of the pamphlet countered that while he had concluded that witches did exist, he had arrived at his determination only after a thorough examination of the facts, which revealed to him that arguing against witchcraft on the basis of Scripture was a self-defeating proposition. He wrote that after coolly assessing the question, he was “ so far from being convinc’d of my having before entertained false Notions of the Matter, that I thought myself capable of Confuting (these) assertions (authored by) but a Smatterer in Matters of Learning.”

Thus, skepticism had begun to enter the picture by this period. Yet there was no change in the fact that women were still accused of witchcraft at a much higher rate than men. If one could use Scripture to “ confute” attacks against the validity of witchcraft, then Scripture, and the writings of church leaders, could certainly be used to uphold the belief that women were deserving of suspicion in such cases. The Old Testament refers to women who used

spoken incantations to cast spells and lay curses against their victims. St. Augustine wrote that there were 14 different kinds of “superstitious or magic arts,” witchcraft being the worst, “therefore it follows that witches hold the worst kind of association with devils, with especial reference to the behavior of women, who always delight in vain things.” Such influential views, drawn from the very foundations of Christianity, were so deeply ingrained in European society by the 15th century that the alternate title for the *Malleus Maleficarum* was *Women Who Commit Maleficia*.

Social change, natural phenomena -

And yet biblical assignation is not the only reason that women were so disproportionately accused of witchcraft. Socio-economic change often manifests itself in negative ways; the growing urbanization of European countries forced unprecedented numbers of people who once lived pastoral lives to seek subsistence in the cities, which led to poverty and a marked upswing in beggary for “above all poor, old women for they were a preponderant majority of those people, who begging went from door to door.” The stigmatizing of such unfortunate individuals doubtless contributed to the fact that approximately 80 percent of those accused of witchcraft were women. These became the “hags” and “crones,” whose image would be characterized throughout Western culture as warty old women with long, pointed noses. The “Mr. Scot” referred to in the 16th century pamphlet (mentioned on page 6) was a Kentish gentleman who described a witch as a “toothless old impotent and unweldie woman,” and “lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles.” Subsequent observers contributed

descriptions such as “ olde weather-beaten Croane,” “ mumbling (and) palsied.” That these characterizations have proven so impactful and lasting speaks to the powerful, subconscious power of misogyny in Western culture. There were many socio-cultural factors at work as well. The shift in population that occurred during the late Medieval- and early-modern periods produced new social pressures, some of which were perceived as direct challenges to ages-old cultural norms, folkways that could be traced to the remotest beginnings of human civilization, including the dominance of the patriarchal society. Disobedient wives and daughters, women who threatened the social norm, could readily be blamed as agents of malign superstitious intent. In this pre-modern European society, punishment for such women was a way of life. Misogynistic preconceptions went hand-in-hand with patriarchy. Thus, “ misogynistic thoughts, which had already been traditional components of the theological dispute, became products of dissemination. For instance, the divines claimed that “ the devil’s seduction attracted chiefly ‘ vulnerable’ women - without being able to account the fact that Satan tempted “ poore doating old women.” For “ vulnerable” women, blackmail became a common modus operandi for supposed witches. The fact that women sometimes took advantage of the belief in witchcraft to threaten and persuade others did nothing to weaken misogynistic views.

As previously discussed, social pressure can be produced by natural phenomena, particularly destructive phenomena. There were many social manifestations of the Plague, one example being the nursery rhyme “ Ring Around the Rosie,” which recounts a kind of dubious folk remedy.

Widespread disease wields a powerful influence on the collective psyche of human societies, and syphilis, which reached epidemic levels during the 16th century, left a deep psychological impression. Significantly, the 16th century saw a shift in the kinds of accusations made against supposed witches, accusations which took on sexual overtones. As such, “ one of the most distinctive features of the witchcraft complex during the course of the 16th century was the belief that witches had had sexual relations with the devil and that this was the source of many of the evils attributed to their sorcery”

Eric Ross explains that the witchcraft craze spurred on by the outbreak of syphilis likely did not reach its height until the disease had developed past its early, most acute phase and become endemic to life throughout Europe. Accounts from this period reveal how closely syphilis was identified with the evil nature of women. A male syphilis victim from the period commented on the symptoms as being particularly dangerous to men. “ There persists, within the private parts of women, lesions which remain remarkably virulent for a long time; they are particularly dangerous because they are less evident to the eye of the man who wishes to cohabit with women in complete safety.” A further problem for woman was the frequency with which venereal disease caused fetal death in pregnant women, which was associated with infanticide, a crime in the 16th century associated with witchcraft. It is interesting to note that the rise in witchcraft prosecutions during the 16th century coincided with an increase in fetal and early-infant death, and other manifestations of syphilis.

If women were thought to be the sources of misfortune, both natural and

supernatural, the fact that men were often seen as positive counterweights to the maleficent power of females further reinforced the gender-based source of the Western European value system. In early-17th century Germany, a Peter Fischer was arrested on suspicion of witchcraft but was released

without punishment. In the 1640s, he was called on in the trial of an accused female witch named Margaretha Rost, who received full prosecution and punishment. The male-centric orientation of European society, it would seem, pervaded everything. " Just as maleficent witchcraft was gender-related to women, beneficent witchcraft was gender-related to men." Cunning may have been a valued quality in Medieval Germany but as a positive image, it was restricted to males.

Conclusion -

The people of pre-modern Europe were prone to suggestion and vulnerable to the visceral responses that often resulted from superficial, supernatural explanations for all manner of phenomena. This was a period of utter disenfranchisement for women, a situation that worsened exponentially in the decades after publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a veritable handbook for identifying and hunting down witches. That women were so closely identified with witchcraft in this book was symptomatic of a socially prescribed mindset rooted in the distant past. The profoundly patriarchal nature of European civilization reinforced misogynistic feeling and supernatural suspicions about women and their place in society. Natural cataclysms, like the syphilis epidemic and its physical consequences, illustrate the tenuousness of life for women in pre-

modern Europe. Thus, social and psychological factors created an environment of oppression, which would eventually spread far beyond the borders of continental Europe.

Women became bearers of sin for society itself, a burden and curse that was seen to have been handed down by the sin of Eve, the proto-woman who was made to be incomplete and reliant upon her husband. The natural physical and moral weakness of Eve's female descendants was used to assert a state of natural sin, thought to make women intrinsically susceptible to the temptations of evil and to the power that witchcraft afforded. Women today still struggle against social obstacles that stem from stereotypes that were established in Medieval times.

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