The Archetype of the Witch:
The Legacy and Manipulation of the *Malleus Maleficarum*

The presence of witchcraft saturated the social and political environments of Europe for centuries prior to and well into the Early Modern period.\(^1\) Despite being a well-documented and established facet of society, the belief in witches and witchcraft did not culminate in the infamous witchcraze until the early 16th century, prompted largely by the publication and distribution of the *Malleus Maleficarum*.\(^2\) Additionally, the introduction of this text to the European vernacular shifted the perspective of magic from small ritualistic practices to encompass a sinister connotation associating magic with *maleficae*, or magic meant to cause harm.\(^3\) This redefinition of what constituted witchcraft created an environment susceptible to the resulting mass of accusations, persecutions, and executions of the witchcraze. Moreover, a limited amount of English translations of the *Malleus* has bred for a mishandling of information and subsequent analysis of this text. This created an avenue for increased obsession of the occult

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\(^3\) The term “maleficae” indicates harmful magic in the feminine notation; this notation is the most common language used in (?) the *Malleus Maleficarum* and works published after this text. See Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches*, 58.
in pop culture that further affected and skewed the perception of witchcraft and its relationship to gender in the Early Modern period. Thus, in this research paper I contend that due to the limited quantity and quality of English translations completed of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the impact and interpretation of the text within the study of European witchcraft has become misconstrued. As a result, the gendered perception of witchcraft being dominated by women in the Early Modern period has skewed the study of this topic, in addition to having these research biases reaffirmed through misguided occultist popular history and culture.

In approximately 1486, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was published by Heinrich Kramer, a clergyman and inquisitor of the Dominican Order.\(^4\) Credit to an additional author, Jakob Sprenger, is also given on occasion; though, proof of his authorship is debated.\(^5\) Additionally, the *Malleus* is prefaced with a Papal Bull (1484) from Pope Innocent VIII that was requested by Heinrich Kramer.\(^6\) This Bull granted the inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger the authority to persecute all witchcraft and heresy in Northern Germany and surrounding territories, granting them access to both religious and secular resources.\(^7\) This Bull from Pope Innocent VIII solidified the authority of inquisitors and their roles in the public sphere, in addition to equating the previously defined religious sins of witchcraft and heresy to the secular world.\(^8\) The presence of these details has led some historians to theorize that the inclusion of multiple authors involved

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4 The Dominican Order was an Inquisitorial group within the church that focused heavily on persecuting and exterminating heresy and heretical actions. See Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches*, 2009, 27.


with the publication of the text and endorsement from the Pope provided it with more intellectual merit.\(^9\)

Nonetheless, the publication of the *Malleus* introduced the first cohesive text to redefine the concept of magic to be synonymous with demonology and harmful sorcery, while also documenting how to identify and eradicate witchcraft correctly in accordance with religious and secular law. Due to these feats, the text is regarded as largely important within the historiography of European witchcraft in the Early Modern period and serves as a foundational resource for many works of scholarship within the subject. The *Malleus* was originally written in Latin, and currently only two complete English translations have been published.\(^10\) The first translation was produced by Montague Summers (1928) who was trained not as a historian but as a clergyman for the church.\(^11\) Summers was a known fanatic in the subject of the occult and held a true belief in the topics he was researching and translating. The next complete translation of the *Malleus* was not done until 2009 by historian Christopher Mackay. The large amount of time between the publication of the two translations suggests that a significant portion of the current historiography (done mostly in the mid-to-late 20\(^{th}\) century) used the first translation and analysis as a basis for much of their information on European witchcraft in the Early Modern period. It should be noted that a third translation in English exists, published by P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (year?); however, this translation is a compiled collection of selected passages and is not


inclusive of the whole text. Thus, the liberties taken by Maxwell-Stuart in selecting which passages to translate introduces an alternative narrative and bias in interpreting the text and is not appropriate for the discussion of this research other than to show the increasing misinterpretation of the *Malleus* in witchcraft historiography.\(^{12}\)

Although translation errors and indirect biases affect the interpretations of historical texts, it cannot be disputed that the *Malleus* contains messages that are often misogynistic and in the case of most translations would remain a central theme.\(^{13}\) The true extent of these misogynistic messages cannot be known without extensively documented comparisons between the original text and translated versions; however, that is not the concern of this research. Instead, it is the analysis set forth by the authors of these limited translations, and how they influence the understanding of these texts, that requires apt attention in determining just how valid the legacy and influence of the *Malleus Maleficarum* is in the historical record of witchcraft.

Thus far, there is not a well-defined historiography that focuses solely on the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other primary texts on witchcraft; nor is there a specific historiography on how those texts are interpreted and used in historical research. The *Malleus*, in addition to other primary source texts, acts as the foundational information for the historiography on European witchcraft, and due to this, these texts are only used to contextualize witchcraft in relation to the

\(^{12}\) The translation published by P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (2007) is a condensed version of the original Latin text that only specifically highlights the most controversial and infamous sections. These are largely exclusive of anything does not discuss tortuous, demonic, or misogynistic material. By adhering to such confines in this translation, the connotations of the source material are misinterpreted the text as wholly representative of these selected sections.

\(^{13}\) Many of the chapters included from the source material are dedicated entirely to women and their association to witchcraft which is not caused by biased translation, thus a connection between the *Malleus* and gendered stereotypes does exist: Institoris and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers, 1971, i-iv.
broader scope of research. Due to these factors, the literature review conducted for this project widened its scope to include the broader subject of witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and the historiographical trends within the available literature. To surmise the most crucial findings from the literature review, the historiography on European witchcraft is concentrated in the mid-to-late 20th century through the early 21st century and is better classified by category than chronology. Though many different classifications for scholarly works exist on the topic, the most relevant to the purposes of this research paper are the different gender theories used by various historians. One of the most common topics of discussion in witchcraft historiography is the feminine connotations given to magic and how the witch trials singled out women as the primary victims of persecution. This line of discussion began to gain traction during the late 20th century, especially with the rise of the Third Wave Feminist movement, and continues to be the dominant narrative in the historiography today. Conversely, the discussion began to shift its focus to the male victims of witchcraft that were previously overlooked or mentioned only

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briefly in scholarly research in the early 21st century.\textsuperscript{19} Though there has been a shift in focus to the male victims of the witch trials during the Early Modern period, there has not been much development in recent years, and the narrative surrounding European witchcraft is still largely dominated by the female perspective. Using the perspective of gender theories and bias towards the discussion of women in witchcraft historiography, this study then looks to determine the effects of the legacy of the \textit{Malleus Maleficarum} had in determining the connotations of witchcraft and how the field now interprets this subject.\textsuperscript{20}

Further research of this topic highlighted how the translations of the \textit{Malleus} had not only promoted the feminization of witchcraft, but how its focus on women increased their rate of persecution in the trials. It is a well-known estimate among witch historians that, for Europe as a whole, the majority of those accused of witchcraft and subsequently tried and executed for it were women, with men making up approximately a quarter of the victims.\textsuperscript{21} Despite the presence of male witches being well documented in court cases and trials, the general assumption in the discipline is that the witch is a gendered figure, and she is female. This research finding, in

\textsuperscript{19} Melvin, History Practicum: Literature Review, \url{http://www.hist298.smelvin-umw.com/literature-review-of-witchcraft-in-early-modern-europe/}

\textsuperscript{20} Before focusing on the specific evidence and analysis of the \textit{Malleus} and related materials, it is important to note the research methodologies that informed the current argument and question. In the beginning stages of this research project, the original hypothesis for this study stated that the limited translations of the \textit{Malleus} influenced the idea and message of the original text, stating that witchcraft was a sin dominated by women, and in doing so, reinforced the societal standard that condemned female agency and sexual expression. This led into the first version of the research argument that was focused exclusively on the female victims of witchcraft in relation to how the translation and authorship bias presented in the \textit{Malleus} worked to uphold and manipulate the demonization of sexual agency in women. As research progressed, it became apparent that the \textit{Malleus Maleficarum} and the way it is situated in the historiography of European witchcraft was too complex to continue with the original line of questioning, ultimately rejecting the original hypothesis.

\textsuperscript{21} Lara Apps and Andrew Colin Gow, \textit{Gender at Stake: Male Witches in Early Modern Europe}, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 26.
addition to the information gained from a review of the literature, prompted a second shift in the projection of this study to the current research question: how do the limited translations of the *Malleus Maleficarum* influence the perception of gender during the European witch trials.

As previously noted, the *Malleus* is regarded as a major and foundational work in the current historiography on witchcraft in Europe. The first English translation from Summers (1928) was completed without a reliable historical methodology and analysis and loses much of its credibility in the historic record due to the explicit bias and antiquated opinions held by Summers which are expressed in both his 1928 and 1943 introduction to the *Malleus.* Summers even goes so far to claim that “the *Malleus Maleficarum* is one of the world’s few books written *sub specie aeternitatis,*” which is roughly translated to “essential or universal form or nature.” Here, and throughout the rest of his analysis, Summers is asserting that the *Malleus* is a text that documents knowledgeable and universal truths, and thus woefully misinterprets the actual impact and message of the texts through his own shrouded beliefs and lack of historical influence. The significance of deconstructing the actual content of Summers’ translation lies in the limited English translations of the text. The historiography of witchcraft in Europe has a majority of scholarly works in the late 20th century, meaning that only one translation of this text existed for approximately 81 years to inform the interpretations of historians who did not have access to Latin or German. Mackay’s translation (2009) was the first to offer actual analysis from a purely historical perspective including an explanation to his methodology and the liberties

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24 In Kramer’s introduction to his translation (1948) he refers to the *Malleus* as a “universal truth” which corrupts his interpretation of the text due to his invested personal belief that the contents of the *Malleus* act more as a manifesto rather than a primary source text to be analyzed for its contents, not its perceived intellectual merits: *Institoris* and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum,* trans. Montague Summers, 1971, x.
taken during the translation process. Additionally, Mackay highlights in his introduction the emphasis on female witches in the *Malleus*, though the use of either gender is used throughout the original Latin text. Mackay leaves the original language connotations, though he notes that this does not make sense with the surrounding context in some cases – it is not clear if the authors (Kramer and Sprenger) originally intended the different gender denotations or if differences were writing errors.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* is organized into three distinct sections: proof that witchcraft exists, those who perform magic and are witches, and how to investigate and eradicate witches and witchcraft. In addition to the influence of the translations on creating a falsified version of what constitutes a witch in modern understanding, the content of the *Malleus* includes a specific focus on female witches and how to recognize their specific brand of witchcraft. Despite the *Malleus* containing an entire section dedicated to outlining the male witch, the analysis Summer’s provides in his introduction creates a clear bias and gender dichotomy in his interpretation of the text by disregarding these sections in his contextualization of the text. Summer’s makes a clear distinction between his audience of the translation (male historians and researchers) and the subjects of the text (women). Kramer ostracizes the perspective of women


29 Institoris and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers, 1971, xxxix-xl: Kramer goes on to state in his introduction (1928) that, “I am not altogether certain that they will provide a wholesome and needful antidote in this feministic age, when the sexes seem confounded, and it appears to be the chief object of many females to ape the man, an indecorum by which they not only divest themselves of such charm as they might boast, but lay themselves open to the sternest reprobation in the name of sanity and common-sense.”
when analyzing the text and situates them as the subject matter not the interpreter, in doing so he upholds the idea that a witch is always classified as a woman and the inquisitor is always a man. Though male witches are recognized and discussed in the original text of the *Malleus* as well, there is a clear bias towards demonizing women, proclaiming them the weaker sex and more easily tempted into feats of witchcraft and satanic rituals.\(^{30}\) With this in mind, the authors created a distinct narrative in Part One of the *Malleus* with a central focus on the sins of women proving the existence of witchcraft. This is done through designating several sections, from discussing the crimes of midwives cooperating with demons and killing children to witches (women) copulating with devils and cursing acts of procreation.\(^{31}\)

Even though women make up the majority of those persecuted in the witch trials when looking at Europe as a general region, this is not reflective of the more complex variation in different countries and territories. Oftentimes, women made up only a slight majority of accused witches and in some places, they were the minority.\(^{32}\) Without looking further into the testimonials of these trials and at texts, like the *Malleus*, that proclaim to define witchcraft in the Medieval and Early Modern periods, contextualization of the actual environment where the European witchcraze occurred is lost. Moreover, even though the *Malleus* is regarded as one of the largest and important texts in witchcraft historiography (as promoted largely by Summers) the text was not actually well accepted as an informative document for another two centuries.


after its publication. Instead, it served the purpose of creating a hysteria around what constituted witchcraft and further created an archetype of a witch that was not founded in the reality of the witchcraze. Thus, the *Malleus* means less as a document that outlines the overarching cultural perspectives regarding witchcraft that it has been interpreted as, and is more so a text that documents the superstitions of individual inquisitors and how they interacted with their own environment. OK, so what you’re arguing is that the Malleus presents us with a double distortion of late 15th century realities—first, by the original text itself, and then by Summers’ translation. Is that correct?

After the publication and distribution of the *Malleus*, the culture and superstition surrounding witchcraft beheld a clearly defined stereotype of a witch, that was not always reflected in the actual trials being held, circulated through folklore and stories. These stories and myths were then adopted into literary tropes by writers and artists, like Shakespeare, who popularized the ideas circulated in the European vernacular that began to further build the witch archetype in popular culture. The *Malleus* further influenced the perception of witchcraft as a sin perpetrated by women, and is relevant to the sexualization of the witch figure in pop culture, especially so, when the text and its translations makes a point of focusing on female sexuality and demonizing the expression and sexual agency of women.

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The study of witchcraft and the witchcraze of Early Modern Europe has captivated the attention of scholars and laymen alike for centuries. Numerous works of research and writing have been published on the subject and have proposed different arguments and research methods on how best to interpret these events. Additionally, the figure of the witch has permeated cultural spheres from academia and literary tropes to popular histories of the occult. The complexity of such a sweeping topic as witchcraft in Europe’s Early Modern period cannot be underemphasized. This is especially apparent in the various approaches taken by scholars to study and interpret the events that led to its occurrence in addition to the factors that influence the way historians interpret Europe's witchcraze, in addition to how this event interacts with the past. The quality of analysis and methodology in interpreting Medieval sources, in this case, the Malleus Maleficarum is vital in creating an accurate and scholarly interpretation of the past.

Thus, in order for future research on Early Modern witchcraft to develop further, the sources that create the foundational knowledge of the discipline must be thoroughly understood and digested, not misconstrued to fit a preconceived narrative. Based on the prominent position given to the Malleus in historical research and the fame it has garnered due to its often-misogynistic contents, the perception of witches being solely or even largely women appears a logical conclusion. By elevating the Malleus as a definitive text that defines the environment of witchcraft in the Early Modern period, the complexity of the actual events that transpired to create the witchcraze and the victims who were persecuted as a result is disregarded. Future research on this topic should work to answer how the legacy of the Malleus was adopted into pop culture and corrupted the perception of witchcraft in the Medieval and Early Modern era. Furthermore, by bringing to light the fallacies of the pop culture influence on the perception of
the historical record is an important first step into approaching and studying an already biased subject as unbiased as possible.

_Honor Pledge: “I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.” - Samantha Melvin_
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


Very good start on this research paper. Good development of the overall focus and good argument. You need to reorganize things in such a way, however, to make it clearer. So, the introduction needs to be a real introduction with your central argument. Do not wait until much later to present your central argument.

Next, some questions—for example, the impact of Summers’ text on popular culture—simply can’t be adequately shown here because of a lack of sources. Save that question for the conclusion as a question for further research.

Insofar as the main argument is concerned, it finally becomes clear later in the paper that you’re arguing this all amounts to a double distortion about the role of women in 15th century witchcraft (see my note above). If so, you will need to draw more specifically from particular parts of Summers’s translation to show this. This is the most important thing to do to improve your argument—point to specific passages from Summers’s translation to illustrate what you claim are his central distortions and biases.

Also, proofread for g/s/p, see other notes above, and edit footnotes for minor typos. Otherwise, good work!
The aim of the present article is to compare the way English and French demonologists interpreted the role of the creator in their witchcraft treatises, as an intent to demonstrate that the confessional gap between both groups of authors did not elicit a critical difference in their approach to the matter. This article explores the role played by the relationship between witch and familiar in the early modern witch trials. It positions animal familiars at the intersection of early modern belief in witchcraft and magic, examining demonologies, legal and trial records, and print pamphlets. The image of witches and witchcraft created by Kramer in the Malleus Maleficarum is one of the most enduring and influential representations of the witch. Although the Malleus was thought to have held a huge amount of sway over the persecution of witches during the European Witch Hunts, its influence seems to have been much more widely spread. Elements of Kramer’s witches appear in the stories collected by the Brothers Grimm, the witches of various Disney films, and even in J. K. Rowling’s Wizarding World. References. Briggs, Robin. Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of Eu Malleus maleficarum, Witchcraft -- History -- To 1500. Publisher. Manchester ; New York : Manchester University Press ; New York : Distributed by Palgrave. SIMILAR ITEMS (based on metadata). Terms of Service (last updated 12/31/2014).