

WITCHERY 101. AN INTRODUCTION

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This book is not about witches. First of all, because it mostly focuses on the Middle Ages. Despite common misconceptions among the general public (and sometimes even among a more learned audience), the figure of the witch as a woman who seals a pact with the Devil is not a “medieval” invention. However, the seeds of this process, perhaps together with some of its sprouts, are to be found in this period.¹

Among medievalists, magic and gender are relatively new topics: they started to pay attention to these subjects between the 1970s and 1980s, and the field is now as lively and thriving as ever.² At any rate, as recently

¹ Jeffrey B. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (London: Routledge, 1976); Brian P. Levack, ed., *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, 6 vols. (New York: Garland, 2001); Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999-2003); Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Gary F. Jensen, *The Path of the Devil: Early Modern Witch Hunts* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); “*Non lasciar vivere la malefica*”. *Le streghe nei trattati e nei processi (secoli XIV-XVII)*, ed. Dinora Corsi and Matteo Duni (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008); Martine Osterero, George Modestin, and Katherine Utz Treppe, eds., *Chasses aux sorcières et démonologie: Entre discours et pratiques (XIVe-XVIIe siècles)* (Florence: SISMEL, 2010); Marina Montesano, “Preaching, Magic, and Witchcraft: A Feedback Effect?,” in *From Words to Deeds: The Effectiveness of Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 153-70; Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London-New York: Routledge, 2016); Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London-New York: Routledge, 2016).

² For a summary of Italian scholarship in the last decades, see Eleonora Plebani, “Streghe e stregoneria nella medievistica italiana degli ultimi decenni,” *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 1 (2021): 233-62.

noted by Catherine Rider, the relationship between magic and gender has been mostly investigated with attention to fifteenth- to seventeenth-century witch trials.³ In contrast, our knowledge of women's magic in the early and high Middle Ages is not as nuanced. As noted above, though, the *Malleus* was the result of older established stereotypes. The treatise just stressed the association between women and magic that already emerged in older sources.⁴

My idea of editing a volume on *Becoming a witch* stems from several brilliant academic works on the topic, but specifically from three of them. The first one is a well-known article by Éva Pócs, entitled "Why Witches Are Women?" (2003); the second is Hans Peter Broedel's *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* (2003); and the third is a fairly recent book by Heidi Breuer, "Crafting the Witch. Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England" (2009).⁵ Clearly, all these works revolve around the gradual development of the idea of "witch," and suggest that this process concerned women in particular.

Now, witchcraft and the consequent witch hunt are extremely complex phenomena, and many scholarly works have been written about these topics. Therefore, my original intention was to dive deep into what was around, before, and beyond the figure of the "witch." Éva Pócs' article shows that understanding the relationship between accusations of witchcraft and gender is no easy task. All in all, one notes that witchcraft tended to be feminine because of social conflicts that characterised the female spheres of public and private life. However, the author correctly points out that Early Modern accusations of witchcraft were also supported by a far older mythology dating from the early Middle Ages.⁶ In other terms, there could not be a Joan of Arc without the Hundred Years' War and all its political consequences. Without her choice to not become a wife. Without the pre-made figure of the female visionary prophet of late medieval France. Without women's limited agency in a

³ Catherine Rider, "Magic and Gender," in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (London: Routledge, 2019), 343-54, at 343.

⁴ Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 170ff.

⁵ Éva Pócs, 'Why Witches Are Women?,' *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 48, 3-4 (2003): 367-83; Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch. Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* (London-New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁶ Pócs, 'Why Witches Are Women?,' 379.

patriarchal society. Without belief in fairies, which in turn were remnants of pre-Christian entities.⁷

And maybe there could be no stereotypical figure of the witch riding a broom without the nightly cortege of Diana, Holda, Perchta or Herodias,⁸ without pagan fertility rituals which involved dancing astride poles and broomsticks,⁹ or without women's expertise in herbal and hallucinogenic ointments.¹⁰ Hans Peter Broedel's monograph on the *Malleus Maleficarum* casts light on the cultural background that led to the composition of this manual. Institoris and Sprenger took it for granted that witches were to be found among members of the weaker sex. But it is fair to note that their "own construction of witchcraft prejudiced the issue."¹¹ Was it about hunting witches, or rather hunting women? "In other words, is the gender bias of texts like the *Malleus* descriptive or prescriptive in nature?" the author asks.¹²

Similar questions help us realize that even though one could determine a time before the witch hunt and a time after it (the fourteenth century being a critical moment),¹³ the phenomenon did not spring out of nowhere. It is deeply rooted in ancient tensions, biases, and power relations. Heidi Breuer's book is mostly interested in the gendered nature of "magic" in English literary sources from the twelfth/thirteenth century to the Early Modern period. She observes that though "magic"

⁷ Andrea Maraschi, "The Tree of the Bourslemonts. Gendered Beliefs in Fairies and Their Transmission from Old to Young Women in Joan of Arc's Domrémy," in *Cultural Exchanges: Some Cases in the Domain of Folklore, Magic, and Witchcraft*, ed. Marina Montesano (London: Routledge, 2021), 21-32.

⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, *Le sabbat des sorcières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); Philippe Walter, *Le mythe de la chasse sauvage dans l'Europe médiévale* (Paris: Champion, 1997).

⁹ Robin Skelton, *The Practice of Witchcraft Today: An Introduction to Beliefs and Rituals* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995).

¹⁰ Michael Ostling, "Witches' Herbs on Trial," *Folklore* 125 (2014): 170-201, at 180. Hallucinogenic ointments were allegedly smeared on broomsticks and then absorbed into the body when the genital area came into contact with them (as suggested in Alice Kyteller's trial of 1324).

¹¹ Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 167.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Federico, Martino "La spirale della storia. Giuristi e streghe tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna," in *Dalla magia alla stregoneria. Cambiamenti sociali e culturali e la caccia alle streghe*, ed. Alessandra Ciattini (Naples: La Città del Sole, 2017), 67-106, at 71. See also Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate. A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (New York: Routledge, 1983), 289-90; Marina Montesano, *Caccia alle streghe* (Rome: Salerno, 2012), 58-60.

was associated with both men and women, one notes a gradual “villanization of feminine magic.”¹⁴ Furthermore, she remarks that the crafting of the witch contributed to the crafting of a certain type of femininity: “The representations of gender produced by culture—through language and literature, through film and art, through news-casts and advertisements, and so on—shape the notions of gender available to people within that culture.”¹⁵ This is to say that when Europe lay down the basis for the figure of the “witch,” it also shaped the social perception of women. Or, at least, of those women who did not conform to a socially accepted and predetermined version of femininity. Breuer’s volume represents an inspiration also because the author devotes the final chapter of the book to the “Contemporary Echoes of the Early Modern Wicked Witch.” I felt that this topic was too important not to be explored in my book as well.

Piero Camporesi observes that all elder women were, to some extent, witches.¹⁶ This implies that all women, being *vetulae*-to-be, were potentially witches-to-be. Of course, this generalization does not reflect the nuances of the past, but it holds a grain of truth. Elder women’s knowledge was often deemed nonsense, their stories labelled as *fabulae aniles*.¹⁷ At the same time, since classical antiquity mythologies promoted the idea of cannibal *striae* or *strigae* or *mascae*, who clearly posed a threat to the community.¹⁸ This was hardly a Western phenomenon, by the way: there is evidence of similar beliefs in different cultures, as anthropologists suggest.¹⁹ Early medieval Germanic laws mention cannibal witches since

¹⁴ Breuer, *Crafting the Witch*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ Piero Camporesi, *Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum, 1995), 53.

¹⁷ Jan Ziolkowski, “Old Wives’ Tales: Classicism and Anti-Classicism from Apuleius to Chaucer,” *Journal of Medieval Latin* 12 (2002): 90-113.

¹⁸ Franco Cardini, *Magia, Stregoneria, Superstizioni nell’Occidente medievale* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1979); Laura Cherubini, *Strix: la strega nella cultura romana* (Turin: UTET, 2010); Marina Montesano, *Classical Culture and Witchcraft in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 30-35. This volume has been recently translated into Italian as *Maleficia. Storie di streghe dall’Antichità al Rinascimento* (Rome: Carocci, 2023). See also Sarah Iles Johnston, “Defining the Dreadful: Remarks on the Greek Child-Killing Demon,” in *Ancient magic and ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden-New York-Köln; Brill, 1995), 361–387.

¹⁹ E.g., Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Stregoneria, oracoli e magia tra gli Azande*, trans. Roberto Malighetti (Milan: R, Cortina, 2002), 13-16.

the sixth century, which attests to the belief that they were... real; or, at least, that common people believed they were real, which could lead to episodes of physical violence.²⁰

Christianity played a crucial role in fabricating and shaping women's identity, thereby empowering clerical male authority.²¹ In a male-dominated society, women's sexuality caused anxiety, thus it needed to be repressed. Women's nature had been unveiled since the Genesis' creation account. Eve was disobedient, gullible, and treacherous. She was responsible for the Fall. Exegetes did not take long to interpret this myth from a sexual viewpoint and to highlight women's proclivity to yield to the devil's temptation.²² Positive examples of women existed — from the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene to female saints — but they represented virtuous exceptions.

During the first millennium CE, one notes a remarkable continuity in the understanding of “magic,” even though late antiquity and the Carolingian era represented critical moments.²³ In this sense, the Old Testament remained a reference point for centuries in Western societies.²⁴ By and large, Christianity exacerbated the marginalization of magic practitioners and of whoever invoked a non-Christian supernatural, even though this process was by no means an exclusive of the Christian Church.²⁵ “Magic,” despite its very noble origins (as

²⁰ Norman Cohn, *I demoni dentro. Le origini del sabba e la grande caccia alle streghe*, trans. Donatella Venturini (Milan: Unicopli, 1994).

²¹ Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 85ff.; *L'Église et les femmes dans l'Occident chrétien des origines à la fin du Moyen Âge*, ed. Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997).

²² Massimo Montanari, *Alimentazione e cultura nel medioevo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008 [1988]), 3-4.

²³ Martha Rampton, *Trafficking with Demons. Magic, Ritual, and Gender from Late Antiquity to 1000* (Ithaca-London: Columbia University Press, 2021), 1ff.; Andrea Maraschi, “A World Imbued With Sorcery? The Fight between Christian and non-Christian Powers in 4th- and 5th-Century Christendom,” in *Civilizations of the Supernatural: Witchcraft, Ritual, and Religious Experience in Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Traditions*, ed. Fabrizio Conti and Elizabeth Ann Pollard, *Advances in the History of Magic, Witchcraft and Religion* 2 (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2022), 519-547.

²⁴ Montesano, *Classical Culture*, 72-73.

²⁵ Owen Davies, *Magic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41; Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21-7; Peter Brown, “Sorcery, Demons and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages,” in *Witchcraft Confessions*

attested by Pliny and Apuleius, among others),²⁶ slowly corrupted the soul of human beings. Women, in particular, seem to have been mostly associated with private performances of “magic,” inside the domestic environment, but their role as wise women and village healers became quite stereotypical as well.²⁷ Be that as it may, the engagement in “magic” practice could hardly fit the figure of the good wife. Quite the contrary, given the links between female sexuality and contact with the devil were strengthened over time and became a fundamental trait of witches.²⁸

Scholars have long shown that in the woman/witchcraft pair, it is not the former that leads to the latter. On the contrary, women ended up being persecuted as witches because specific aspects of “magic” became feminized.²⁹ It is fair to wonder why this happened in many different societies, and the imbalance between male and female power is definitely one of the factors at play (though not the only one).³⁰

So, this book is not about witches. It is about the path to *becoming* one, the *feminization* of specific aspects of “magic,” and the later projections of these ideas. The late-medieval notion of “witch” was elaborated in treatises by Jean Gerson, Johannes Nider, Alphonso de Spina, Heinrich

and Accusations, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock, 1970), 17-45; Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber&Faber, 1972); Maijastina Kahlos, “*Artis Heu Magicis*: The Label of Magic in Fourth-Century Conflicts and Disputes,” in *Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome: Conflict, Competition, and Coexistence in the Fourth Century*, eds. Michele Salzman, Marianne Sághy, and Rita Lizzi Testa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 162-77.

²⁶ Andrea Maraschi, *Similia similibus curantur. Cannibalismo, grafofagia, e “magia” simpatetica nel medioevo (500-1500)* (Spoleto: Cisam, 2020), 43.

²⁷ Michael Bailey, “From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 76, 4 (2001): 960-99, at 986. Medieval romance often suggests that women’s medical knowledge relied on the supernatural. See Peggy McCracken, “Women and Medicine in Medieval French Narrative,” *Exemplaria* 5, 2 (1993): 239-62, at 241.

²⁸ Louise Jackson, “Witches, Wives and Mothers: Witchcraft Persecution and Women’s Confessions in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Women’s History Review* 4:1 (1995): 63-84, at 72.

²⁹ Michael Bailey, “The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 120-34, at 121; Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 84-7; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 110-1; Bailey, “From Sorcery to Witchcraft,” 986.

³⁰ Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of Witches* (London 1964); Philip Mayer, “Witches,” in *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, ed. Max Marwick (London: Penguin, 1970), 45-65.

Kramer, and others, but it did not arise from nothing. It shared elements with earlier features of feminine “magical” knowledge and practice, and it was fuelled by similar biases. This volume thus aims at rediscussing long-standing myths, and at problematizing superficial connections in the wake of David Harley’s research on the midwife-witch figure.³¹ And, necessarily, it is meant to offer new insights into the very notion of “magic” in the past.³² “Magic” could be analysed from several different angles, but this book indirectly looks at it in search of continuities. First and foremost, continuity of needs and attitudes.³³ “The circulation of knowledge is at the very base of the cumulative concept of witchcraft,” observes Marina Montesano, “and is the omnipresent fuel that subtends the initial moments of the witch-hunts around the middle of the fourteenth century.”³⁴

Chronology-wise, the book is structured so as to cover the conventional 1000 years of the Middle Ages. However, it also aims at offering insights into longer-term patterns concerning the notion of “witch.” The intention is to further explore topics such as womanhood, femininity, “magic,” marginalization, agency, empowerment, as well as social and cultural biases. Hopefully, the picture(s) emerging from this volume will contribute to keeping the debate lively and sharp.

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³¹ David Harley, “Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch,” *Social History of Medicine* 3, 1 (1990): 1-26.

³² On this, see the recent *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, eds. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (London-New York: Routledge, 2019). See also Maraschi, *Similia similibus curantur*, 1-35.

³³ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1948), 70. See also Andrea Maraschi, “Magic, Miracles, and Rituals to Fight Famine in Old Norse Literature,” in *Food Culture in Medieval Scandinavia*, eds. Viktória Gyöngi and Andrea Maraschi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 31-51, at 39.

³⁴ Marina Montesano, “Introduction,” in *Folklore, Magic, and Witchcraft*, 1-17, at 9.

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