

The Malleus Maleficarum

Review Number:

672

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 June, 2008

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Editor:

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ISBN:

9780719064432

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£9.99

Pages:

320pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

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As P. G. Maxwell-Stuart notes in his introduction to these selections, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (c.1486) has elicited periodic interest throughout the last hundred years, perhaps more than it ever did in the two centuries or so of witch persecution after its first publication (p. 36). Despite this interest, scholars without access to contemporary editions have, until recently, been reliant on partisan translations - in English, that of Montague Summers originally published in 1928. An interested student can now find the 1948 edition of this translation freely available on the internet. It is, however, biased in favour of the Catholic inquisitors and written in a style which can sometimes seem archaic even by the standards of the 1920s; it is also inaccurate and lacks a reliable commentary. A more conscientious scholar now has an impressive array of translations to weigh up. The first of these is the excellent critical German translation which appeared in 2000. (1) For the reader without German or wanting a complete Latin edition, there is Christopher Mackay's two-volume, dual-language set. (2) For many individuals and libraries, the cost of Mackay's edition is likely to be prohibitive and they will therefore look to Maxwell-Stuart's selections, the subject of this review, as a suitable alternative.

Maxwell-Stuart's edition begins with a relatively short essay introducing the intellectual 'ambience' of the *Malleus*, magic in the 15th century, Heinrich Institoris, an overview of the work from which the selections have been made and its later history. We are then presented with selections covering most of the questions raised in the three parts of the *Malleus* or, more accurately, of the 1588 Frankfurt edition of it.

The introductory essay provides a useful survey of the context of the *Malleus*. Maxwell-Stuart tells of a

church engaged in a millenarian struggle against dualist heretics and invading Muslims. Whether intentional or not, mention of the latter conveniently alerts the reader to the alleged conspiracies (said to be organised by Jews, bankers, Bolsheviks and communists) which provided the backdrops for previous 20th-century translations. Whilst Maxwell-Stuart floats these possibilities (p. 36), he falls short of placing his own edition in such a context. It may not have been his purpose, of course, to draw parallels between the controversial aims and practices of Heinrich Institoris and recent activities in Iraq. They are, however, difficult to resist because the elements are all there: the creation of a global, largely imaginary, conspiracy against Christendom, the admittance of exceptional evidence, the suspect treatment of the conspirators, the inordinate use of torture and the misleading or forged justifications. Political opinion aside, what this potential comparison does is to render this edition of the *Malleus* and the essay which introduces it useful as a teaching aid. In many ways the essay offers a concise supplement to Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957). (3) It is also much more pertinent to the work which follows it than the historical background sketched in Montague Summers's introduction to his 1948 edition. (4) Maxwell-Stuart's is grounded firmly in the 15th-century context rather than digressing into various witchcraft cases which seem to have little relevance to the creation of the *Malleus*. Consequently, it allows one to locate the text in its immediate historical setting, introduce the witch persecutions as one version of a perennial feature of history and, in passing, reinforce 30 years of witchcraft historiography which has argued successfully that the trials should not be viewed as some kind of aberration along a mythical progress towards enlightened civilization.

In recreating the intellectual 'ambience' of the *Malleus*, Maxwell-Stuart takes the reader on an interesting excursion into medieval understandings of the Devil, fides and the nature of women, all of which help to make sense of the following selections for the reader. His focus, however, is primarily on the 15th century. As he observes, 'To a fair number of those living in the last half of the 15th century, it must have seemed that, as far back as memory would stretch, the Church stood embattled against forces threatening to destroy it ...' (p. 4). Memory here seems to stretch back only as far as Wycliffe and one is left with the impression that the *Malleus* was the culmination of a moment rather than an endemic anxiety about heresy in mid-late medieval Catholicism. I am not certain whether this emphasis is the product of brevity (and a consequent need to distil the discussion) or a genuine argument for placing the text more firmly than before in its late 15th-century setting. In this respect, the essay needs to be read alongside other works, not least Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975), which offer a broader medieval context going back to the inquisitorial crusades of Konrad of Marburg in the 13th century, to take just one example. (5) Curiously, the intellectual 'ambience' described by Maxwell-Stuart does not seem to include the invention of printing. The *Malleus* was clearly a beneficiary of this new technology. After all, as Maxwell-Stuart suggests, the *Malleus* with its attack on opponents of the author, the supporting papal bull and the forged letter of approbation was as much a propaganda tool as a handbook (p. 27); rushing to complete his weighty scholastic tome and have it printed, Institoris seems to have recognised early the value of the new medium.

Having set the tone, Maxwell-Stuart offers an overview of 15th-century magic drawn from the more recent scholars of various branches of magic, demonology and the *Malleus*. He reiterates the important correction to much discourse on the gender of the witch that Institoris never meant witches to be understood as solely female. Rather than follow Summers's example in translating maleficus/malefica and malefici/maleficae indiscriminately as 'witch' and 'witches,' Maxwell-Stuart preserves the original distinctions in his translations: 'worker of harmful magic' for the male maleficus and 'witch' for the female malefica. To anyone who has been studying witch persecutions for a long time, these distinctions initially appear cumbersome. Interest in male witches is burgeoning and many historians are comfortable using 'witch' to mean either a man or a woman, relying on statement or context to supply the gender. While I would not want to introduce Maxwell-Stuart's wordy 'worker[s] of harmful magic' into my own writing, its repetition throughout the translations and the limited use of 'witch[es]' in gender-specific contexts such as the infamous trick to make men believe they have lost their penises (pp. 84-7) do work. The translations highlight how infrequently Institoris actually referred to female 'witches' and consequently reinforce Christina Lerner's assertion that witchcraft was sex-related rather than sex-specific. (6)

The discussion which follows this correction is an excellent introduction to the complexities of the 'why

women?' question which students, if not historians, still seem keen to ask. It is situated not in the social history which has come to dominate the answers to that question, but in demonological and magical discourses. As I have argued in my own work, it is these discourses, coupled with the use of leading questions and the abuse of torture, which created the witch as female in Eichstätt and probably most other parts of Germany. (7) Social or cultural circumstances had little to do with that process or the continuing association of 'woman' and 'witch' in the minds of most early modern individuals whether demonologists or peasants.

The middle section of the introductory essay considers the author of the *Malleus*. A general reader of witchcraft histories in English is likely to be convinced that the work was jointly authored by Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger. He or she is likely also to know that both were Dominicans with inquisitorial authority active in Germany at about the time the *Malleus* was written; it is unlikely they will know much else. In this section of his essay, Maxwell-Stuart brings to light unfamiliar scholarship to flesh out the biography of Institoris and cast him as the sole author of the piece. He also emphasises a fact which, although it has always been in circulation, is too often missed: the *Malleus* was written as a defence of dubious practice by a troubled Dominican who did not always enjoy influence over his colleagues (pp. 26-8). It was not the authoritative work which Institoris probably wanted it to be and, as Maxwell-Stuart reminds his readers, even Sprenger took offence at the forged letter of approbation Institoris added to the work, prosecuting his inquisitorial colleague for doing this (p. 27). Although, in line with recent scholarship, Maxwell-Stuart dismisses the misplaced notion that Sprenger was the co-author, he does give us a short biography of the man to complete the biographical picture (pp. 30-1).

If the publication of the *Malleus* was not universally welcomed in about 1486, it did come to influence both later demonology and the procedures used in the prosecution of witches in some parts of Europe, notably in the Holy Roman Empire. To state this goes against the grain of recent scholarship on demonology. Most commentators since Cohn have granted the *Malleus* only a very limited influence on the early modern witch persecutions. This is not the place to engage in that particular debate, but to highlight its absence from the final section of the introductory essay. Maxwell-Stuart's later history of the *Malleus* provides a cursory account of subsequent early modern editions alongside an unresolved question about the possible number of copies which may or may not have been in circulation; it continues with a tantalising glimpse of some early criticisms, and a description of how Summers's translation fits the profile of his other works. It does not offer an opinion of the influence of the *Malleus* on subsequent events; it does not sell the text to unconvinced, if perhaps curious, witchcraft scholars. Having gone to the trouble of translating the text, I am interested to know where the translator thinks it fits into early modern demonology and jurisprudence.

Turning to the translation itself, I find myself asking a number of other questions. The first is why translate the 1588 edition of the *Malleus*? If it is the edition referred to by Summers, it is one of the more curious as it was printed as the witch persecutions were entering their most intense phase and it was bound as part of a collection which included tractates by eight other authors ranging from Jean Gerson to Bartolommeo Spina. It was also, by Summers's account, 'very poor and faulty'. (8) While Summers himself was not always a careful or impartial scholar, his opinion on bibliographic matters is not to be dismissed lightly. I am sure there are sound scholarly reasons for using this relatively late edition and that the faults alleged by Summers have been addressed by Maxwell-Stuart. It would, however, have been reassuring to see some justification for this choice and a brief account of the method of translation (for example, comparing editions and modern translations) such as is offered by the translators and editors of the recent German version. (9)

I am also curious about the selections. While some sections have been summarised because they merely pile up obscure authorities in the scholastic manner or simply repeat what has already been argued by Institoris, other omissions are less clear and sometimes frustrating. One of the most widely used passages of the *Malleus* is the eloquent disquisition (even in Summers's translation) on 'why superstition is chiefly found in women' (Part I, Question 6). In Maxwell-Stuart's translation, this lengthy passage and the corresponding references to and quotations from a number of biblical passages, commentaries and classical works are reduced to a summary of just one sentence (p. 74). What Maxwell-Stuart has left us with is the bare and rather dull gist of the argument (in this case, that neither a tongue nor a woman knows how to act

moderately). It is not clear how a scholar or student could make sense of this version when confronted with the numerous references to this passage in histories of demonology or witchcraft. From the user's point of view, Maxwell-Stuart's abridgement is not contextualised by late medieval theology or scholastic thinking (which is where some apt selections from the omitted passage would have proved the worth of the translation) nor is it sensitive to the uses which have been made of the *Malleus* by historians, feminist polemicists or modern witches. A sensible scholar or student wanting to make sense of either Institoris's opinion of women or the historiography of the witch image, including the discussion of female witches in the introductory essay which prefaces this translation, would do well to brave the 'almost unreadable' style (Maxwell-Stuart's description on the back cover) of Summers's edition (or Mackay's if he or she can get hold of it).

The advantage of paring the selections down to the minimum is that the annotations can likewise be reduced. To take Part I, Question 6 again, the footnotes here serve their purpose, as all good footnotes should, in clarifying elements of the text for the reader and yet, like the summaries in parentheses in the main body of the text, they are not exhaustive. Which particular writings of the Church Fathers or Cicero refer to immoderate tongues or women? I certainly do not want to spend time hopping from this translation to another or reading all of the possible sources simply to find an answer to this very valid question. An annotation at this point would therefore have been some recompense for the omission of the original arguments. And, if Summers's translation and, indeed, the 1588 edition are full of inaccuracies which have no doubt been incorporated unwittingly into the arguments of others, where have they been corrected in this text? Annotations would be useful in highlighting these places too.

It is hard to know what to make of Maxwell-Stuart's translation. Historians and teachers of witchcraft and demonology do need an affordable up-to-date translation, and in places where the text has been left rather than summarised, this one would serve well. The introductory essay will be useful to students and I enjoyed reading it. The translation, however, appears isolated from witchcraft scholarship. It is not clear why the 1588 edition has been used, why key passages have been omitted or where the translation is a correction of Summers's. This is a shame because it is certainly better written than the older version and clearer about, for example, Institoris's understanding of the gender of the witch. In several respects, therefore, it does deserve to replace it. For the time being, however, I think Summers's translation remains a rival simply because it enjoys the benefits of being widely available and containing the very sections which have stimulated scholarship.

June 2008

P. G. Maxwell-Stuart agrees that the translation of a complete work is always preferable to an edited or excerpted one, but commercial considerations and the word limits they bring with them do not always permit such a thing.

Notes

1. H. Kramer (Institoris), *Der Hexenhammer: Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. W. Behringer, G. Jerouschek and W. Tschacher (Munich, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. H. Institoris and J. Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. and trans. C. S. Mackay (2 vols., Cambridge, 2006) [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1957). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. H. Kramer and J. Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. M. Summers (1928; repr. London, 1986), pp. 15-24 for the introduction dated 1946. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. N. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (London, 1975), pp. 24-31. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. C. Lerner, *Enemies of God: the Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London, 1981), p. 92. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. J. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 64-82. [Back to \(7\)](#)

8. In 'A note upon the bibliography', in *Malleus*, trans. Summers, p. 26. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Kramer, *Der Hexenhammer*, pp. 91-8. [Back to \(9\)](#)

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