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#### CONTACT INFORMATION

*Provocatio*

Human Rights Studies

Lund University

P.O. Box 192, SE-221 00 Lund

E-mail: [provocatio@mrs.lu.se](mailto:provocatio@mrs.lu.se)

Journal web page: <http://journals.lub.lu.se/index.php/prvc/index>

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# The female rebel – the 15<sup>th</sup> century witch that never died

A trans-historical comparative content analysis between the 15<sup>th</sup> century's *Malleus Maleficarum* and modern papal writings searching for the female ideal

*Josefine Thorén*

## **Build a witch, build a man, and you have built a woman**

The year 1486 Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger published the book *Malleus Maleficarum*<sup>1</sup>, also known as Hammer of the Witches<sup>2</sup>. The book's sole purpose was to identify and help destroy the greatest threat of its time: the witches. Though witches, in this book, were understood to be women.

The Hammer of the Witches became the second most sold book during a period of two hundred years, second only to the Bible, even after the Protestants branched out from the Catholic Church. *Malleus* was used all over Europe and North America and strongly contributed, together with the Bible, to shaping the idea of the woman.

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<sup>1</sup> Complete title: *Malleus Maleficarum*, Maleficas, & earum hæeresim, ut phramea potentissima conterens, which generally is translated as The hammer of witches that destroys witches and their heresy as with a double-edged sword.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher S. Mackay *The hammer of witches: A complete translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

The witch, as she was described in Malleus, represented everything a woman was supposed not to be. There is a clear dichotomy between society's ideal woman and Malleus' witch; their symptomatic attributes, qualities and abilities are mutually exclusive. The interesting point lies with the fact that by giving the witch these attributes, qualities and abilities, Kramer and Sprenger creates not only the witch, but also consequently the woman. This is because, by describing the witch, ergo the bad woman<sup>3</sup>, Malleus constructs the image of the ideal woman since she is the witch's opposite. Furthermore, the ideal woman turns into a reverse image of the ideal man, whilst, as this article will illustrate, the witch shows more similarities to the ideal man. Though, of course, the witch's attributes, qualities and abilities will have a negative twist with horrid outcomes, while the man's are not just great but also keystones in a prosperous society. To explicate, the witch and the ideal woman, as well as the ideal woman and the man, will be shown to have been constructed as opposites. The witch and the man, on the other hand, show similarities in their characteristics.

The fascinating aspect of Malleus is not solely that the book had the power of constructing the idea of the woman. What is even more fascinating is whether or not we are still facing the same idea of women today in modern writings with a similar platform as Malleus.

The sources that I have chosen for comparative purposes are modern papal writings of the popes Saint John Paul II and Benedictus XVI. The reason for choosing these popes is that they ruled the church during a recent and hence relevant time frame, that is between the years 1978-2005 and 2005-2013 respectively. Saint John Paul II and Benedictus XVI also show greater diversity in their writings when it comes to women than other popes do.

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<sup>3</sup> The word "witch" will be used throughout the article. The witch is to be understood as the bad woman, an opposite of the ideal woman. It is not my intention to claim that a discourse of witches still exists to this day or in modern papal writings.

Influencing over 1.2 billion people across our world, the pope plays a uniquely powerful role. The image of the woman the popes portray serves as a gender guide for a lot of people. However, it is not the ambition here to find parallels of a misogynist or aggressive discourse between Malleus and the papal writings. This article's focus is to understand the general discourse concerning the ideal woman in historical and current contexts with an ambition to unwind the identity creating aspect.

I will be searching for different markers<sup>4</sup> that the sources use in their construction of the woman. The markers will then be used to identify the woman's identity and role in the source material. This article will thus answer how and through which markers the ideal woman is identified in Malleus Maleficarum and in the papal writings. The article will also show how similar markers can be identified in both source materials, thereby proving how an androcentric construction of the ideal woman is used in both.

### How was the woman built then?

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”<sup>5</sup> is a classic description of the androcentric theory. The idea of the theory is that being a woman is to be “the Other” in a society where the man<sup>6</sup> and his characteristics are “the One”. “The Other's” qualities are understood to be projected upon them. These qualities do not fit the norm, since the man, being “the One”, has claimed them.<sup>7</sup> The creation of “the Other” is considered as a construction of an idea of gender as fixated binary opposites, where one sex (the man),

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<sup>4</sup> Markers are the leading concept, which will be used to identify different words and expressions that are being used in the construction of the woman in the different sources.

<sup>5</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The second sex*, New York: Vintage books, 2011, p. 330.

<sup>6</sup> But the man has to be a white, heterosexual, cis-man with no disabilities in order to fulfil this role.

<sup>7</sup> Leticia Glocer Fiorini, *Deconstructing the Feminine*, London: Karnac Books Ltd., 2008, p. 83.

representing the good traits, has the upper hand, whilst the other (the woman) becomes his natural opposite and hence gets defined with opposing, and often negative, traits.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of androcentrism is relevant not only in modern contexts. Research shows that the theory is highly applicable to other time periods as well. Lyndal Roper states that the medieval society was a heterosexual phallus-society, which was greatly influenced by the inhibited male potency and concern regarding female influence. The combination of the two is considered to have played a part in medieval societal structure where, as a way of maintaining power status, the influential or independent woman was given certain characteristics to exclude her from societal approval. This led to her lifestyle being avoided by other women and her threatening behaviour was oppressed.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the androcentric theory claims what this article does as well. Through understanding the man or the witch, who are what a woman is supposed not to be, we can begin to understand how the woman is supposed to be. The woman is created as an opposite of male characteristics and is thus created as “the Other”, which is something we will come to find in both Malleus and in the papal writings. Even though the popes did not mention witches, they still have an idea of the bad woman, which is essentially what the witch is.

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 33-34, 37; Judith Butler, “Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenally and feminist theory”, in Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo (eds.), *The feminist philosophy reader*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008, pp. 101-102, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 40-45, 48, 137-138. Roper also describes how even organised sisterhood within monasteries could pose a threat to patriarchal society and how prominent abbesses lived under threat since they challenged the traditional family where the man was head, pp. 41-42.

In order to find the attributes, qualities and abilities, I am using the idea of markers, explained briefly above. Markers here are understood as the most recurring words, euphemisms and contexts regarding the woman, the witch, and the man. Hence these markers have acted as guidelines in order to find the discourse concerning the different parts and, in extension, the discourse about women. This will be done through comprehensive readings of the source materials, which consists of Malleus as well as a variation of papal published texts found on the Vatican's own website.

Since the source materials are very different and from different time periods, it is important to look at them individually and in their respective contexts in order to avoid viewing them in the light of modern ideas. Words and contents slowly undergo a translation process, which can affect their meaning.<sup>10</sup> This is also true for religious texts. It is important to remember that hermeneutical reinterpretations of the Bible and its messages have become more popular in later centuries,<sup>11</sup> and how the papal writings are individual interpretations by the popes of the Bible. However, this article will prove that the popes express a unified idea of the ideal woman.

The comprehensive reading of the materials has resulted in pinpointing certain markers regarding the three different characters and their identities, and they have been categorized as follows:

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<sup>10</sup> Helge Jordheim, *Läsningens vetenskap: Utkast till en ny filologi*, Göteborg: Daidalos, 2003, pp. 155, 157, 159-160.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin J Vanhoozer "Exegesis and hermeneutics" in *New Dictionary of biblical theology: Exploring the unity and diversity of Scripture*, B.S. Rosner, T.D. Alexander, G. Goldsworthy, D.A. Carson (eds.), Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000, p. 53.

Table 1

<b>Ideal woman</b>	<b>Witch</b>	<b>Man</b>
<b>Mother</b>	Child murderer	Father
<b>Wife</b>	Unavailable	Husband
<b>Carer</b>	Ominous	Provider
<b>Virgin</b>	Promiscuous	Sexually dominant
<b>Respectable</b>	Lustful	Citizen
<b>Mysterious</b>	Discredited	Strong
<b>Passive/weak</b>	Active	Fertile

Below I have categorised the characteristics further into four groups. Each group represents different social roles in society. The chart below explains more easily the differences between the ideal woman, the witch, and the man in regard to their societal role.

Table 2

	<b>Hetero-normativity</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Group identity</b>	<b>Status</b>
<b>Ideal woman</b>	Mother Wife	Virgin	Carer	Respectable Mysterious Passive/weak
<b>Witch</b>	Unavailable	Promiscuous Lustful	Ominous Child murderer	Discredited Active
<b>Man</b>	Father Husband	Sexually dominant Fertile	Provider	Citizen Strong

## Four categories – a plunge into the source materials

Hetero-normativity is the first category in the tables above because of the prominent role it plays in both source materials and also in understanding the other categories and their markers. There is a clear idea that the man and the woman are opposites. This means that they are distinctly different and dichotomous. Saint John Paul II writes that it is intended for there to be only two sexes and that they are to come together in marriage and as a family. Their roles are obviously as husband and wife, and as father and mother.<sup>12</sup> Benedictus XVI goes as far as claiming that people who desire independence risk ignoring all natural relationships.<sup>13</sup> This shows how the idea of heterosexual marriage and opposite-sex parenting is what is considered natural, something which is found in Malleus. In Malleus the woman's role is interpreted through the witch. The witch is understood to be the centre of chaos in society, defying marriage by cheating with demons,<sup>14</sup> and defying true motherhood by giving birth to demons or making men impotent.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the ideal woman is understood to be a wife faithful to her husband and a mother caring for her human children.<sup>16</sup>

In both source materials, women are discussed in the same manner: in relation to a man. No matter the context, the materials consistently try to connect the woman to a man. The papal writings even go as far as claiming that even a single woman are part of a marriage – her marriage to Christ. Unlike the woman in Malleus, the pope's woman cannot refuse marriage or escape a man's grasp. Though this does not mean that single or childless women escape criticism. Women without the ambition of motherhood, or women who wish to do an abortion, are considered to be murderers since

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<sup>12</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II, 1988-08-15, part 1 paragraph 1, and also part 3 paragraph 6.

<sup>13</sup> Adress of his holiness Benedictus XVI, 2008-04-09, paragraph 3.

<sup>14</sup> Mackay, 2009, pp. 108, 119, 211, 278-279, 299, 399.

<sup>15</sup> Mackay, 2009, e.g. pp. 193-194, 243, 251, 280-281, 323-324.

<sup>16</sup> Mackay, 2009, pp. 163.



they refuse their children life<sup>17</sup>, a similarity shared with Malleus. In Malleus the most horrid actions a witch could perform were actions that put her outside the reach of the patriarchy. Actions such as separating herself from the grasp of her husband by being unfaithful or carrying the children of others, by murdering babies that were heirs of men, and by acting on orders that were not controlled by the patriarchal society. Even though the papal writings naturally do not write of demons or witches the message is the same: the woman needs to exist in relation to a man.

“Sexuality” is the second category and the source materials show a great difference in handling this subject. Whilst Malleus delves into the subject, sparing few details, the papal writings show little to no interest in dealing with the matter. However, this does not mean that their opinions differ. In Malleus the woman is understood to be a creature driven by sexual lust and the witch is a woman who has given into this lust. The man on the other hand is deemed to be in perfect control of his sexual abilities and the sole reason for a man losing his control or potency was witchcraft; hence it was the woman’s fault if a man cheated or could not procreate. This means that the best sexual condition for a woman in Malleus is to be a virgin, since she then had not engaged in a sexual act. The authors write: “A good woman is subordinated desire of the flesh”<sup>18</sup> and a virgin actually elicited some respect. However, the ideal was to combine motherhood with virginity, as Mother Mary had done. This ideal being impossible in reality, women giving birth and becoming mothers lost a lot of the respect they had had as virgins. The papal writings actually have the exact same ideal: Mother Mary, and they too hold the idea of virginity and motherhood high. Saint John Paul II writes: “In the teaching of Christ, motherhood is connected with virginity, but also distinct from it”,<sup>19</sup> which shows how important it is to connect

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to women, John Paul II, 1995-09-29, section 5; *Caritas in veritate*, Benedictus XVI, 2009-06-29, chapter 2 paragraph 28, chapter 6 paragraph 75.

<sup>18</sup> Mackay, 2009, p. 164

<sup>19</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, part 6 paragraph 21-22.

virginity to motherhood and making it possible to get closer to the ideal. The papal writings also state “One cannot correctly understand virginity – a woman’s consecration in virginity – without referring to spousal love”,<sup>20</sup> which makes it perfectly clear that the sexual act is accepted as long as it remains within the boundaries of marriage. However, actual references to the sexual act are practically non-existent in the papal writings and are more of a necessary evil. A certain explanation can be found in Unger’s biblical dictionary where cheating is explained as “any woman married or single, who practices unlawful sexual indulgence, whether for gain or lust”.<sup>21</sup> This indicates that acknowledging a woman’s sexual desire equals defining the woman as sinful. Hence, in both Malleus and the papal writings the ideal woman is a virgin with no sexual ambitions. The ideas of virginity and motherhood differ though, in the sense that motherhood in modern papal writings can withhold a woman’s status whilst it could not in Malleus.

The category “group identity” indicates the role the characters have in society. The witch, still to be understood as the bad woman, and what not to be, has an active role in society. She is not afraid of interacting with the world around her and she has a place in the society, which in other words means that she has power. However, her actions are in Malleus described as vile and the consequences are horrific as she creates cataclysms<sup>22</sup> and diseases<sup>23</sup>, and pretty much destroys the civilization around her. As an opposite, the ideal woman is considered to be good, obedient and caring for her family. The following is mentioned in Malleus: “The husband of a good woman is blessed. For the number of his years is double”.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the ideal woman helps to strengthen the patriarchal system and the society by acting her part and using her caring skills to care for her surroundings.

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<sup>20</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, part 6 paragraph 20.

<sup>21</sup> Merrill F Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary, 3rd edition (1966)*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1988, p. 735.

<sup>22</sup> Mackay, 2009, pp. 106, 281, 299, 380-386.

<sup>23</sup> Mackay, 2009, pp. 91, 100, 104, 149, 353-354, 403-404, 443.

<sup>24</sup> Mackay, 2009, pp. 163.

The papal writings show a very similar idea to what they consider to be the ideal woman. They write of her as a carer for her husband and children, and how her loving nature and her openness are traits that nurture entire societies and even help form nations. Even if the contributions from women to society are great in areas like medicine, physics, theology, sports, and many more, the only areas the popes address when thanking women for their contributions are within health care, teaching and charity.<sup>25</sup> Her role in the papal writings is consistently linked to the home and her role is as a housewife caring for her family, whilst the man's responsibility is to provide for the family, since he would be the one working outside of the home.

Therefore we can draw the conclusion that in both source materials the woman is characterized as the carer and the man as the provider. The witch on the other hand is outside of the system completely, trying to overturn society. She does this not only through physical actions like killing and cheating, but also through refusing to be a part of the hetero-normative society.

The status of the characters is based on their group identity. The status of the witch is naturally very low. In *Malleus* the status is even inheritable and daughters especially were in the danger zone, even though both genders experienced being excluded from the society.<sup>26</sup> In *Malleus* it is therefore advocated that the honourable woman acts correctly, shows respect to her husband and family by fitting into her passive role, a role that was counterpart to her husband's more active role in society. Roper explains how the man, if he stayed away from public scandals and overuse of alcohol, was considered a member of society. Even if being considered a member did not guarantee him any rights, it gave him membership and a position in the local society. This gave him at least some influence, that very few women would ever experience.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, part 6 chapter 18; Letter to women, paragraph 9.

<sup>26</sup> Mackay, 2009, pp. 374.

<sup>27</sup> Roper, 1994, pp. 108-110.

The papal writings try to reinforce the idea of the strong woman and her role in society, which means within the family, the home and in the church as a lovable pillar. Nevertheless, the required passivity shines through when her contribution repeatedly is described as solely a supporter of love, a role that, according to the popes, is a very respectable one.

Reading the papal writings, another marker was identified: mysterious.<sup>28</sup> Once again Mother Mary is in the centre, but this time along with Eve. Eve, the first woman, is the first mystery, but she needs to be completed by Mary. Mary is the woman Eve was “intended to be in creation and therefore the eternal mind of God”.<sup>29</sup> In Mary, Eve finds the true dignity in being human, but it took Mary being open to the female mystery. Saint John Paul II writes that embracing femininity is to embrace the mystery, which is linked to all God’s mysteries. By embracing her feminine self with love, which is a woman’s greatest ability, she welcomes the world. This is, as we have seen earlier, a woman’s purpose – to unite.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, it is in being considerate, caring and by embracing love that a woman’s status lays. But the woman also has to distance herself from the “female sins”, which is to identify her with masculine and hence witch-similar features. The similarities in the two materials are striking. However there is a difference in their approaches. Whilst Malleus never explains or gives advice on how a woman can avoid becoming a witch, the papal writings are very explicit in how a woman can achieve her purpose in life and become the ideal woman. The source materials have been written with different purposes, however this does not mean that their message is different.

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to women, paragraph 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, part 4 paragraph 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Caritas in veritate*, chapter 5 paragraph 54.

## Being a witch is being a rebel – both then and now

Despite the different origins and usages of the sources materials and despite their different ambitions we see a clear similarity between the two. Being a witch, being the bad woman, is in to turn away from the system that upholds the current society. As mentioned above, the witch and the man show striking similarities. They both have an active part in society, they are both linked to sexual freedom, and they both have power. Both source materials describe a patriarchy where the man has the freedom of choice, the authority to cultivate society and to speak for the people. The ideal woman aids him in this. By caring for the man, for his children and for the people, her love creates a sturdy foundation. Her role is key for the man to exist. The witch is a woman who escapes her role. She does not fit the norms; she goes her own way and gains power within areas not meant for a woman. Both source materials describe the danger in this: these women have the power to corrupt society and the authors reject these women in order to make sure others does not follow their example.

However, there are also plenty of men, then and now, who experience little control over their lives or feel that they too are given a mass-produced template to fit into. The difference lies in that being a man is to be characterized with good attributes, qualities and abilities, and acting on them gives a pass into society. A woman's attributes, qualities and abilities do not give her freedoms, but restrictions. Thus the woman's position within the hetero-normative ideal and her identity as "the Other", as opposite of the man, has been proven to be destructive for the woman. She is stripped of her emancipatory and autonomous rights to self-identification. When the ideal is constructed for the woman, and a crossing of "gender-typical" characteristics is considered destructive for the society, women are being raised to adapt and to restrain themselves. Women are not able to reach full potential and hence society will not be able to reach full potential. Even if in practice women are allowed vocational freedom, family planning, and to be sexually active, taking advantage of these freedoms is more difficult in a society where these freedoms are regarded as signs of

corruption, where women acting on their freedoms are stigmatized as promiscuous or even murderers..

Both source materials show an androcentric, hetero-normative understanding of the genders, and a fear of a shift in power positions between men and women. Both portray the rebelling woman as a witch in society, a threat to be contained. This article has shown that a modern context is not always a precondition for a new worldview, and also that the witches identified in Malleus is considered to be walking around among us still.

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