The Scapegoat: Impotence and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages

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In Western Medieval Europe, a phenomenon occurred known as the Witch Craze which became prominent from 1450-1700 and reached its peak from 1550-1660. This period was marked by the popularity of witch-hunts, which were sanctioned by communities and most predominantly by the Inquisition.[1] During the late Middle Ages, right up to the eighteenth century, an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people were executed for witchcraft in Europe.[2] This excludes the millions more that were tortured, persecuted and lived in constant fear of such horrendous acts. Rising from this fear, a strong correlation between the female sex and the "occult" or "dark arts" of witchcraft was established.[3] Women were targets and their feminine identity was strongly grafted into the fifteenth century stereotype of precarious women who renounced God, flew over Sabbaths to meet the Devil, held orgies, murdered babies and planned inflictions of magical harm on neighbours.[4] A particular feature of such infliction was male impotence. The issue of male impotence and sterility was by no means a new concept in the Middle Ages. Ancient Greek physicians, such as Galen, Aristotle and Dioscordies, discuss impotence in their medical treatises and tried to such cases.[5] However, in the fifteenth century the tendency for male impotency to be projected onto women as the cause, emerged. How is it that women were held responsible for the innate biological issue of male impotence in the fifteenth century? Why during this time frame and why in particular women?

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[1] Joseph R. Strayer, *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner, 1989), 663.
[2] Ibid., 658.
[3] Ibid., 664-665
[4] Catherine Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 186.
[5] Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 39.

In the thirteenth century, natural philosophical discourses such as the Latin treatise *De secretis mulierium* had a direct influence in establishing a situation where women and their sexual functions were viewed with suspicion and hostility. This suspicious atmosphere allowed men to assert their dominance and project their biological issues, such as impotence, onto women in the form of witchcraft. In order to analyze this concept, this essay will first examine impotence and how it was believed to be caused by witchcraft, followed by an analysis of the medical treatises *De secretis mulierium* along with *Trotula* and conclude with an analysis of how witchcraft and natural philosophy intersected to establish an atmosphere that allowed women to become scapegoats for male impotence.

There is a strong relationship between witchcraft and sexual issues such as impotence. The notion of witches attacking fertility was widespread in the fourteenth century and such ideas about magical infertility took on many forms. In the case of impotence, natural philosophers or medical writers describe two potential causes. The first was natural impotence which derived from physical or biological causes. The second was magically-caused impotence which arose from supernatural or magical means that prevented procreation.[6] If a physical cause could not be determined, then magic was the second explanation for impotence. Magically-caused impotence involved several forms of spells and rituals but its targets incorporated both men and women along with animals. The *Malleus Maleficarum,* a witch-hunting manual from 1486, describes several cases of magically-caused impotence. One of the most prominent forms of "depriving the man of his virile member" was stealing or rendering the penis to vanish.[7] The *Malleus Maleficarum* notes the example of a young man from the town of Ratisbon who wished to leave

[6] Constance M. Rousseau, "Neither Bewitched nor Beguiled: Philip Augustus's Alleged Impotence and Innocent III's Response." *Speculum* 89, no. 2 (2014): 410-36. Accessed November 25, 2015. doi:http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1017/S0038713413004570.

[7] Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*. Translated by Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 246.

the relationship he had with a girl and that he potentially, "lost his member; that is to say, some glamour was cast over it so that he could see or touch nothing but his smooth body".[8] A similar case was also reported from the Father of a Dominican House in Spires when he heard the confession of a young man who lost his member to a woman living in Worms.[9] Another form of magically caused impotence was tying knots or the process of tying *aiguillette.*[10]This type of sterility spell was often accomplished by tying a cord or string in knots which symbolized the tying of a man's seminal vessels. In one particular Italian folktale from the Middle Ages, a woman's rival uses a padlock to "lock" or "bind" her man, rendering him impotent.[11] When it came to male impotence, women were generally targeted and used as a scapegoat.

Impotence threatened a man's masculinity as it was both grounds for annulment and it also hindered a husband's duty to perform sexually and beget children.[12] "Witchcraft" was essentially attributed to both men and women, however, witchcraft took on a gender norm that was more feminine than masculine. Records from the Church of Canterbury only describe women as being "witches" in trials while men were accused of specific offenses.[13] By targeting the opposite sex, men in the Middle Ages projected their own biological issues onto women as a way to avoid threats to their masculinity. This hostility towards women was embedded in cultural beliefs due to the ideology of the "secrets of women".

In the thirteenth century, the "secrets of women", was a term used to describe the mystery that men experienced (especially male physicians) concerning women's bodies and their

[8] Institoris and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum.*
[9] Ibid.
[10] Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages*, 198.
[11] McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History*,45.
[12] Vern Bullough, "Chapter 2: On Being Male in the Middle Ages." In *Medieval Masculinity Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, edited by Clare Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 41.
[13] Jones Karen, and Michael Zell, "'The Divels Speciall Instruments': Women and Witchcraft before the 'Great Witch-Hunt'" *Social History* 30, no. 1 (2005): 50. Accessed November 25, 2015. doi: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4287161.

reproductive functions, which was at first a subject of medical inquiry. However, later in the fourteenth century these "secrets" became infused with suspicion and connoted the idea that women hid malicious purposes towards men concerning their reproductive systems. This type of ideology established certain cultural beliefs that made women susceptible to being charged for crimes of magically-caused impotence. At the medical school of Salerno, in the eleventh century, a prominent teacher, Trotula composed the medical treatise, *On the Disease of Women* (also referred as *Trotula).* This particular medical document contains a pitying tone towards female illness and troubles and seeks to aid women.[14] In the chapter concerning menstruation, *Trotula* offers the medical explanation that menses was caused by an excess of moistures, and also relays the dangers of retaining menses. The chapter furthers recommends remedies to bring on menstrual periods to avoid such illnesses caused by the retention of menses.[15] In contrast, the medical treatise, *De sectretis mulierum* or *On the Secrets of Women*, was composed by a disciple of Albertus Magnus in the thirteenth century and approaches the treatment of women's illnesses differently.[16] In regards to retaining menses, the pseudo-Albert asserts that the retention of menses was not that women could become ill from it (as was the popular belief) but that the danger actually arose with those who came into contact with such a woman.[17] Young children should not interact or even be looked upon by such women as they could be made ill from her "abundance of evil humors".[18] Both treatises show a contrasting difference when dealing with the topic of menstruation. *Trotula* offers remedies while *On the Secrets of Women* simply outlines causes and dangers of non-menstruating women.

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[14] Helen R. Lemay, "Some Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Lectures on Female Sexuality", *International Journal of Women's Studies* 1, no.4 (July/August 1978): 393.
[15] Ibid, 394.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

Another area that the treatises overlap upon is the subject of "Wounds of the Penis". In regards to sores on the penis, *Trotula* recommends "washing the area, anointing it with a mallow macerated in warm blood or butter and covering it with cabbage and linen cloth".[19] The author of *On the Secrets of Women* however, provides a different perspective concerning wounds on the male member. The author states, "O my companions you should be aware that many women, although ignorant of the cause, are familiar with the evil phenomenon".[20] The author continues to elaborate on the subject by suggesting that the cause derived from a cauterizing chemical called iron or *ferrum* found in the woman, which wounds the male member allowing menses to enter.[21] Women were protected from this chemical because their womb was not as porous as a penis and they could also prepare themselves by using protective oils.[22] *On the Secrets of Women* treats female patients with a suspicious tone while *Trotula* simply recognizes the medical issues regarding women and tries provide remedies. In the thirteenth century, literature such as *On the Secrets of Women* treated topics of female sexuality and reproduction not only in the terms of Aristotelian natural philosophy but also Christian theology, both containing antifeminist elements.[23] Both *Trotula* and *On the Secrets of Women* show the changing attitudes in natural philosophy towards female patients and their sexual functions. Whereas in the thirteenth century, medical discourses sought to understand women simply in medical terms but this eventually altered during the fourteenth century as women were treated not only as biologically inferior but as harmful and deceitful towards male bodies.

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[19] Lemay, "Some Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Lectures on Female Sexuality," 395.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Katherine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 93.

Women were prominent scapegoats for male issues of impotence. Such accusations were made possible due to medical discourses and their treatment of the "secrets of women". In the thirteenth century, the interior of women's bodies were simply a matter of interest to medical scholars who sought to aid women and their infirmities. This changed drastically in the later century, as a suspicious tone was adapted in discussion on the "secrets of women" and their reproductive system. Women knowledgeable of their reproductive system often held such information in secrecy from men as social boundaries prevented women and men to divulge information about their bodies to one another. Such secrecies allowed inquisitors to accuse women of causing impotence. This perception towards women grew into an ideology and was accepted as a cultural belief in medieval society. These beliefs towards women allowed them to be targets during the Witch Craze and potential scapegoats for threats to male masculinities specifically in the case of magically-caused impotence.

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