



Four Hundred Years Later: An Appreciation of Johann Weyer

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“. . . and if she will not, let him order the officers to bind her with cords, and apply to her some engine of torture.”
(1, Part III, Question XIV)

The Renaissance: a re-birth, a renewal, a new beginning. The word calls to mind images of those golden centuries (approximately 1300-1600) in Western Europe when new ideas, new energy, new discoveries, new hope for the human condition were springing up in every area of man's efforts. It was a time of great literature, unprecedented progress in the medical arts, daring navigation and exploration, original scientific inquiry, and a time when many courageous men dared to question old authority and to break openly with old traditions. It was the time of such historically great names as Albertus Magnus, Arnold of Villanova, Erasmus, Luther, Jean Fernel, Montaigne, Frascatorius, Shakespeare, and the great anatomists of the school in Padua. It was the time of great artists and their contemporaries, such as Leonardo, Titian, and Michelangelo. The printing press eventually allowed the rapid and widespread availability of these new and stimulating ideas. The discoveries of the English, Spanish, and Portuguese explorers added new yeast to all this ferment. We have reason to think of it as bathed in a golden light.

But the Renaissance, as every historian knows, had its dark and ugly side. The great mass of men and women did not share the glories of the age, but remained slaves to the oppressive social conditions carried over from the Middle Ages. Wars

continuously used up the resources of nations. The devastation of such catastrophes as the bubonic plague of 1348-1350, for example, and the appearance of syphilis in 1492-1493, is difficult for modern man to realize. Education, sanitation, proper nutrition, in fact, the basic essentials for normal human life were lacking for the average person. Along with this was the carry-over of the superstitions and paranoias of the previous dark centuries, and especially oppressive were the demands and threats of the Church. The Church was not, to the peasant masses, a pillar of hope or help; rather, it was something to be obeyed with fear, and lives were lived out under the burdens of toil and hopelessness. It is small wonder that strange phenomena appeared and flourished along with the winds of change in the arts and sciences. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse rode the skies of Europe, as if to verify the mysterious Book of Revelation.

The madness of the Crusades had at last passed. But in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries such opposing sects as the Albigenses and the Waldenses aroused the Church to increased vigilance, and in 1227 the Inquisition, under the direction of the Dominican order, was instituted as a permanent court to suppress heresy and persecute Jews. Further developed and reorganized under Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain, it eventually became essentially a State tribunal, and was not officially abolished until 1834. Mass manias of various types did spring up from time to time all over Europe, such as the hysterics of the St. Vitus Dance and the wandering Flagellantes, along with that age-old practice of witchcraft, all the offspring of ignorance, superstition, and fear of the supernatural. Witchcraft, a sort of gamble for the supposed promises of the Devil, witch hunts, and the wholesale executions of witches and heretics ordered by Church and State engulfed Europe. How could such conditions exist for the vast majority of the citizenry, mired in poverty and ignorance, along with the great advances which we know as the Renaissance? Paradox indeed, and one that has never been fully explained.

It is not the purpose here to review in full the history of witchcraft, for it is a well known and painful scar on the human record. Presented here is only a brief backdrop for one important gain in the art and science of medicine which resulted from the insane cruelties of the Inquisition. No doubt many unrecorded opinions of medical men, as well as thoughtful persons in other endeavors, voiced denunciation of witchcraft, witch hunts, and everything associated with related practices, but the pressure of the Church, holding up the well-known threats of both the Old and the New Testaments, made the general population cower and give at least lip service to the actualities of the power of the Devil and his demons over a mere human being. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus, 22:10) became the rallying cry for the Dominican inquisitors who spread out over Europe to sniff out heretics and witches, almost always women and girls. Was the concentration on the feminine sex an expression of the uneasy sexuality of the monomaniacal clerical inquisitors? Was the hunt a release from their own painful celibacy? This misogynous mania, the path of which was marked by blood and smouldering human ashes, spread like a plague in its own right all over Western Europe. It was not as thoroughly pressed in Spain and Italy as it was in Germany, the Lowlands, and especially in France. It has been reported that in the late sixteenth century more than 900 women were burned at the stake as witches in France alone, mainly in the province of Lorraine. Julius Caesar, an experienced observer, centuries previously had remarked that of all the peoples he had encountered the Gauls were the most superstitious, warlike, and cruel. Britain, too, shared the shame of this dark episode in history. Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and James I were all believers in the presence of witches and demons and their control by Satan. And we can recall with shame that in our own Massachusetts, in Salem Village, in 1692, 1693, and 1694 witch hunts swept through the community with a brief but murderous effect. As many as five witches might be executed in one day, the village populace turning out to watch the spectacle as at any village fete. Hanging or

drowning were the favorite methods of execution, but "pressing" to death with stones was also favored. Whether or not misogyny, a blatant principle of the witch hunts, originated in the Judaeo-Christian theology may be argued, but it is obvious that that theology supported and continued the persecutions.

Maimonides (1135-1204) "... opposed with great vehemence all ideas of witchcraft and denounced the pretensions of astrology. . . ." ¹ It will be recalled that Maimonides later fled his native Cordova to seek safety in first Fez, and finally in Egypt. Other, later, dissenting voices of Jewish doctors are on record, protesting in their publications the persecution of so-called witches. (Amatus Lusitanus, 1511-1568 and Andres a Laguna, 1499-1563). Voices of derision and outright denial of the Church's cruel dogmatic tenets were more and more frequently heard, such as those of Montaigne and Rabelais, but this had little effect on the steadfastly growing practice of witchcraft. Heresy became one with witchcraft; confusion reigned concerning Christ and the Anti-Christ. King Frederick II of Naples, who did so much to promote and spread the fame of the School of Medicine at Salerno, was a good Catholic, yet he was suspected by his critics of being a dabbler in necromancy. He is reported to have said on one occasion that Moses, Jesus, and Mohamed were history's greatest imposters. That there was confusion about who was or was not a witch may be seen in the old story of the burning of Joan of Arc at the stake in Rouen in 1431. As the flames engulfed her she exclaimed, "Jesus!" An English soldier standing by cried out in terror, "We have burned a saint! We are lost!" But in spite of voices of doubt and protest from various places, the Inquisition flourished with unabated fury for well over three centuries. One of its early and lasting inventions was the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list published by the Roman Catholic Church restricting the reading of certain books. It also spawned one of the most, if not the most, coldly cruel books ever to disgrace literature. It was a

¹ Harry Friedenwald, *The Jews and Medicine; Essays* (2nd ed.; New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 214.

best-seller of the Renaissance, and rapidly went through many editions in many different locations. Its bibliography is very complicated and not yet fully established. It had gone through thirty editions by 1669. It is a long, complicated work, obviously the result of much study and work on the part of its authors. Its two most prominent characteristics are the genius with which logic is twisted and its unrelenting voice of misogyny. It is one of the most notable literary products of the Renaissance, that period of blossoming of the humanities, the arts, and the sciences! It is amusing to speculate whether Shakespeare, who certainly must have been acquainted with the book, didn't find in it inspiration for the witches scene in *Macbeth* (Act IV, Scene I).

That book, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, approved and promoted by a Papal Bull from Pope Innocent VIII in 1484, and finally approved again by the Council on Theology of the Faculty of Cologne, was the work of two industrious, ambitious, single-minded, and self-righteous Dominican inquisitors, Heinrich Kraemer and Johann Sprenger, the birth and death dates of whom are not certain. They collaborated on the exhaustive research for this book which appeared in Lyons in 1486. It has been translated into most European languages, and into English for the first time in 1928 by Rev. Montague Summers, an English clergymen, who praised the book for its scholarship, its "supremely authoritative" content, and called it "a venerable volume" and a "great work".² "One turns to it again and again with edification and interest. From the point of psychology, from the point of jurisprudence, from the point of history, it is supreme."³

The good reverend, who himself shows a profound knowledge of the history of theology, sorcery, witchcraft, and the Renaissance, professed his total approval of the precise and comprehensive rules of *The Malleus Maleficarum* and he assures

²Heinrich Kraemer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. by Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 1971), pp. XXXIX, XL.

³*Ibid*, p. ix.



Witches burned at the stake. From the front cover of a 1971 edition of *The Malleus Maleficarum*.

the reader in his introduction to the original edition of 1928 that he, too, believed with good reason in the presence and power of witches.

The Malleus Maleficarum is without doubt the most detailed, exhaustive, and authoritative book ever written on witchcraft. The index is a masterpiece of detail, as is, in fact, the entire text. The opening "Question" of the index reads, "Whether the Belief that there are such Beings as witches is so Essential a Part of the Catholic Faith that Obstnacy to maintain the Opposite manifestly savours of Heresy."⁴ The text, written in long, convoluted sentences is heavy-footed, tiresome, uncompromising, threatening, erotic, lurid, pornographic, cruel, and sadistic. Witches are usually old women, sometimes younger

⁴*Ibid*, p. I.

women, rarely men. Demon-possessed girls were of common occurrence. All this is quite normal, since by nature woman is lower than man, is naturally unclean, given to lust and licentiousness, and is easily seduced by the Devil into sexual digressions. Was it not the woman, not the man, who was seduced by Satan and took the first bite of the forbidden fruit? Woman is *from* man, having been made from Adam's rib. Now that rib, being one of the lesser bones of the body, was from the lower portion of the rib cage, and, furthermore, a rib is not a straight bone; it is crooked. And so on, with puerile, ludicrous, infuriating, twisted argument. With infinite detail the proof of witches is expounded, along with how they are to be identified, how to be tortured (beaten, burned with boiling oil, lighted candles held under the arm pits, hanging by the hands, starvation, throwing into pools of water, stretching on the rack, confinement in jail for months without trial, etc.), and how to be disposed of (burning at the stake was best, for the Devil hates fire above all else). All the procedures for the operation of the Inquisition are there in shocking detail for the modern reader, for it was the textbook of instruction for the hundreds of fanatically zealous inquisitors who roamed the countrysides intent on cleansing the world for their love of God.

All this was supported by direct quotations from the Bible, proof of the righteousness of the persecutions. Eventually the State joined the Church in the witch hunts and executions, and even such a brilliant intellectual as the jurist Jean Bodin (1530-1596) was a confirmed believer in the presence of witches. Tolerant though he was in many ways, he wrote a legal treatise on the subject which in its way was as persuasive as *The Malleus Maleficarum*. He was an example of the many educated professionals of the day who believed that the handling of witches was not a medical matter, and that doctors should not meddle with the problem. It was a legal, theological matter.

Thus the victims accused of sorcery were fenced in left and right. If you were accused of witchcraft you were guilty until you proved yourself innocent. Once accused and tried, even

though acquitted—a rare occurrence—the victim's life was shattered forever after, often being deprived of all property and turned out into a world alone, shunned and destitute. As the strongest dissenting voice of the day wrote, human blood and the stench of burning flesh spread like a pall over Europe; the wood, he said, used for the flames would have been better spent warming the dismal homes of the helplessly trapped victims in this wicked time.

Johann Weyer (1515-1588) was born into a family of modest means in the small city of Grave, in Brabant (The Netherlands). As a child he was studious, quiet, grave, and religious, characteristics of all his later life. In his late teens he lived for two years in the home of his teacher and preceptor, Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), a brilliant but erratic scholar, physician, free-thinker, and a model who set a lasting example for the young Weyer by his humane attitude toward the sick and unfortunate. It is particularly important to note that Agrippa, defying the prevailing social attitudes concerning the inferiority of the feminine sex, wrote a treatise totally out of keeping with the era: *On the Nobility and Pre-eminence of the Feminine Sex*. The humane if stormy nature of his teacher so deeply impressed the young student that these views were reflected later in his first and most important book. Leaving Agrippa, Weyer studied medicine at Orleans and the University of Paris, where he received his doctor's degree in 1537, at the age of 22. In the next several years of general practice he came face to face with the horrors of the witch hunts and was outraged at the pretensions of the Inquisition and its guide book, *The Malleus Maleficarum*. He railed in writing and open speech against the revolting discussions in that book of the erotic perversions of the devil with women, of the fantastic claims concerning the powers of the incubi and succubi, and of the murderous persecutions of "silly old women" by Church and State. His bluntly stated criticisms forced him to seek protection as physician to Duke William V of Jülich-Cleve-Berg, and he spent most of the rest of his life with this intelligent, kind, and humane man. After the Duke's death, however, Weyer was



Portrait of Johann Weyer
(1515-1588)

forced to turn elsewhere, and he lived the remaining few years of his life under the protection of Countess Anna of Techlenberg. He died there in 1588 and was buried in the local churchyard, but his grave site is now unknown.

During his busy, yet quiet, life Johann Weyer was ever the astute observer of the world around him, which seemed to him more like a huge clinic filled with sick people. He published a number of works on general medical topics, perhaps the most notable of which was his treatise on scurvy. But his greatest work, his first publication,

was the book destined to leave a lasting effect on the development of psychiatry: *De Praestigiis Daemonum, et Incantationibus, ac Veneficiis Libri V* (Basle, 1563). A second, larger edition was published the following year, for the book was widely read, though its message was little respected or followed by the contemporary medical world. In 1566 a third edition was published, again enlarged, and a year later Weyer's translation was published in the vernacular, still larger. Other editions followed in 1568, 1577, and 1583, an *Opera Omnia* having appeared in 1660. Though a popular book, there was wide opposition to it. The Church promptly put it on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. Sigmund Freud said that Weyer's book was one of the ten greatest books ever published, a statement which is not entirely prejudiced hyperbole.

Weyer's life was spent in clinical observation. He thought in terms of the individual patient and his special concerns. In horror he wondered at the atrocities committed around him in the name of the Mother Church and God. He knew first hand

of the tortures, the filth, disease, and death in the dungeons and jails where "witches" were held for long pre-trial periods. He was repulsed by the fanatical methods of execution: burning at the stake, drowning, hanging, beheading, prolonged beating, or tearing the body to pieces on the rack. How, he wondered, could all this be done in the name of a loving God? He, too, was more or less a practicing Catholic, and he believed that witches and demon possession could exist, but he denied the supposed power of the Devil in the wretched lives of most of the accused, for he saw about him women called accomplices in evil, but who were so frightened, so ignorant, so destroyed mentally by their hallucinations arising out of their miserable lives, that they were unable to sustain any denial of the charges against them. Believable and trusted witnesses were rarely to be had. Many such women, as well as trouble-making, malingering, or delusional children, usually girls, he studied individually, often taking them into his own home where he and his wife cared for them, closely observed them, counselled them, and brought them back to mental and physical normalcy. He saw mental illness where the Church and State saw criminality, and he was the first physician boldly to confront the Inquisition and deny its right to carry on in the name of Christianity. He saw the individual, not the mass mania of witchcraft, as the point to which he must direct his efforts for reform, and he could only be this defiant because of his royal protection. The lengthy arguments and twisted logic of *The Malleus Maleficarum* as to why confession under torture was valid (the victim was finally brought to her senses through the intercession of Our Lord) particularly fired his scorn. In writing *De Praestigiis Daemonum* he must have had before him a copy of *The Malleus Maleficarum*, for his book is almost a sentence by sentence refutation of *The Malleus Maleficarum*. His derision of the tortuous and ludicrous "logic" of the book was a consuming passion with him.

Johann Weyer, being first of all an astute clinical observer, did his observing and reporting by a "hands on" method, just as, for example, Vesalius, Harvey, and Morgagni broke ground

by using the same method of independent observation. He demonstrated clearly, case after case, that mental illness was a completely separate entity from the ignorance, superstition, and hallucinations which together made "witches" out of innocent people. He insisted and conclusively showed that mental illness, like any other human illness, should be treated by physicians, and not by the Church or State. His critical analysis of the scourge of witchcraft, his scientific, descriptive, observational approach to the problem, are the very roots of modern psychiatry, for his was the first statement clearly to demonstrate psychopathology as something completely apart from the work of the Devil and something which could be successfully treated. He was the first to outline such treatment. "Therein lies the greatest historical significance of Johann Weyer, for he was the first man to insist that normal and pathological mental processes differ in degree and form but not in substance, and that human will has nothing to do with mental illness".⁵ The effects of this man, so remarkable for his era, were not immediately evident, but were reflected later in the humane reforms started by Pinel, Esquirol, Chiarugi, the great nineteenth century German neuropsychiatrists, Freud, and many others. It was a long process, from Weyer to the modern practice of psychiatry, and it was not until within living memory that psychiatry became accepted as a respectable member of the medical world.

Johann Weyer left a quiet message for all of us. He left proof that all human beings are vulnerable to the sufferings of mental illness, and that sanity is a very fragile thing.

⁵Gregory Zilboorg, *The Medical Man and the Witch During the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1935), pp. 204-205.