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The Demonopathology of Impotence

By W. H. TRETHOWAN

So little consideration is given in early medical writings to sexual disorders, that it seems that these were, for many centuries, hardly regarded as the concern of the physician. There are a few exceptions. For example: Hippocrates (Airs, Waters, Places XVII-XXII) discussed the part played by constitutional and environmental factors in the causation of impotence among the Scythians. Later, Caelius Aurelianus, according to Zilboorg (1941), while expressing disgust at the debauchery which characterized Imperial Rome, seems to have recognized that sexual perversions were illnesses which, at times, were epidemic in character. Subsequently, and in particular during medieval times, problems of this nature seem to have had a moral rather than a medical connotation. Indeed it was not until towards the close of the nineteenth century that any real insight into the medico-psychological nature of sexual difficulties and deviations became apparent. This new awareness reached its peak following the investigations of Havelock Ellis, Freud, Stekel and others, and the formulation of certain psychoanalytic hypotheses.

In contrast to the prolonged silence of the physicians, certain of the medieval demonologists had a great deal to say on the subject; in particular Sprenger and Kramer, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. This notorious work, which was first published about 1487, is replete with sexual details. Sprenger, its principal author, has been called a dangerous and evil-minded fanatic, who revelled in the preposterous and even more the sensual, and the *Malleus* itself one of the wickedest and most obscene books ever written (Parrinder, 1958). Be this as it may, parts of the work are of considerable psychopathological interest. Although some of the views contained therein are the very antithesis of those expressed by Freud and his followers four centuries later, the essential difference lies in the premises on which they are based. In short, what the psychoanalyst recognizes as an instinctual impulse derived from the "id", the demonologist appears to have ascribed to possession or bewitchment. Apart from this basic difference, and, in particular in regard to the classification of the nature and causes of impotence, demonological "psychopathology" often bears a remarkable resemblance to certain current psychodynamic formulations.

The impetus for the *Malleus* came from the Papal Bull of Innocent VIII, *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*, which, in 1484, set the juggernaut of the Inquisition rolling. Most of the major indictments against witchcraft practitioners made in this proclamation have a sexual content. Apart from causing abortion in women and cattle, by means of "accursed charms and crafts, enormities and horrid offences" witches were accused of hindering men from performing the sexual act and women from conceiving "whence husbands cannot know their wives nor wives receive their husbands". Over and above this, it was said "these wretches . . . do not shrink from committing the foulest abominations and filthiest excesses". What exactly these abominations and excesses were, is not specifically enumerated; it is likely, however, that this is a reference to the sexual practices which were supposed to be performed by those who were intimate with the Devil.

Before proceeding to examine the basis of these accusations in greater detail, certain more general aspects of the matter need consideration.

The first concerns the nature of witchcraft. There are three main views extant. One, to which Montague Summers (1926), the translator of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and a prolific

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writer on witchcraft, seems to have subscribed, is that while many witches and their victims were undoubtedly mentally abnormal a residuum of true cases of demoniacal possession existed. A second and more widely held opinion is that all the phenomena of witchcraft were no more than could be accounted for by mental illness. While there can be little doubt that major hysteria, and possibly other forms of mental disorder also, accounted for many of the recorded manifestations of bewitchment and possession and for much of the behaviour of witches themselves, this view, even after having allowed for cultural determinants and current superstitious beliefs, is probably an over-simplification.

The third main view, which was advanced by Professor Margaret Murray in 1921, while not entirely incompatible with the "hypothesis of hysteria or hallucination" is that Ritual Witchcraft, as opposed to Operative Witchcraft or sorcery, represented the persistence in Europe of the Dianic cult or pre-Christian pagan religion. Because of this, and quite apart from its unsavoury nature, witchcraft was regarded as heresy. This was at least one, though not the only, reason it was so bitterly opposed by the Church.

Apart from this, witchcraft ritual seems originally to have included much which was of a sexual kind. According to legend, the witches' coven consisted of a group of twelve women, who consorted with the Devil, or, in effect, his representative, and were in the habit of indulging in ritual copulation, probably employing an artificial phallus for this purpose. This, if true, would seem to have been a ceremony akin to the fertility rites, a part of many pagan religions. Such practices, as Murray has pointed out, have always excited horror in members of higher religions both in ancient and modern times. Nor have they ever received general approbation other than in primitive cultures.

Apart from this, a close association between witchcraft and sexuality, and usually disordered sexuality at that, is often clearly apparent in contemporary accounts. The thinly disguised erotic antics of the bewitched Ursuline nuns at Loudun and the obviously scoptophilic leanings of their exorcists are an obvious example (Lègue and la Tourette, 1886; Huxley, 1952). Nor is this tendency altogether dead. Contemporary occultism even in Western society is still strongly tainted by perverse sexuality. In the same vein medieval witchcraft, whether fantasy or fact, was, from the *osculum infame* to the witch's broomstick, highly sexually coloured and, as any Freudian would agree, rife with phallic symbolism. As a corollary to this, the *Malleus Maleficarum* contains much that a psychoanalyst would at once interpret as castration anxiety.

In later medieval times witchcraft appears to have become somewhat attenuated. This debasement, merely to the level of Operative Witchcraft, which confined itself largely to charms, spells, incantations and other mumbo-jumbo, seems to have led to a lessening of its sexual force. Thus, while a large part of the *Malleus Maleficarum* is devoted to the topic, in the first edition of the *Compendium Maleficarum* (Guazzo, 1608) which appeared over a hundred years later, discussion of the sexual side is confined to one short chapter. Later still, Glanvil, chaplain to Charles, Duke of Richmond and Lennox, in his *Sadducismus Triumphatus*, published in 1681, was willing to concede such things as "carnal copulation with the Devil" to disbelievers, expressing at the same time the somewhat naïve request that "having been so free in concessions I may expect that something should be granted me from the other party". As Glanvil's work is no more than a confused hotch-potch of theological argument, old wives' tales and other hearsay evidence it is unlikely that this pious hope was fulfilled.

There do, furthermore, seem to have been certain differences in the quality of witchcraft practices as carried out on the continent of Europe as compared to those confined to Great Britain. Thus Beatrice White (1931) points out: "In contradistinction to the scientific demonology of France and Germany, English witchcraft was a flat, dull, vulgar affair", English witches being for the most part no more than "bad-tempered old women with a grudge against individuals or the world at large and the victims of their own spite".

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This opinion is in agreement with that originally advanced by the sceptical Reginald Scot (1584) to whom witches were "commonly old, lame, blearied, pale, foul and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious and papists; or such as know no religion". In Scot's day the only sexual misdemeanour of which an English witch could probably, with some justification, be accused, was procuring abortion. No doubt the old village crone, who, it appears, was liable to be regarded as in league with the evil one, numbered among her simples an abortefacient or two.

The second general aspect of the matter to be considered concerns the misogyny of the middle ages. In particular it was the attitude of the Church towards women which was so inconsistent. Eileen Power (1926) has observed that: "As the ascetic ideal rose and flourished and monasticism became the refuge of many of the finest minds . . . there came into being, as an inevitable consequence, a conception of woman as the supreme temptress, 'ianua diaboli', the most dangerous of all obstacles in the way of salvation". As the clergy who preached the ascetic ideal were for so many centuries the only educated and articulate section of the community, it is not surprising that the essential inferiority of women became a fundamental doctrine. However, ambivalence is evident in that there developed "with no sense of incongruity, the counter-doctrine of the superiority of women, that adoration which gathered round the persons of the Virgin in heaven and the lady upon earth, which handed down to the modern world the ideal of chivalry".

The persecution of witches, which can be directly attributed to Christian ascetism, was therefore largely a result of the sexual urge being directed from its natural context by divine decree. This has been symbolically interpreted by Walter Schubart (quoted by Gruhle, 1948) as: "Eros, neglected by the gods, sought Satan out and found his support there". As a corollary to this it may be pointed out that sexual desires when inhibited have a strong and sadistic tendency to become a force of destruction. Thus: "The fear-laden rejection of women rose to a raging campaign of revenge and annihilation against her."

All this can be clearly perceived in the anti-feminist literature of the period. The *Malleus* contains a whole chapter on this topic, sub-headed: "Why it is that women are chiefly addicted to Evil Superstitions."

Among the arguments advanced is a quotation from St. John Chrysostom's ninety homilies on St. Matthew, written in A.D. 390, which runs: "What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature painted in fair colours?" If nothing else, this statement is remarkable in the ambivalence it expresses. Sprenger and Kramer cherished the old belief that there was "a defect in the formation of the first woman since she was formed from a bent rib, as it were in a contrary direction to a man, and since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives". And, as if this were not enough, they also stated: "Women are liars by nature, filled with vanity, wheedling and secret enemies, have a defect in intelligence, weak memories, are jealous, domineering and filled with insatiable lust". As a rider, it was observed that of all women: "Midwives surpass all others in wickedness."

This last conclusion points to the fact that the midwife from time immemorial, appears to have been a sinister figure. The reasons for this have been discussed by Harvey Graham (1950). He points out that the modern professional midwife had her derivation in primitive cultures from the grandmother or the mother-in-law. By a process of displacement her role was, in the course of time, taken over by the village crone or "knowing woman", who eventually evolved via Sarah Gamp to the midwife we know to-day. It is probably largely owing to her matriarchal origin that she became the target for so much displaced hostility. In any event, responsibility for various evil practices has, at one time or another, been laid at her door. For example, as late as 1772, Scottish midwives were believed to have the power of transferring labour pains from women to animals, or from the "good wife" to her husband (Frazer, 1910).

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Misogyny and the witchcraft persecution were, then, means by which the male dealt with his sexual problems. Both sprang from a wish to liquidate the fear of sex and thereby to re-establish disordered equilibrium. This is well summed up by Schubart, who says: "With sexual anxiety was mixed the demoniacal horror which had once upon a time accompanied the religious experience of mankind. In the witchcraft delusion, the erotic and the religious primitive horror burst forth from their common darkly sinister source. The witch is at one and the same time the product of the male's fear of woman and man's fear of demons." The truth of this statement is clearly evident in the main accusations made by Sprenger and Kramer against those who "infect with witchcraft the venereal act". Although these adhere very closely to the catalogue of offences listed in the Papal Bull it is clearly "injuries towards men" which caused the authors of the *Malleus* the gravest concern.

The subject of interference with the sexual act was also discussed, in rather less detail, by Francesco Guazzo, in 1608. Under the heading: "Of Tying the Points" seven varieties of this event are enumerated:

"The first is when one of a married couple is made hateful to the other, or both hateful to each other, by means of suspicion or by the affliction of some disease."

The example given is of "a poison which made all the women of Lemnos to smell badly in their breath and so caused their husbands to neglect them". Although severe halitosis might certainly quell sexual desire, this would hardly seem to come into the category of impotence proper. However, it is characteristic of the period that it was the woman rather than the man who bore the blame.

The second category is of greater interest. This refers to some bodily hindrance preventing man and wife coming together. By this means, it is said: "Husband and wife are either kept apart in different places; or, when they try and approach each other a phantasm or some such thing is interposed between them."

At first sight the analysis of this presents rather more difficulty. However, the statement could be interpreted as a symbolic expression of difficulties derived from the oedipal situation. As is well known one of the commoner forms of psychosexual impotence is said to be the result of unconscious identification of the sexual partner with sister or mother, leading to assertion of the incest taboo (Strauss, 1950). In the same vein, reference may be made to a tale twice told in the *Malleus* of "a young man who had pledged himself to a certain idol and who, nevertheless, contracted marriage to a young maid. He was unable to have any connection with her because the Devil always intervened."

Guazzo's third variety is: "When the vital spirit is hindered from flowing to the genital organ and so the emission of semen is prevented."

This appears to be a description of coitus reservatus, a somewhat uncommon variety of impotence usually ascribed to a deep-seated fear of causing pregnancy or alternatively, and somewhat tentatively, thought to be a sexual manifestation of a degree of narcissism sufficient to render its possessor incapable of giving.

The fourth is stated to be simply: "When the fertile semen is dried and taken away." As no further explanation is given, analysis is not possible. The basis of this type of impotence could well have been organic.

The fifth is "when the man's penis becomes flabby whenever he wishes to perform the conjugal act". This is easily recognizable as the commonest form of impotence in which erection cannot be sustained.

The sixth disorder is largely irrelevant to the subject under discussion as it merely refers to certain "natural drugs which in some way deprive the woman of the power of conceiving". Most probably this is no more than a reference to some form of contraception.

The seventh is said to be rarer and to consist in "closing or narrowing of the female genitals" (a reference, presumably to vaginismus) or "a retraction, hiding or actual removal of the male genitals".

This is a matter into which the authors of the *Malleus* go in great detail, for, while Guazzo's classification is largely descriptive, Sprenger and Kramer were more dynamic in their approach to the subject.

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The principal explanation of the apparent disappearance of a man's genitals is given in a chapter in the *Malleus* which solemnly begins: "Here is declared the truth about diabolic operations with regard to the male organ". The argument advanced contains the statement: "But when it is performed by witches, it is only a matter of glamour; although it is no illusion in the opinion of the sufferer. For his imagination can really and actually believe that something is not present, since by none of his exterior senses, such as sight and touch, can he perceive that it is present. From this it may be said that there is a true abstraction of the member in imagination, although not in fact."

This odd phenomenon is also called a "prestige": "since the sight of the eyes is fettered by things that seem to be other than they are". In considering this, attention may be immediately drawn to the fact that a connection between prestige and potency still exists. Even to-day male prestige is often equated with power over woman, and, not infrequently bolstered by boasting of sexual prowess.

It may be presumed that this illusion of genital deprivation is, once again, an expression of castration anxiety. The authors of the *Malleus* throw further light on the matter in their discussion of the significance of dreams. They state that: "The devil can excite the fancy and inner sensory perceptions of a man by apparitions and impulsive acts . . . so that they appear to be a new impression . . . received from exterior things. . . . Also such things happen not only to the sleeping but even to those who are awake . . . so that ideas retained in the repositories of the mind are drawn out . . . so that such men imagine these things to be true."

This phenomenon which is referred to as "interior imagination" is of particular interest because it is virtually identical with contemporary theories concerning the influence of unconscious mental processes. That the matter also has its psychosexual application is clearly shown by the statement: "The Devil can, by moving the inner perceptions and humours, effect changes in the actions and faculties, physical, mental and emotional, working by means of any physical organs . . . and can cause a man to be unable to see his wife rightly . . . so that she is represented to him as an odious and horrible thing."

The various categories of impotence described in the *Malleus* do not differ substantially from those listed later by Guazzo, though with some additions. One of these is that which is now called selective impotence: a state in which a man is quite potent in his relationship with prostitutes and with women for whom he has no real regard, but impotent with the woman he marries or holds in high esteem, and whom he probably, once again unconsciously, identifies with his mother.

The explanation given in the *Malleus* is not of this order, the stated reason merely being either that some witch has persuaded the Devil to do this or because God will not allow the obstruction to apply save to some particular woman. However, it is again explained that the cause is an artificial not a natural impediment, and that there is no actual physical change in the organs but a disturbance of mental images.

Finally it is stated that impotence due to bewitchment may be distinguished by the fact that it is not permanent. Also: "When the member is in no way stirred and can never perform the action of coition, this is a sign of frigidity of nature, but, when it is stirred and yet cannot become erect, it is a sign of witchcraft." This, again, is not without interest, as it indicates recognition that absence or feebleness of sexual desire can have a constitutional basis. In any event the authors of the *Malleus* seem to have considered this piece of information to be of special significance, for the announcement of it is accompanied by the solemn warning: "This must not be publicly preached".

Despite the apparent astuteness of some of these formulations, the examples on which they are based are disappointingly lacking in detail. Because insufficient information is given, re-analysis is for the most part hardly feasible. It is clear, furthermore, that most of the illustrative anecdotes are either merely legends or simply founded on hearsay. A few, however,

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are sufficiently detailed to permit a very tentative interpretation. The following is an example:

"In the town of Ratisbon, a certain young man who had an intrigue with a girl, wishing to leave her, lost his member; that is to say some glamour was cast over it. . . . In his worry over this he went to a tavern to drink wine and after a while he got into conversation with another woman who was there, and told her the cause of his sadness. The woman was astute and said: 'If persuasion is not enough you must use some violence to induce her to restore you your health.' So in the evening the young man watched the way by which the witch was in the habit of going and finding her, prayed her to restore him the health of his body. And when she maintained that she was innocent and knew nothing about it, he fell upon her, and winding a towel tightly round her neck, choked her, saying: 'Unless you give me back my health you shall die at my hands.' Then she, with her face already swelling and going black, said: 'Let me go and I will heal you.' The young man then relaxed the pressure of the towel and the witch touched him between the thighs, saying: 'Now you have what you desire.' And the young man, as he afterwards said, plainly felt, before he had verified it by looking or touching, that his member had been restored."

Although it is implied that the young man was rendered impotent as a punishment for wishing to end his intrigue with the girl in question, it is not explicitly stated whether he was ever or at any time sexually successful in this affair. Allowing for lack of detail, and for distortion in the telling, the interpretation may be hazarded that his sexuality was perverted by a sado-masochistic component and, like those in this category, he may have been largely impotent in a normal sexual relationship. However, incited by wine, which no doubt rendered him somewhat less inhibited, he, in his attempt to strangle the young woman, seems to have acted out his sadistic impulses with the not unexpected result that his sexuality was stirred.

Now to the remedies. These, as perhaps might be expected, are disappointingly conventional, though they were possibly very little less successful than psychotherapy often is, to-day, in the treatment of this sometimes intractable disorder. The alternatives offered are: "a pilgrimage to some holy and venerable shrine"; "true confession of sins with contrition"; "the plentiful use of the Cross and devout prayer"; and, if all else failed presumably: "a remedy which can be effected by approaching the witch".

Zilboorg (1941) has said that the *Malleus Maleficarum* is so full of sexual details that it might well be considered a handbook of sexual psychopathy. This is not wholly correct, for although its authors were obsessionally preoccupied with sexual matters they confine themselves more or less completely to the topic of impotence and interference with connubial relations. Of sexual perversion almost nothing is said. There is, however, a passing reference to sodomy and "any other sin whereby the act is performed outside the rightful channel" though curiously enough this is not ascribed to devils, who it is said "equally and of whatsoever order, abominate and think shame to commit such actions". Clearly Satan, in the last resort, was a gentleman!

In conclusion a moment's consideration may be given, once again, to the motive force underlying the "witchcraft delusion". Its misogynous background has already been stressed. As a corollary it must be remembered that the most ardent persecutors of witches were those sworn to celibacy and whose sexuality, for this reason, was bound to seek vicarious expression.

The nature of their conflict is perhaps most clearly revealed in the statement: "The power of the Devil lies in the privy parts of man. Of all the struggles those are the hardest where the fight is continuous and victory rare."

Summary

There is to be found, in medieval demonological literature, a classification of impotence which in certain respects relates remarkably closely to some psychodynamic hypotheses current today. There is also evidence of appreci-

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ation of the part played by inner (unconscious) mental processes; it being held that these, by deceiving the senses, can give rise to an illusion of genital deprivation. This phenomenon can probably be equated with castration anxiety.

Viewed retrospectively, the persecution of witches, in medieval times, seems to have stemmed from several sources. Because Ritual Witchcraft represented the persistence in Europe, of the pre-Christian pagan religion or Dianic cult, those who practised it were regarded as heretics. Further impetus was given to this persecution by knowledge of certain sexual rituals probably akin to primitive fertility rites. This in the setting of misogyny attendant upon the Christian ascetic ideal, led to the emergence of a delusional belief that witches had power to interfere with sexual relationships.

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