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[Table of contents](#)[Search Builder](#)[List journal issues](#)[Home](#)[Printer-friendly format](#)

Book Review

Europe: Ancient and Medieval

Walter Stephens. *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2002. Pp. xv, 451. \$35.00.

This is an erudite and charming publication, written in a brilliant style. Walter Stephens scrutinizes late medieval and early modern demonologies in considerable detail, starting with Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (around 1435) and ebbing out somewhere in the seventeenth century, with the *Malleus Maleficarum* serving as gravitational center. Stephens challenges the assumption that demonologists were primarily concerned with power relations or gender politics. In order to prove this point, he moves one particularly exciting subject of demonology to the center of attention: sexual intercourse between demons and women. The author of the *Malleus*, Heinrich Kramer (Institoris), does indeed devote a couple of chapters to discussing demonic love. According to Stephens he was not interested in sexuality, nor in women, and not even in witchcraft, but rather in proving that devils were capable of assuming material bodies. His concern thus was not pornographic but metaphysical. In reaction to a crisis of belief, Kramer and his colleagues attempted to demonstrate the existence of spirits. Dealing with "demon lovers" was "an attempt to maintain belief while fighting off skepticism" (p. 27). The subject could provide "eyewitness proof" for the reality of metaphysical effects, with the sacrament of transubstantiation being the godly counterpart of devilish transformations. The conclusion that the real "demon lovers" were the demonologists themselves, since they needed these stories to reassure themselves of the validity of Christian doctrine, characterizes the author's elegance.

However, there are a number of serious problems with this book. First, although ingenious and plausible, Stephens cannot prove his interpretation. Fewer than ten percent of the *exempla* in the *Malleus* refer to demon lovers, and all of them are either

nonspecific ("everyone in Como says") or ludicrous. Most of the contemporary examples concern cases of *maleficium*, or love magic. Second, to explain "why a society produced texts about witches for so long and why it did things to people identified as witches" (p. 29), demonic love is hardly suitable. To use Ockham's razor: if these theologians claim to be concerned about witchcraft, why should we not assume that they were indeed primarily concerned about witchcraft? Most of their contemporaries were, and the Dominicans clearly tried to exploit this widespread uncertainty. Kramer's concern was more the witchcraft *heresy*, and it should not (be forgotten) that he participated in trials against Waldensians, Conciliarists, Hussites, Taborites, and women who desired the Eucharist too frequently, as well as against Jews (ritual murder case at Trent in 1475). Kramer was a persecution specialist, whose obsessions might be described in terms of "purity and danger." Third, and most important, Stephens's book fails to put demonologies in context. Referring to Richard Rorty and Umberto Eco, Stephens considers it a waste of energy to explore the empirical author's intention. By reconstructing the "intention of the text" (p. 28), which seems to speak mysteriously for itself, he renders it possible to construct an *implied* author's intention, "the type of individual who would or could have written such a text." According to Stephens, "textual evidence" allows us to track "precisely" the revisions of the *Malleus* in the process of writing. Inconsistencies are supposed to prove that demonic sex "is the thematic keystone of the entire book" (p. 49). However, his speculations about a protracted process of revision are hot air. The "empirical" *Malleus* was assembled hastily within hardly nine months and bristles with inconsistencies. Contradictions and mistakes of all kinds are frequent, and even the gender of the witches varies continuously. According to the contents, forty-eight questions were to be treated, but Kramer completely messed up this structure and arrived at eighty-six chapters (with only four dedicated to demonic love) unevenly distributed over three "parts," two of which were subdivided further. Large chunks of text are not mentioned in the contents, the headings hardly ever match, and chapters are lacking, some wrongly numbered with cross-references usually leading nowhere. This was indeed a work in progress. Stephens exaggerates the importance of demonic love and underestimates the practical difficulties of compiling such a massive text ("scissors and paste-editing," p. 46) under extreme time pressure and premodern conditions. "When Kramer sent the *Malleus* to press" (p. 51), he was presumably forced to be physically present in the imperial city of Speyer, where the book was printed by Peter Drach in 1486, as we know for sure from his account book (not 1487, as Stephens claims repeatedly). We can only guess why Kramer wrote such a desperate book under desperate conditions, putting his scholarly reputation at risk. Apocalypticism, it seems, is a good guess, if we take the author's apologia seriously. If the end of the world is nigh, you do not care

about grammar.

Evidently it is the right of a literary scholar to emphasize the dignity of texts, but equally clearly historians may reject the assumption that it is possible to make sense of texts without putting them into context. "Reading between the lines" is clearly necessary since many arguments displayed in demonologies serve tactical purposes. This, however, can only be demonstrated by contrasting the constructions of authors like Kramer with archival sources. In his *exempla*, Kramer grossly distorts the original court cases, which dealt exclusively with maleficium or love magic. Demons—and "demon lovers"—are basically *absent* from the depositions of accusers, suspects and witnesses, as well as from expert opinions, and court sentences of Kramer's inquisition trial at Innsbruck. The worrying contrast between the judicial records and the inquisitor's fantasies drove contemporaries to the conclusion that Kramer had gone mad, as Bishop Golser asserted in autumn 1485. Kramer's largest inquisition ever was a crushing defeat. As a result, he started writing the *Malleus*, providing his version of the story, and in it we read of a triumphal success and of a world full of demons. The proceedings against the inquisitor, including Kramer's apology, were published by Hartmann Ammann in 1890 and have been scrutinized by Heide Dienst more recently. The introduction to a new translation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (ed. Günter Jerouschek and Wolfgang Behringer, 2000) suggests that Kramer was considered a maverick even within the Dominican order, because he distorted quotations from authorities, forged documents, and had a quarrelsome temperament. Jacob Sprenger, the supposed co-author of the *Malleus*, was a bitter enemy of Kramer, whom he tried to restrain wherever possible. Maybe Stephens missed all these publications because of his lack of interest in context. It seems to me, however, that the context wrecks Stephens' argument, despite all its erudition and its many striking ideas. By rendering context unimportant, this book proves congenial to its subject. Kramer could be seen as an ancestor spirit of postmodernism. For him, reality was at once unimportant and unintelligible. However, as we can see from the results of his reasoning, fantasies can prove dangerous.

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