

Marina Montesano, *Maleficia. Storie di streghe dall'Antichità al Rinascimento* [*Maleficia. Histories of Witches from Antiquity to the Renaissance*] (Carocci, 2023). Paperback, 284 pp., € 27.00, ISBN: 9788829016501.



*Review*

Witchcraft, in the European context, is a historically complex phenomenon that assumes different shapes and expressions. This subject has received considerable scholarly interest, and the critical literature covering the period from antiquity to the Renaissance is both extensive and well developed. Marina Montesano has contributed to this field of study through valuable research that follows the lines of inquiry established by her former mentor, Franco Cardini, with whom she co-authored historical essays on magic and female figures associated with esotericism. Montesano's research on these topics owes much also to the contributions of other historians, cited in the introduction of her recent book *Maleficia*, for instance Richard Kieckhefer, Robin Briggs, and Stuart Clark. In her monograph, Montesano introduces various themes and examples related to the role of the witch, beliefs in supernatural phenomena, occult sciences and aspects of folklore documented in texts from different times and places. She reconstructs these narratives with a critical approach. The result is a very detailed essay, accessible not only to scholars from different fields of study, but also to a broader audience of non-specialist readers seeking to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the topics explored in each chapter. Originally published in 2018 as *Classical Culture and Witchcraft in Medieval*

*and Renaissance Italy*, the Italian edition's title is arguably more fitting – ironically because it omits any reference to Italy. The study does indeed focus primarily on sources from the Italian context. At the same time, though, it highlights intersections among different cultures and traces the historical development of themes associated with witchcraft. Montesano's line of inquiry extends from antiquity to the early modern period. Her work puts strong emphasis on the multiple terms associated with female figures with magical powers throughout the centuries (for example, *strix*, *saga*, *venefica*, *malefica*), showing the influence of classical Greek and Roman culture on the medieval and early modern folkloristic beliefs which broadly introduce the figure of the 'witch'. Montesano considers different kinds of sources, ranging from mythological texts, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, to texts of Roman jurisprudence, from encyclopaedic works of medieval scholars to Renaissance treatises and manuals concerning superstition, for instance the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* of Kramer and Sprenger, and the *Démonomanie* of Bodin. The density of references to sources and figures – both historical and fictional – makes the historical reconstruction occasionally difficult to follow. Nevertheless, Montesano's choice to incorporate such a wide range of material remains understandable and justified, given the aim of her essay. *Maleficia* retains its value as a book for a wide audience, encouraging further exploration of the various topics addressed in its seven chapters.

The first two sections of the monograph are dedicated to Greek and Roman literature. Montesano introduces mythological characters associated with magical powers and practices of ceremonial magic, for example Circe, Medea, Canidia, Erichtho, and Meroe. The author also introduces other known figures of classical mythology, known for their feminine appearance accompanied by animal traits, their capacity to transform partially or completely into beasts, and a distinctively malevolent behaviour toward human beings. This is the case with harpies, lamiae, and empusae. A short paragraph (pp. 46–49) concerns the theme of medicine and poison, which both Greeks and Latins referred to with a single word (*pharmakon* or *venenum*). This example of terminological ambiguity helps to illuminate the depiction of the witch as a woman with the ability to prepare herbal mixtures to either heal or harm people. As highlighted by the author, classical sources also refer to male healers with knowledge on the properties of herbs, yet the harmful use of filters is more commonly associated to women in ancient culture. The third chapter considers the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, highlighting the importance of the rise of Christian communities, as well as the constitution of the Church as an institution. The author underlines the attention medieval Christian authorities gave to unorthodox beliefs and provides examples of the condemnations of the so-called *malefici* — men and women practicing magic, considered sacrilegious. The fourth chapter focuses on the reception of Greek and Latin culture between the twelfth and the fourteenth century, drawing attention to authorities such as Peter Damian, William of Auvergne and various preachers, who showed

interest in ancient folkloristic beliefs that had survived up to their time, especially in rural environments. These beliefs concern daemons, supernatural creatures and phenomena, such as the magical flight, associated with evil by Christian authorities. The fifth chapter moves to the period between the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century and presents the discourses on witchcraft in the sources of Italian preachers such as Bernardino of Siena, John of Capistrano, Jacob de Marchia, and Roberto Caracciolo, considering the relation of some of these religious authorities to classical sources such as Apuleius' *Golden Ass* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The sixth chapter considers the central role of Dominicans in the condemnation of superstition in the fifteenth century, focusing on historical accounts of the practice of witchcraft in various regions of Italy. The author also considers the importance of humanistic philology in the rediscovery of Greek literature, which enriched the knowledge of the preachers on the ancient folkloristic beliefs which resonated in Latin culture. Furthermore, she mentions philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico, known for their interest in the astrological culture of the Greeks, as well as themes described in sources on occult sciences, such as the Arabic *Picatrix*. The last chapter further explores the relationship between humanists and treatises on magic and witchcraft, mentioning related sources, for example Gianfrancesco Pico's *Strix* and Ulrich Molitor's *De lamiis et pythonicis mulieribus* to examine the critical approaches towards superstitions and the attempt to interpret them rationally. The author underlines once again the interest of Latin authors in ancient sources and focuses on

the reinterpretation of classical figures, such as Circe, which takes on new roles in the literature of the Renaissance.

In conclusion, Montesano's essay is relevant for the advancement of historical studies especially for the attempt to reconstruct a 'pre-history' of witchcraft, tracing back the evolution of concepts and terminology in classical literature and underlining its reception in both the oral and written tradition of the Middle Ages, as well as its revival in the Renaissance. The book offers a detailed overview of this topic, aiming to stimulate scholarly discussion on the singular cases examined in its chapters. The variety of topics related to witchcraft across different places and historical periods — including those after early modernity — underscores the potential for further research in this field.

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