

## The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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### ***Malleus Maleficarum: Review of The History of Witchcraft and Demonology by Montague Summers***

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**How to cite:** Warner, S.T. 'Malleus Maleficarum: Review of *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* by Montague Summers'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2022(1), pp. 17–20 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.22.1.05>.

Published: 7 July 2023

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This is a reprint of a manuscript originally found in *Time and Tide*.

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\*(1893–1978)

# *Malleus Maleficarum: Review of The History of Witchcraft and Demonology by Montague Summers*<sup>1</sup>

*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

## **Abstract**

Sylvia Townsend Warner reviewed Montague Summers's book on witchcraft and demonology in 1926. She took an ironic and sceptical view of his denunciatory fervour.

**Keywords** Sylvia Townsend Warner; Montague Summers; witchcraft; demonology; Nesta Webster.

*Editor's note: Following the publication of Lolly Willowes on 14 January 1926, Warner was asked to review Summers's book on witchcraft later the same year. A passage from its introduction indicates his point of view on the subject: 'In the following pages I have endeavoured to show the witch as she really was – an evil liver; a social pest and parasite; the devotee of a loathly and obscene creed; an adept at poisoning, blackmail, and other creeping crimes; a member of a powerful secret organization inimical to Church and State; a blasphemer in word and deed; swaying the villagers by terror and superstition; a charlatan and a quack sometimes; a bawd; an abortionist; the dark counsellor of lewd court ladies and adulterous gallants; a minister to vice and inconceivable corruption; battenning upon the filth and foulest passions of the age' (p. xiv).*

While reading Mr Montague Summers's *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* I was reminded of my French governess. (No. She was not a witch – she was a good catholic: and I should not have read Summers

with much attention if I had not discovered that the two states are mutually incompatible.) My French governess taught me the principle that to learn a new language one's own must be kept at bay; there must be no translation, no backsliding into the mother-tongue; and when there were words (there were) that I didn't understand I must wait until I did. One of these words was *franc-maçon*. It was a word that I got to know pretty familiarly, and I observed that it was always pronounced in terms of the most passionate abhorrence. Whatever *franc-maçons* might be, it was obvious that they were a powerful and widely-spreading gang, and that their works were the works of darkness. There was another untranslated word which I came to associate with *franc-maçons*, and that was *charançons*. My governess didn't appear to worry so much about these, but my grammar (in accordance with the principle a French one, as used in the national schools) dwelt on them constantly and always with reprobation. These two trisyllables (both charged with so much reprehensible mystery) became synonymous in my mind, and seemed interchangeable ... *Les charançons détruisent la patrie. Les franc-maçons sont un des plus formidables fléaux de l'agriculture.*<sup>2</sup>

As my French governess felt about the freemasons; as a paternal government felt about the weevils; as Mrs Nesta Webster feels about the reds;<sup>3</sup> as I feel about the fascists – so does Mr Summers feel about the manichees.

I have confessed my own little weakness, I am in no position to grudge Mr Summers the pleasure of intolerance. I am so well prepared to listen with the sympathy of a fellow-fanatic while he describes the manichaeian system as 'a desperate but well-planned organisation to destroy the whole fabric of society, to reduce civilisation to chaos' that I can even wish (for the period's sake) that he had produced some more lurid accusations to top up with than the statement that 'the members bore the titles of "brother" and "sister" and had words and signs whereby the initiates could recognise one another.' (As a matter of justice I hasten to say that this second quotation, so tepid and unimaginative, is from a decretal of Innocent III.<sup>4</sup> No doubt Mr. Summers would have put more pep into it.) But when I read on page 32 that 'witchcraft was in truth a foul and noisome heresy, the poison of the manichees,' though I admired the orts I could not but recall how, twenty-one pages earlier, Mr. Summers had refuted the rationalistic view that the belief in witchcraft was one of the persecutory manias which signalled the age of faith, by giving instances of pre-christian edicts against the practice of it. A weevil may be the acme of malevolence and so may a freemason, but it is a mistake therefore to look on them as identical. If witchcraft was a well-established wickedness

in B.C. 721 it cannot also be the poison of the manichees. And no amount of pious bluster can make it so. Nor, however foul and noisome, can this survival of paganism be heresy, since heresy is a perquisite of christianity; although it could, and did, add into its original heathendom heretical practices. Mr. Summers writes: "The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* clearly identify heresy and witchcraft."<sup>5</sup> I have not read the work so I speak under correction; but the only citation given by Mr. Summers which has any bearing on this point (p. 63) is to the effect that it is heresy to *disbelieve* in witchcraft; and of this heresy at any rate the greater number of witches and warlocks may be acquitted.

This muddle-headedness, this inability to 'tell the garment from the man' vitiates the worth of this book as a serious contribution to the study of witchcraft. But a book may contain grave errors in logic and yet be valuable on the counts of learning and method. *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* is extremely learned: it contains a bibliography of thirty-two pages, modestly prefaced with: 'This Bibliography does not aim at anything beyond presenting a brief and convenient hand-list of some of the more important books upon witchcraft,' and the notes at the chapters' ends are extremely comprehensive and informative. But though Mr. Summers is clearly a mine – no, more: an active volcano of learning, some of the matter is more valuable for its own sake than for its relevancy to the subject. That 'the arch-confraternity of Our Lady of Consolation, or of the Black Leathern Belt of S. Monica, S. Augustine and S. Nicholas of Tolentino took its rise from a vision of S. Monica, who received a black leathern belt from Our Lady,' and that C.H. Hazlewood's 'Faust: or Marguerite's Mangle' was produced at the Britannia Theatre, 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1867 are interesting historical facts; but they have no bearing on witchcraft. Gratuities of this sort, together with a good many repetitions and a certain un consecutiveness of arrangement suggest that Mr. Summers did not give himself time to digest what must have been a portentously heavy meal of note-books. This suggestion is abetted by one very odd error: the attribution of Robert Kirk's 'Secret Commonwealth' to Robert Hink.<sup>6</sup> No doubt this is a printer's error (there are several), and proof-reading is a tricky affair. But even in proof-reading there are certain laws of seeing and not-seeing: and 'Robert Hink's' Secret Commonwealth' is as unlikely a lapse for an adept in the study of the supernatural as 'Bump's Critique of Pure Reason' would be to any but a tyro in philosophy.

*Time and Tide*, 3 December 1926, p. 1105

## Notes

- 1 Montague Summers (1880–1948), prolific author, teacher and defender of Roman Catholic dogma.
- 2 ‘Weevils are destroying the country. Freemasons are one of the most dreadful scourges of agriculture.’
- 3 Nesta Webster (1876–1960), anti-communist and anti-Semitic English author. Her publications in 1926, the year of Warner’s review, included *The Need for Fascism in Britain* (London: British Fascists, Pamphlet no. 17, 1926) and *The Socialist Network* (London: Boswell Printing & Publishing Co., 1926).
- 4 Innocent III was Pope from 1198 to 1216.
- 5 *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *The Hammer of the Witches* (1486), by Jacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, was a hugely influential treatise denouncing and anatomizing witchcraft and urging inquisitions against witches. Montague Summers’s translation of the work was published by John Rodker in 1928, in a limited edition.
- 6 Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (1691); Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

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