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Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe (review)

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Abstract
This book, a volume in Houghton Mifflin's Problems in European Civilization series, brings together selections from recent scholarship on early modern European witchcraft in order to expose students to major debates in the field. The book is divided into four parts, representing broad areas of research: "Intellectual Foundations and Demonology"; "Political, Economic, and Social Causes"; "Accusations, Trials, and Panics"; and the ever-contentious subject of "Gender and Witchcraft." In each section, Merry Wiesner presents four selections drawn from recent monographs or scholarly articles (all originally published within the last twenty years). While no such collection could possibly cover all perspectives on this complex topic, Wiesner's selections do a good job of introducing several important areas of scholarly debate, and this slim reader would be a useful addition to any course on the history of early modern witchcraft.

Disciplines
Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Other History

Comments

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Michael D. Bailey

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For additional information about this article
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any hard historical purchase. An example is the claim that the book inverts the usual question: “which elements of Dee’s complex and largely unscientifc ideas contributed to the development of modern science?” by asking instead: “in what way Dee’s scientific activity inspired his visionary and occult program” (p. 12). Occasionally, Szőnyi seems to forget even his own polarity, as in: “Once again we have arrived at Dee’s most ambitious magical program: he aspired for this state of exaltatio in order to understand fully the work of creation and become God’s partner. His whole scientific program was subordinated to this goal” (p. 199, my italics). Surely, the only way to write about the historical phenomena to which terms like “magic” and “science” are usually applied is either to abandon these labels altogether or to adopt—but only as a matter of report—those used by the historical agents in question. In Dee’s lifetime, for example, “magia” may have had multiple meanings but none of them is, in principle, historically unrecoverable.

For these reasons, the opening section of John Dee’s Occultism, which is actually called “Definitions,” is historically unhelpful, leaving the reader less well equipped, not better, to tackle the rest of the book. And yet it also promises an approach to Dee that is inspired not by old-fashioned “science history” but by “historical anthropology” and the history of “mentality,” both of which should have provided Szőnyi with powerful warnings against essentialist readings of “magic” and “science.” The Preface likewise gestures toward poststructuralism and to things like “polyvalence” and “polysemy” that do not afterward seem to have enough bearing on the book’s use of terms. Indeed, this is a study that employs several other once-favored but now-questioned formulations, as in “man-centered Renaissance” (sometimes “so-called . . .”), “world picture,” the “Great Chain of Being,” “modern Western mentality,” “the new self-consciousness of Renaissance Man,” and the “fantastic transcendental dream world” of Athanasius Kircher. Readers may therefore wonder whether this new study of Dee is as innovative as it claims to be.

STUART CLARK
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This book, a volume in Houghton Mifflin’s Problems in European Civilization series, brings together selections from recent scholarship on early mod-
ern European witchcraft in order to expose students to major debates in the field. The book is divided into four parts, representing broad areas of research: “Intellectual Foundations and Demonology”; “Political, Economic, and Social Causes”; “Accusations, Trials, and Panics”; and the ever-contentious subject of “Gender and Witchcraft.” In each section, Merry Wiesner presents four selections drawn from recent monographs or scholarly articles (all originally published within the last twenty years). While no such collection could possibly cover all perspectives on this complex topic, Wiesner’s selections do a good job of introducing several important areas of scholarly debate, and this slim reader would be a useful addition to any course on the history of early modern witchcraft.

Each section begins with a brief introduction summarizing the arguments of the subsequent selections and situating them in a larger historiography. The first section presents pieces dealing with the intellectual foundations of witchcraft. This is in some ways a very old-fashioned approach, akin to that taken by scholars such as Henry Charles Lea and Joseph Hansen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is also, however, a newly revitalized area of study, thanks primarily to the efforts of Stuart Clark, and an excerpt from his magisterial *Thinking with Demons* is the first selection presented. He is followed by a piece by Charlie Zika, moving beyond formal demonology and connecting learned concerns to popular folklore. Then comes Gerhild Scholz-Williams, tying the demonological thought of Pierre de Lancre to concerns over New World exploration. The final selection is from Walter Stephens, introducing his controversial thesis that demonologists were obsessed with witchcraft not because they feared demonic power, but because they were skeptical about demonic existence. The connections—and the conflicts—between these varied arguments might not be immediately apparent to a student, but could easily be brought out by an instructor in classroom discussion.

The second section is even more varied, encompassing political, economic, and social studies of witchcraft. A selection from Brian Levack stands as the lone political analysis, arguing that witchcraft prosecutions were not abetted but rather were hindered by increasingly powerful centralized states in the early modern period. The next two selections, by J. T. Swain and Gábor Klaniczay, each begin with a consideration of Keith Thomas’s and Alan Macfarlane’s classic analysis that witchcraft accusations often began in cases of refusal of charity, although while Swain presents a fairly focused economic study, Klaniczay moves into a broader social analysis. The final selection, from Robin Briggs, situates accusations of witchcraft within family networks.
The third section examines various types of trials and panics. A selection from Wolfgang Behringer is used to introduce stereotypically major waves of prosecution in the central European heartland of witch hunting. Robert Walinski-Kiehl then explores the issue of children accused of witchcraft—an interesting approach but one that falls rather flat in this section, since none of the other selections focus on characteristics of the accused. The student finds no explorations of elderly, poor, or socially marginal witches to compare to this study of witch-children, though some reference could be made to the beggar witches of Part II or to the exclusively female witches of Part IV. Julian Goodare provides an account of the major Scottish witch panic of 1597, while Thor Hall and Herbert W. L. Burhenn present the single case of Elline Klokkers, executed for witchcraft in Gjerpen, Norway. While Wiesner does not dedicate a separate section to the geographic variations in witchcraft, an instructor could create some discussion of this issue by comparing the German, Scottish, and Norwegian material in this section to the Hungarian (Klaniczay) selection in Part II and potentially the Italian (Scully) selection in Part IV.

Part IV, dealing with gender, is the most thematically coherent section of the book (even more so than Part I), but is nevertheless somewhat disappointing. The section begins with a selection from Hans Peter Broedel on the misogyny of the Malleus maleficarum. The general importance of male demonologists in casting women as witches is then questioned by selections from Lyndal Roper and Diane Purkiss, both of whom note how women themselves often constructed and employed accusations of witchcraft. In the entire collection, these are the two selections that speak most directly to one another. Yet, given that only four selections are permitted per section, one could wish that two more varied pieces had been chosen. The final selection, by Sally Scully, is indeed at variance with the other three, presenting witchcraft as a “professional activity” available to women in early modern Venice, rather than as a fundamental female identity. Yet all four of the selections are uniform in presenting witchcraft as primarily a female crime. That it certainly was in most of Europe, but if this section wants to present the full range of debate, and wants to treat “gender and witchcraft” and not just “women and witchcraft,” why is there no selection that presents a case or a region (Normandy, Russia, many areas of Scandinavia) where witches were predominantly men?

Given that only sixteen brief selections could be chosen to cover all aspects of witchcraft, one could carp forever about what issues, and what authors, were excluded. But two omissions seem to me particularly glaring. Aside from a brief reference in the selection from Klaniczay, no mention is made
of shamanism. Surely in a volume that claims to introduce students to contentious issues of the historiography of witchcraft, space should have been found for some of Carlo Ginzburg’s highly provocative arguments. Also, the topic of skepticism, opposition, and decline of the witch hunts, on which much recent work has been done, is entirely absent. Such omissions can, however, be redressed in other ways by instructors in their classrooms.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
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Emma Wilby’s Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits is a bold, yet careful and intellectually rigorous, attempt to examine a hotly contested area of British history: the epistemological status of the stories of visionary journeys and experiences told by cunning people (practitioners of popular magic) and accused witches during the period of the witchcraft trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Wilby explains, such stories have often been considered to be the ramblings of deluded or tortured people—stories that to traditional historians of fact do not mean anything definite and so are unworthy of or resistant to analysis as sociological or historical data. But with the linguistic turn of historical thinking in recent years, these empiricist dismissals have given way to a belief that such stories might be read through various theoretical paradigms (psychological, feminist, or narrative, for example) and found to be meaningful after all. The difficulty with such readings is that sometimes the theory comes to predominate—often anachronistically—over the substance of the story. This can leave the reader feeling that the original teller has been badly served by academic attempts to categorize their experiences too rigidly, and that what such analysis has achieved has simply been to “explain away” the mystery of the story and diminish its teller’s individuality in the service of some wider aim. In some cases, the story is crudely retold to suit the notions of the scholar, which is unforgivable when one considers that the story is often the only known remnant of the life of its teller. When the tellers were the victims of witch hunts, the further disservice done to them by academic history is particularly evident.

Wilby’s book proposes to address this vexed issue. In its intellectual sophistication and ethical awareness it offers an excellent model of how the stories