Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe, and: Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe (review)

Michael D. Bailey
Iowa State University, mdbailey@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs

Part of the Cultural History Commons, European History Commons, History of Religion Commons, and the Other History Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/52. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe, and: Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe (review)

Abstract
The continuation, and continued development, of magical beliefs and various forms of witchcraft and countermagic in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries has become an increasingly important topic for scholars. Ever since the resurgence of European witchcraft studies in the 1970s with, among other landmark publication, Keith Thomas’s Religion and the Decline of Magic, tremendous attention has focused on the (mainly) sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witch hunts. As Thomas’s title indicates, the need to explain the decline of magical beliefs and the transformation of Europe from a witch-hunting society into a putatively “disenchanted” one was always part of this scholarly project. Yet the important question of decline (and continuation) received significantly less attention than the horrors of the hunts themselves. For some time it seemed adequate to assume that belief in witches receded as governments decriminalized the act of witchcraft. We now know that picture is highly inaccurate. Prosecution of witches in most regions of Europe declined almost to nothing decades before law codes were changed to eliminate witchcraft as a crime, and belief in witchcraft and other “popular” magical practices continued among large segments of Europe’s population for centuries afterward.

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

Comments

Rights
All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations used for purposes of scholarly citation, none of this work may be reproduced in any form by any means without written permission from the publisher. For information address the University of Pennsylvania Press, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4112.
Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe, and: Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe (review)

Michael D. Bailey

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 4, Number 1, Summer 2009, pp. 100-104 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0130

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v004/4.1.bailey01.html
The continuation, and continued development, of magical beliefs and various forms of witchcraft and countermagic in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries has become an increasingly important topic for scholars. Ever since the resurgence of European witchcraft studies in the 1970s with, among other landmark publication, Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, tremendous attention has focused on the (mainly) sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witch hunts. As Thomas’s title indicates, the need to explain the decline of magical beliefs and the transformation of Europe from a witch-hunting society into a putatively “disenchanted” one was always part of this scholarly project. Yet the important question of decline (and continuation) received significantly less attention than the horrors of the hunts themselves. For some time it seemed adequate to assume that belief in witches receded as governments decriminalized the act of witchcraft. We now know that picture is highly inaccurate. Prosecution of witches in most regions of Europe declined almost to nothing decades before law codes were changed to eliminate witchcraft as a crime, and belief in witchcraft and other “popular” magical practices continued among large segments of Europe’s population for centuries afterward.

The two volumes under review here represent the (early) coming of age of the study of European magic and witchcraft after the witch hunts. Certainly, some works preceded these. Already in 1999 appeared the volumes of Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark’s *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* covering the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. That same year, one of the editors here, Owen Davies, published his groundbreaking *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture 1736–1951*. In 1992 Martin Pott had already published an important study of superstition in the early German Enlightenment. Yet by bringing together essays from numerous scholars (twenty-one different contributors across the two volumes), these collections provide an important cross-section
of this young field. Bound together mainly by chronology—the first volume treats the long eighteenth century of the Enlightenment, while the second concentrates on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the essays gathered here nevertheless often speak to one another in terms of underlying concerns. They provide a valuable, although inevitably not exhaustive, overview of the sort of questions scholars in this field are posing and at least the preliminary answers toward which they are moving.

Rather than discuss, all too briefly, each of the articles contained in these volumes, I will instead treat them as unified books, drawing out some of the major themes they develop and questions they raise. The editors have made this task easier, particularly for the Enlightenment volume, where they use their introduction to focus attention on what they see as three broad themes evident throughout the articles. The first of these concerns authorities’ shifting condemnation of “folk magic” from demonic menace to fraudulent crime. The second concerns intellectual elites’ continued interest in demonic or spiritual activity in the world. The third entails attention to the growing importance of printing and the written word in what had previously been a much more exclusively oral culture of folk belief and practice.

The first focus is obvious and unavoidable. Despite the volume’s overall intent of demonstrating the continued prevalence of magical beliefs and practices throughout the period of the Enlightenment, no study can escape the fact that this era witnessed a major refocusing of concern about magic among educated intellectual elites. Whereas previously ruling elites had accepted the reality of witchcraft as a terrible demonic threat, they now dismissed claims to magical power as foolish superstition. The only social danger that claims of witchcraft now carried was that they might further delude the credulous populace. Charges against supposed witches, or more often against magical healers and cunning folk, now asserted that they committed fraud by claiming (and frequently charging for) magical powers they did not really possess.

The second theme seeks to mitigate the traditional impression that the Enlightenment saw a fully “rational” and “disenchanted” European elite working to eradicate what they regarded as a hopelessly benighted “popular” vision of a world beset by fairies, demons, and spirits of all sorts. While witchcraft fell into fairly thorough disrepute, many enlightened authorities retained a strong readiness to believe in demonic or spiritual activity in the world, most evidently in the form of spirit possession. In addition, Soili-Maria Olli notes that in eighteenth-century Sweden, many urban, middle-class (and so assumedly enlightened) people continued to accept some reality to demonic pacts, although not of the fearful sort that underlay notions of diabolical witchcraft. Several authors also note that nonelites often evidenced a willing-
ness to reject, or at least to claim to reject, “superstitious” beliefs and embrace Enlightenment logic while still retaining certain magical beliefs. Discussing a case of spirit possession in Bristol, Jonathan Barry notes that supporters and opponents of possession could both frame their arguments in terms of Enlightenment principles of empirical evidence. Willem de Blécourt, examining the Dutch folk healer Derk Hilberding, notes that many of Derk’s clients “were aware of the opinion that one should not believe in witchcraft, and . . . expressed this opinion at relevant moments” (p. 149), but continued to seek the services of a magical healer nonetheless.

These observations, I think, point to a much broader fact in the long history of magic in Europe. There is no doubt that prior to the Enlightenment, European elites were generally far more willing to attribute a greater degree of reality to many magical practices, both elite and common. Scholars studying the medieval and early modern periods now typically warn against drawing too sharp a distinction between elite and popular conceptions of magic, noting that many people from all social levels participated in a broad, common magical culture. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the witch hunts themselves arose from a fatal correspondence between magical beliefs and fears among both authorities and “the people.” Nevertheless, there is also no doubt that elite condescension toward foolish, empty, or vain magical beliefs among “the common folk” was perennial. Although these took on new forms and new force in the eighteenth century, one could just as easily analyze enlightened elites’ derision of popular magic, and nonelites’ accommodation of that derision, as an element of continuity rather than a new feature of the era. What is needed, and what these volumes point toward, is an analysis that can appropriately balance elite rejection of some varieties of magical belief—as well as the fact that common people, too, readily regarded some magic as foolish or laughable—with these same groups’ serious acceptance of, and often deadly concern about, other forms of magical practice. The history of magical skepticism does not begin in the eighteenth century, and it is a history that badly needs more attention.

The third major theme of the first volume, and of the second volume too (all the themes, in fact, carry over) is that during the eighteenth century what had been a mainly oral magical culture began to shift to a more written one. Spells, but also stories about witches, fairies, demons, and so forth were transmitted mainly by word of mouth in the premodern world. With the sharp rise in literacy and advent of many more forms of publications in the eighteenth and subsequent centuries, written media became very important to magical cultures. Newspapers, in particular, are regarded as a classic Enlightenment medium, intended to spread the new orthodoxy of magic’s un-
reality, and to stress the dismal degree to which foolish popular superstitions were impeding progress. This they certainly did, but they also helped to spread information about, and interest in, occult beliefs and practices. So did other forms of written media. As Sabine Doering-Manteuffel notes, “literary occultism was a thoroughly modern phenomenon” (p. 188).

Newspapers continue to be important in the second volume under consideration here, now as an important—indeed, it seems, preeminent—source for information about modern magical practices. If there is a central theme to this volume, in addition to those already discussed, it would be the difficulty of accurately judging the decline of magical practices in an era when almost all major sources tend to be derisive of this topic. That is, newspaper accounts of continued magical practices typically report on magical practices as odd curiosities completely out of touch with the tenor of the times. Accounts gathered by folklorists, especially in the nineteenth century, tend to be even more judgmental, paying close attention to folk practices, but always viewing them in the context of primitive, superstitious traditions. Several authors note that particularly in the twentieth century, many ordinary people who know of such practices have internalized this condescension and are often careful, in their descriptions, to place such practices at least a generation or two in the past, or to stress that they themselves do not really believe in them. Such factors conspire to make accurate assessments of the continuation (and continued development) of magical practices difficult, while at the same time offering testimony to how effectively post-Enlightenment derision of magical beliefs has spread in modern European culture. In this volume, too, there is great emphasis on magic as a system of discourse in addition to a system of real actions.

Perhaps because of such source problems, several of the authors in this second volume seem unintentionally to reproduce some of the shortsightedness of earlier folklorists. Magic is too frequently treated as a purely rural phenomenon, sometimes explicitly as a remnant of traditional local cultures that are being eradicated by increasingly centralized economic, educational, and media systems. One factor contributing to this perception is the deliberate exclusion of new age or neopagan magical systems. The volume intends to focus on popular magic, which it clearly understands as magic that may continue to develop in the modern era but must be rooted in traditional past practices. Exclusively modern magical creations, whether they be nineteenth-century spiritualism or ritual magic, or twentieth-century Wiccan rites, are tacitly deemed not folkish enough. There is certainly reason to draw such distinctions, but any limitation of focus inevitably narrows perspectives
on how magical beliefs are, in fact, developing in dynamic ways in modern European culture.

To some extent, the difficulty of defining the field of inquiry is a perpetual element in the study of magic. Not just in the modern period do scholars seeking to examine magical practices typically work from sources that have negative intellectual, moral, or legal views of the subject and that define “the magical” in negative ways. Yet the definitions those sources provide cannot be cast aside, partly because other contemporary understandings of magic and the magical are difficult to come by, and partly, also, because those condemning sources strongly affected contemporary understandings. The legal condemnation of witches as servants of Satan certainly affected early modern “popular” views of witchcraft, just as twentieth-century intellectual derision of magical beliefs in newspaper accounts affects attitudes of some practitioners even toward their own acts. Thus even the difficulties these two volumes raise, and the occasional shortcomings that can be detected in them, function as important points of introduction not just to the more recent history of European magic, but also to how scholars struggle to study it.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
Iowa State University


This is a useful, although ultimately curious, book. The early modern heartland of witchcraft and witch-hunting lay, of course, north of the Alps, and studies of northern Europe tend to dominate the historiography. Experts typically know that southern Europe presents something of a different magical world. While many general beliefs about magic and witchcraft held sway in the south as well as in the north, southern Europe offers notable variations: less outright witchcraft, for example, and more love magic. Institutionally, the highly bureaucratic Roman, Spanish, and Venetian Inquisitions all worked to restrict the sort of major witch hunts that were possible (although far from universal) in the north. Yet northern Europe, and particularly the German heartland of witch-hunting, is still too often presented as the early modern norm; other regions then assume the role of more or less interesting variants. All this is to say that a monograph focusing exclusively on magic