Wörterbuch des Aberglaubens (review)

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Wörterbuch des Aberglaubens (review)

Abstract
In his foreword, Dieter Harmening, who literally wrote the book on superstition in medieval Europe (Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters [Berlin, 1979]), explains why this new, compact "dictionary of superstition" [End Page 111] is needed. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, superstition was a topic mainly explored by folklorists, ethnographers, and historical linguists. They understood superstitious beliefs and practices primarily as the residue of very early cultures, and used superstitions as a point of access to pre-Christian Germanic societies. The mammoth Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, published between 1927 and 1942, is marked by this approach to the topic. Ominously, Harmening also notes the work was marked by conditions in Germany at the time of its publication, when notions of early and “authentic” Germanic culture took on particular political force. Not only have those dark times passed, but scholars now approach superstition in very different ways. They recognize that many European superstitions do not derive from ancient ur-cultures but developed only in the medieval or early modern periods. Rather than using superstitions to access some lost, primeval past, they examine them as important elements of historical (and contemporary) societies.

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

Comments

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Michael D. Bailey

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 4, Number 1, Summer 2009, pp. 111-114 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0123

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v004/4.1.bailey03.html
tion and Bedingfield’s intense desire to provide some succor within broader European intellectual conversations and popular controversies about possession and exorcism. The fact that Hallett includes documents that discuss the 1651 exorcism not only from Bedingfield’s perspective, but from that of the sisters as well, makes her book both poignant reading and quite valuable to scholars. Auxiliary themes concerning the supernatural—such as the nuns’ intriguing belief that their cloister had been haunted for fifty-three years by a devil that tormented the sisters—also abound in the volume.

True to the ambitious mission of this Ashgate series, Hallett’s text is indeed accessible for the general public and for student use, and will prove especially valuable to those in the latter group studying the religious experiences of early modern women, demonic possession, and/or processes of female self-writing. A broad audience will find the volume’s modern language and Hallett’s careful glossing of religious terminology helpful. Occasionally clarification would have been useful for general readers—for example, some discussion of Samuel Harsnett’s particular brand of Protestantism would have better contextualized his noted opposition to exorcism (p. 15). Specialists may quibble in other areas. The “Angela of Fralino” to whom Bedingfield referred was more likely the Umbrian mystic Angela of Foligno than Angela of Brescia (Hallett’s tentative identification, p. 120). Given her family’s prominence in the recusant community, “the old Countess of Arundel” (p. 138) should have been identified fully as Althea Talbot Howard. Furthermore, editions of early modern texts rendered in modern English present some frustrations; Hallett’s occasional use of original language in footnotes is likely to make early modernists yearn for more of the originals. That said, Hallett has performed an important service in carefully editing these rich texts, making them widely available for the first time, and restoring the voices of two largely forgotten women with captivating spiritual lives.

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In his foreword, Dieter Harmening, who literally wrote the book on superstition in medieval Europe (Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theorieggeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters [Berlin, 1979]), explains why this new, compact “dictionary of superstition”
is needed. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, superstition was a topic mainly explored by folklorists, ethnographers, and historical linguists. They understood superstitious beliefs and practices primarily as the residue of very early cultures, and used superstitions as a point of access to pre-Christian Germanic societies. The mammoth *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, published between 1927 and 1942, is marked by this approach to the topic. Ominously, Harmening also notes the work was marked by conditions in Germany at the time of its publication, when notions of early and “authentic” Germanic culture took on particular political force. Not only have those dark times passed, but scholars now approach superstition in very different ways. They recognize that many European superstitions do not derive from ancient ur-cultures but developed only in the medieval or early modern periods. Rather than using superstitions to access some lost, primeval past, they examine them as important elements of historical (and contemporary) societies.

Nowhere in the foreword does Harmening set out the limits of his dictionary, assumedly understood by his intended German audience. First, although no “deutschen” appears in the title, this *Wörterbuch des Aberglaubens* is, like its giant predecessor, absolutely Eurocentric and to a large degree Germano-centric. Friedrich Spee and Johann Weyer receive entries, for example, where the Englishman Reginald Scot does not. There are entries on Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Johann Faust, but not on John Dee. Elsewhere in Europe, coverage is spotty. From Italy, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola get entries, for example, while Giordano Bruno does not. Girolamo Cardano is treated (by his Latinate name, Hieronymus Cardanus) while Tommaso Campanella is not (nor is D. P. Walker’s classic study of *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* listed in the bibliography; also missing is Anthony Grafton’s essential study on Cardano).

The second major limit to this dictionary is that it is rather thoroughly medieval and early modern. There are, of course, entries extending back into classical antiquity that provide a basis for medieval and early modern European superstition, as well as entries that defy any historical periodization, such as on “fire” or “grave” or even “blue” or “red” (although curiously no “black”). But for the most part, entries on people or practices that can be historically fixed come from medieval and early modern Europe. Entries begin to grow thin into the eighteenth century; only a very few come from the nineteenth and none at all from the twentieth, which seems to be a kind of absolute cut-off (Eliphas Lévi merits an entry, but Aleister Crowley does not).

Within these limits, this dictionary provides wide-ranging and informative
Harmening understands superstition to encompass almost any aspect of magic, sorcery, divination, or witchcraft (exclusive of witch trials). Many entries deal directly with magical beliefs or practices (from “Astrologie” to “Zauber sprüche,” although no entry on “Zauberei” itself), items used in magic, or authorities who wrote about or more often against it. When entry-words are more general—anything from the above-mentioned “blue” or “red” to “Bible” or “house,” “Pentacost” or “time”—superstitious elements, associations, or applications are stressed. In any such assemblage of terms, there are bound to be omissions. Among the more curious choices include an entry for Dracula but none for vampires in general. There is also no entry for the vampiric/witchy strix, although there is an entry for lamia (and also for werewolf, for that matter). The goddess Hecate, often associated with magic and witchcraft, receives an entry, but not the far more commonly referenced Diana.

Searching through the extensive bibliography also reveals a few curious absences. Naturally, one finds the principal focus falling on German-language scholarship. Yet there is no reference to works, either in German translation or in the original, by Carlo Ginzburg, and this despite the fact that there is an entry on shamanism (no works by Gábor Klaniczay are cited either). Even within German-language scholarship, there are some gaps. Wolfgang Behringer is cited for his Hexenverfolgung in Bayern, for example, but not for his Chonrad Stoeckhlin und die Nachtschar, which would be even more pertinent to the topic of superstitious beliefs.

Despite such occasional omissions or idiosyncrasies, inevitable in any work aspiring to such sweeping coverage, there is no question that Harmening’s erudition and expertise in the subject, particularly within the limits he has chosen, is vast and beyond reproach. He has produced a solid, reliable, and useful guide to the general terrain of superstition as defined here. Its usefulness will now, and particularly for an Anglophone audience, be somewhat reduced by the 2006 publication of Richard Golden’s massive Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition (see review in MRW 2 [2007]: 87–93). Witchcraft and superstition are by no means one and the same subject, but because Harmening limits his dictionary mainly to medieval and early modern Europe, and because Golden’s encyclopedia reaches out beyond just witch trials and witchcraft narrowly understood to include aspects of magic and even some “ethnographic” entries such as on “blood,” “ghosts,” or “hair,” the two works do cover more than a little of the same territory. Inevitably, Golden’s much larger and multiauthored encyclopedia is superior in almost all cases of overlap. Despite Harmening’s notice at the outset that scholarship, and by implication his dictionary, now approaches superstition coverage.
more historically and less ethnographically, it is precisely in those more ethnographic, inevitably ahistorical entries on “deers” or “garlic” or such, to which Golden’s encyclopedia gives only very limited inclusion, that Harmening’s book will be most useful to readers of this journal.

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Ever since its mid-twentieth-century discovery by Morton Smith, the Secret Gospel of Mark has been the subject of endless debate and speculation among scholars of ancient Christianity. These debates have centered not just on the importance of the Secret Gospel, but also on questions of authenticity. Is the Gospel a forgery, and if so, was this forgery perpetrated by Morton Smith himself? Peter Jeffery’s The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled is the latest addition to this ongoing discussion. Jeffery, a Princeton musicologist, approaches the Secret Gospel through the history of Christian liturgy and (sometimes less successfully) through a kind of forensic analysis of Smith’s writings and life history.

The book consists of eleven chapters and an appendix containing Smith’s translation of the Clementine letter from Mar Saba. The chapters, each of which contains a helpful summary of the author’s argument, cover a wide range of topics. In Chapter 1, Jeffery offers “a careful reading” of Smith’s two visits to the Mar Saba monastery, as chronicled in his 1973 book The Secret Gospel. Chapter 2 covers major issues in the ongoing scholarly discussion of the Secret Gospel of Mark, including the authenticity of the manuscript, the attribution of the letter to Clement of Alexandria, the historical value of the Secret Gospel, and the validity of Smith’s claim that the Gospel fragment depicts a Jesus who engaged in ritualized homosexual activities.

Chapters 3 and 4 best reflect Jeffery’s expertise in musicology and liturgiology. Chapter 3 argues that the Secret Gospel does not accurately reflect early Christian worship. The baptismal theology evident in Secret Mark resembles twentieth-century Anglican theories about early church practices, but it does not resemble the baptismal theology of the Alexandrian church, which was based upon Jesus’s baptism by John rather than resurrection symbolism. Chapter 4 addresses the claim that the Secret Gospel was read during secret