Communicating with the Spirits (review)

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Abstract
This is the first in a series of three planned volumes containing essays presented at a conference on “Demons, Spirits, and Witches” held in Buda-pest in 1999. While this volume offers essays dealing with demonic possession, visionary experiences, trance states, and shamanism, future volumes contents of which are listed) will focus on demonology, both elite and popular, and on witchcraft. In all, forty-three articles will be published. As is typical with conference proceedings, indeed with essay collections of any sort, the articles in this volume vary considerably in their focus, and in the depth and breadth of their coverage. The most extended contribution is that of Éva Pócs, who seems to have exercised editor’s privilege and expanded her essay to sixty-eight pages. Most of the other articles, however, appear to have been revised only slightly, if at all, beyond their original forms as conference papers. Many are only ten to twelve pages long. In terms of coverage, Pócs’s article spans several periods, but focuses on East-Central Europe. Of the other ten essays, five focus on medieval Europe, three on the early modern period, one on the modern, and one is essentially ahistorical. The authors come from several different disciplines, including history, literary studies, and folklore, although only one article really makes an issue of its particular disciplinary approach.

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

Comments

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text—thus de Gheyn had a friend named Buchelius who kept a diary in which he gave his opinion about contemporary witchcraft treatises, and so Buchelius may have introduced de Gheyn to witchcraft literature, for de Gheyn’s library proves he read Latin (p. 155)—but such suggestions are not very convincing.

The book also evinces a lack of depth regarding theology and early modern religion, especially but not exclusively when it comes to Catholicism. Between 1570 and 1640, witchcraft did not “become a crime of high treason, of lèse-majesté” (p. 118): the concept already explicitly connoted treason against God, as the work of Edward Peters amply demonstrates. Philip II fostered the cult of the Eucharist because of the Council of Trent, not as a ploy to increase state power. Hults’s comments on the Spanish Inquisition having “possessed a historical role in formulating the idea of witchcraft and in persecuting witches” (p. 231) are inaccurate. And most scholars, indebted to the research of Lyndal Roper, among others, no longer view Protestantism’s emphasis on women—as-wives as a progressive step (see p. 172). Hults’s book also contains some puzzling errors of fact. In 1558, no one knew that the Northern Netherlands had eluded the grasp of Philip II (p. 118), and the Spanish Inquisition was not abolished by a King José I (p. 232), but by royal decree of Regent María Cristina, acting for Isabella II, on July 15, 1834.

In conclusion, in the largest sense Hults relays a teleological account of artists and witches that often confirms some very old stereotypes: Goya critiquing society as a fully autonomous artist in his Caprichos, Protestant artists expressing skepticism and tolerance, and Catholic artists conveying witchcraft in the most extreme terms. It is to be hoped that other scholars will build on her particular insights while avoiding her work’s shortcomings.

LU ANN HOMZA

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gábor klaniczay and éva Pócs, eds., in collaboration with eszter csonka-

This is the first in a series of three scheduled volumes containing essays presented at a conference on “Demons, Spirits, and Witches” held in Budapest in 1999. While this volume offers essays dealing with demonic possession, visionary experiences, trance states, and shamanism, future volumes (the
contents of which are listed) will focus on demonology, both elite and popular, and on witchcraft. In all, forty-three articles will be published. As is typical with conference proceedings, indeed with essay collections of any sort, the articles in this volume vary considerably in their focus, and in the depth and breadth of their coverage. The most extended contribution is that of Éva Pócs, who seems to have exercised editor's privilege and expanded her essay to sixty-eight pages. Most of the other articles, however, appear to have been revised only slightly, if at all, beyond their original forms as conference papers. Many are only ten to twelve pages long. In terms of coverage, Pócs's article spans several periods, but focuses on East-Central Europe. Of the other ten essays, five focus on medieval Europe, three on the early modern period, one on the modern, and one is essentially ahistorical. The authors come from several different disciplines, including history, literary studies, and folklore, although only one article really makes an issue of its particular disciplinary approach.

Almost all of the articles are worthwhile. Because of their typically short length, however, few can do more than offer preliminary insights or pose interesting questions. Nancy Caciola introduces the notion that medieval concepts of demonic possession presented demons as physical presences occupying various spaces within the body. In the years since the original 1999 conference, she has actually worked out this argument to much greater extent in other article and monograph publications, which she cites here. Renata Mikolajczyk presents the demonological thought of the medieval Silesian scholar Witelo. While some of his natural interpretations for demonic activity are intriguing, she herself admits that most of his thought was not extraordinary but drew on standard demonological notions. She does not have space, however, to develop these issues fully. Moshe Sluhovsky examines ideas of demonic possession in early modern Catholic countries. His main conclusion is that problems of discernment continued unresolved from the late Middle Ages into the early modern period. Sophie Houdard, examining visionary activity in seventeenth-century France, indicates that these problems persisted, but that in this period visionary activity as a whole was coming under greater suspicion. Regardless of whether visions were supposedly divine or demonic, all such experiences were now more frequently regarded as fake. Éva Pócs closes out the section on demonic possession by presenting a long survey of categories of possession phenomena and what she calls “possession systems”—the social and cultural forms that possession experiences took in Central Europe over an extended span of time. She argues for these effectively, but also cautions that her results are only preliminary.

The next section of the volume, on “Contacts with the Other World,”
begins with an excellent article by Wolfgang Behringer, in which he argues that late-medieval Waldensian heretics became associated with witchcraft because their holy men (and women) claimed to possess the ability to be in contact with the dead, as well as having other supernatural powers. The argument is necessarily more suggestive than conclusive, but sheds useful light on the otherwise odd association of Waldensians with witchcraft. This is followed by a short article on “thanotopic aspects of the Irish Sidhe” by Tok Thompson. Here he asserts that Irish fairy-beliefs are rooted in archaic notions of communication with the dead, since the Sidhe are associated with Neolithic burial mounds. At the end of his paper, however, he admits that he has not actually established the central linkages on which his argument hinges (pp. 200–201); instead he refers readers to his unpublished master’s thesis. Roberto Dapit presents an equally brief introduction to certain folk-beliefs about contact with the dead surviving in present-day Resia (a Slovenian region of Friuli). By his own admission, his account is extremely preliminary. Many of the beliefs he presents seem fairly standard, such as daylight hours being associated with the living and nighttime with the dead; whether there are unique cultural patterns at work here will await further study.

In the third section of the volume, dealing with divination and shamanism, Christa Tuczay leads off with an article that catalogs various kinds of visionary and trance experiences throughout the Middle Ages, moving from antiquity to the sixteenth century. Peter Buchholz provides a survey of elements of shamanism that appear in medieval Scandinavian literature. Rune Blix Hagen closes out the section and the volume with an intriguing story of King Christian IV of Norway, who undertook a voyage to the northernmost regions of his realm in 1599, mainly to assert royal power in the arctic. Here his fleet encountered various Sami sorcerers, and at one point a sailor stole a sorceress’ cat, thereby bringing foul weather down on the fleet until the cat was set adrift in a tub. Building from this vignette, Blix also offers a brief introduction to Sami sorcery practices, and draws some tentative connections to witch trials in the northern county of Finnmark that were to extend over the next century.

The goals established for a major interdisciplinary conference on the related subjects of witchcraft, demons, and spirit beliefs, as set out by the editors in their introduction, are laudable. Some of the articles collected in this volume are more fully realized than others, while some serve only to introduce interesting but still largely inchoate arguments. That is to be expected from any conference proceedings. What this volume (and hopefully the two yet to be published) effectively demonstrates is the range of work being under-
taken that can usefully be brought together on topics of demonology, magic, superstition, and witchcraft.

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This slim volume comes from the North American publication of the British Library series Medieval Life in Manuscripts, to which Page earlier contributed a volume Astrology in Medieval Manuscripts (2002). The series draws upon the vast resources of the British Library manuscript collection to present topical themes—flowers, warfare, courtly love—to a general audience. Page succeeds admirably with this handsome paperback in which beautifully reproduced images and an insightful text are sensitively integrated. The text does not simply string together a series of fascinating pictures, nor are those images merely illustrations to the narrative. Page provides a solid introduction to the subject of magic and richly demonstrates its visual nature.

The book is divided into a brief introduction and five chapters: “The Medieval Magician,” “Natural Magic,” “The Power of the Image,” “The Magical Universe,” and “Necromancy and Sorcery.” The last three pages contain the apparatus: a useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources, an index, and publication information. All of the illustrations come from the British Library and are adequately, if briefly, identified with a descriptive caption, date, manuscript, and folio number, the title of the work and context for the image being signaled in the text. Because the manuscripts of the British Library are so well studied, additional information about individual manuscripts can readily be found elsewhere, including, now, the catalogues and digital image databases online.

Page’s primary materials impose a chronological and geographical focus, emphasizing magic as it was understood between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. This period reflects the high Middle Ages that is best represented in the preprint, manuscript tradition, but also coalesces comfortably into an historical period that begins at the time when many Jewish, Greek, and Arabic texts on magic were translated into Latin, and ends with the trials and witchcraft persecutions of the late Middle Ages. Page lays the ideological foundations for understanding Renaissance and Reformation developments, but only alludes to them.