2005

Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief (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, Medieval History Commons, and the Other History Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/28. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief (review)

Abstract
Walter Stephens has added an important contribution, not just to witchcraft studies, but to late-medieval and early-modern studies as a whole. He opens with an account of demonic copulation from a witch trial in 1587 but then focuses almost exclusively on treatises and the "witchcraft theorists" who authored them. In his careful and wide-ranging reading of those sources, he follows the work of Stuart Clark (Thinking with Demons [Oxford, 1997]). But unlike Clark, who draws a firm line around 1500 and works to situate demonological literature amidst the larger intellectual currents of the early modern period, Stephens includes earlier treatises from the fifteenth century in his study. Moreover, he sets this literature in the context of intellectual developments stemming from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and at the center of a general crisis of belief that he sees developing within later medieval Christianity.

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

Comments
This is a book review from Speculum 80 (2005): 334, doi:10.1017/S0038713400007570. Posted with permission.
Reviews

been to the university the affair was most satisfying. It was very fine indeed that Genji should see fit to give his son a university education."

JOHN C. HIRSH, Georgetown University


Walter Stephens has added an important contribution, not just to witchcraft studies, but to late-medieval and early-modern studies as a whole. He opens with an account of demonic copulation from a witch trial in 1587 but then focuses almost exclusively on treatises and the “witchcraft theorists” who authored them. In his careful and wide-ranging reading of those sources, he follows the work of Stuart Clark (Thinking with Demons [Oxford, 1997]). But unlike Clark, who draws a firm line around 1500 and works to situate demonological literature amidst the larger intellectual currents of the early modern period, Stephens includes earlier treatises from the fifteenth century in his study. Moreover, he sets this literature in the context of intellectual developments stemming from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and at the center of a general crisis of belief that he sees developing within later medieval Christianity.

While trial records have received careful readings from historians and literary scholars, treatises on witchcraft, and especially fantastic descriptions of witches’ sexual interaction with demons, have frequently been dismissed as the work of misogynistic, paranoid, or simply evil minds. Stephens wants to take this material seriously, seeking to discern the underlying purpose such accounts served in the intellectual systems their authors were constructing. His conclusion is this: witchcraft theorists were obsessed with demonic copulation because this act made witches who engaged in it “expert witnesses” to the corporeal reality of demons. Throughout the range of treatises he has read (Stephens rightly criticizes some scholars’ penchant for examining only particularly salacious bits of witchcraft literature out of context), he finds an almost desperate desire to use witches as proof of the real existence of demons in the face of terrible doubt.

This doubt, Stephens argues, originated with the rise of “scientific” angelology and demonology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As Scholastic authors endeavored to account systematically for the real presence and power of spiritual beings in a material world increasingly structured by their understanding of Aristotle, they encountered profound incongruities. The early-medieval world had not worried overmuch about “rational” explanations for spiritual power or manifestation, and the modern world simply sets all matters of spirituality outside the realm of scientific consideration. But the “early modern” world (by which Stephens means approximately 1100 to 1700) tried desperately to understand spiritual forces—that is, angels, demons, and ultimately divinity itself—“scientifically,” and failed profoundly in that effort.

Theories of witchcraft developed at the center of this crisis of belief and served to buttress the faith against logical dilemmas. In their sexual activity witches provided “eyewitness” evidence of the physical reality of demons. Desecration of the host at demonic sabbaths served to verify the real power and importance of the transubstantiated wafer. Witches’ opposition to marriage and magical impediments to fertility reinforced the importance of this sacrament, and nefarious plots to kill infants emphasized the importance of baptism and entrance into the spiritual community of the church. All of these points of analysis are instructive and make a good deal of sense.

Yet there is a problem lurking at the center. For Stephens, the crisis of belief that witchcraft theorists were confronting was a covert one. These authors could not bring themselves
to admit, let alone directly confront, their profound doubts about basic tenets of their faith. Setting aside any consideration of authorial intent, and also setting aside any concern for audience reception, Stephens instead follows Umberto Eco’s suggestion of a third interpretive focus—the intention of the text itself, which can develop even against conscious authorial design. This forces Stephens into extremely suspicious readings, not only looking for elusive clues to the real intentions hidden in his texts but dismissing out of hand any overt statements authors may make about their meaning. Moreover, Stephens deals hermeneutically with these treatises, reading widely in the literature but almost never incorporating other historical or cultural evidence to support his conclusions. His extended reading of the *Malleus maleficarum* reveals some of the effects of this approach.

The *Malleus* is generally regarded as profoundly misogynist and sex-obsessed. Yet for this work, too, Stephens argues his central point that its author, Heinrich Kramer, was primarily concerned with demonic copulation as evidence of demonic reality. The *Malleus* does have much to say on the subject of incubi and succubi demons, but this material is embedded deep in the second part of the treatise. Much better known is the apparently foregrounded material in the first section describing the moral inferiority of women and their natural proclivity for evil, especially witchcraft. By a close reading of the text, Stephens concludes that this arrangement is actually the result of a massive reorganization, a “cut-and-paste” job, that Kramer put the *Malleus* through before publication. According to Stephens, the material in part 2 was always primary in Kramer’s mind but through a series of revisions was pushed into a location of relative obscurity. A leading expert on the *Malleus*, however, Wolfgang Behringer, has noted in his review of this book (*American Historical Review* 108/4 [October 2003]) that the *Malleus* was written in great haste and that Kramer would have had no opportunity for such revisions.

Stephens correctly maintains that the *Malleus*, along with most other witchcraft literature, was written to counter skepticism. The central point of skepticism overtly addressed in the *Malleus*, however, does not concern the reality of demons but rather the reality of witches and witchcraft. Ideas of harmful magic, *maleficium*, had long existed in medieval Christian thought, but only in the fifteenth century was such common magic linked to intense diabolism, and about this linkage there was significant and persistent doubt. These direct doubts about the reality of witchcraft certainly interacted with the sort of concerns Stephens highlights in his analysis. If witchcraft was to be defined as *maleficium* performed through demonic agency, then demons had to have real agency in the world, and this agency had to be explained in physical, Aristotelian terms. Yet concern over diabolism in general, rather than demonic sex particularly, would salvage much of the theorists’ own overt statements about their intentions that Stephens is forced to jettison and would account for the fact that an obsession with demonic physicality was not nearly so prevalent in witchcraft literature as Stephens would have it (there were always theorists, for example, who maintained that the witches’ sabbath was a nonphysical, illusory experience but nevertheless represented a “real” encounter between witches and demons).

Somewhat ironically, then, it is precisely those points where Stephens tries to apply his arguments, derived from his reading of witchcraft theory, most closely to that theory that I find problematic. Nevertheless, I am convinced that his larger insight—that a profound intellectual shift focused on the nature of spiritual being and power occurred in western Europe from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries and that ideas of witchcraft were centrally enmeshed in this shift—is correct. This important book moves witchcraft from the periphery to the center of late-medieval and early-modern intellectual and religious culture, challenges the very distinction between medieval and early modern, and forces us to reconsider seriously some basic categories of premodern European thought and life.

Michael D. Bailey, Iowa State University