

**Harmes, Marcus and Victoria Bladen, eds. *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015; hardback; pp. 250; 1 b/w illustration; R.R.P. £70.00; ISBN 9781472429407.**

In *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England*, Marcus Harmes and Victoria Bladen have brought together, in a truly interdisciplinary collection, various essays to demonstrate that the supernatural was a pervasive aspect of everyday life. The book expands on recent scholarship in this area by aiming to understand how the 'intangible was grounded in the tangible physical world' (p. 3).

The book is divided into three parts. The first, 'Magic at Court', focuses on supernatural power within the Elizabethan courtly elite. In the first chapter, Glyn Parry considers the impact and influence of alchemy on the Elizabethan court, with a special focus on John Dee. Not only does the chapter chart Elizabeth's own fascination with alchemy, but it also demonstrates how, by engaging in political discourse, alchemy's subversive potential ultimately 'led to its marginalization well before the impulses of scientific empiricism' (p. 7).

Pierre Kapitaniak next analyses the context surrounding the publication of Reginald Scot's treatise, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). While Scot may have believed that a 'witch mania had taken hold of England', Kapitaniak draws on Scot's own anti-Catholicism to contextualise his work (p. 42). He notes the increasing conflation of treason with witchcraft, demonstrating that witches were more likely to be branded as Catholics.

Michael Devine's chapter is an excellent analysis of the political and religious climate in the lead up to the passing of the 1563 Witchcraft Act. Devine argues that English Catholics were believed to be using magic, particularly in order to overthrow Elizabeth, and this fear manifested itself in the political debates of Elizabeth's early reign. The hyperbolic nature of the debate meant that during the forty years in which the Act was in force, it was not used to deal with magic in conspiracies; rather, it was 'an instrument for dealing with perceived maleficent and anti-social behaviour at a county level' (p. 91).

Victoria Bladen opens Part II, 'Performance, Text and Language', with her analysis of *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) and supernatural identity. She argues that drama 'represents the way common beliefs in the supernatural constituted powerful pretexts for the persecution of outsiders' (p. 115). Fiona Martin follows with her examination of the shifting attitudes to suicide in early modern England through William Sampson's *The Vow Breaker* (1636).

In the next chapter, Catherine Stevens focuses on Ludwig Latavar's *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by Nyght* (1569) as a way to understand the shifting and unclear positions of ghosts within Protestant theology. By not saying mass for the dead and denouncing purgatory, Protestantism battled 'ingrained folk beliefs as well as vestiges of Catholic belief'

regarding the fate of the soul [page 300] (p. 11). Concluding Part II, Martin Dawes focuses on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and its effect on Restoration politics. Dawes's thesis rests on the idea that the supernatural component of *Paradise Lost* – particularly Christ's chariot – was a pointed commentary on the excesses of Charles II's court.

Part III, 'Witchcraft, the Devil and the Body', contains the collection's most exciting and engaging essays. Marcus Harmes's contribution analyses the role bishops played in investigating demonic possession in England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Harmes observes that 'the agency of the Devil ... concerned some bishops, as claims that people had the power to dispose or exorcise demoniacs could cut across episcopal authority' (p. 186). He emphasises both how the episcopacy was embroiled in the contest over the authority to deal with demoniacs, and the various ways in which 'episcopal power and authority intersected with secular jurisdiction' (p. 13).

In her chapter, Charlotte-Rose Millar argues that contrary to the prevailing historical narrative, sexuality was indeed a significant factor in cases of English witchcraft. Her study of fifty surviving seventeenth-century witchcraft pamphlets demonstrates that English witchcraft was presented as 'diabolical and highly sexualised' (p. 231). These 'witches' were accused of engaging in both penetrative and non-penetrative sex with familiars and manlike devils. Millar argues that 'the sexual dimension of the English witchcraft pamphlets can thus be located with and recognized as part of the process of Protestant delineation of acceptable sexuality' (p. 13).

The omission of a bibliography—either for each chapter or a general reference list for the book—is disappointing, and the collection focuses far more on witchcraft than is suggested by both the title and the section titles. Nevertheless, these are small criticisms of an otherwise well-written, expertly researched and engaging collection.

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