

Witchcraft: A Problem for All Times?

ASHFORTH, Adam — *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Pp. 396.

BEHRINGER, Wolfgang — *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004. Pp. 337.

BROEDEL, Hans Peter — *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. Pp. 209.

DAVIES, Owen, and Willem DE BLÉCOURT (eds.) — *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004. Pp. 211.

DE BLÉCOURT, Willem, and Owen DAVIES (eds.) — *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004. Pp. 219.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY of witchcraft and magic has, like that of any other field of study, evolved over time in response to a number of ideological, methodological, and political influences. It has remained, however, a field dominated by the early modern period and by a sense that beliefs in witchcraft and magic — that is, the kind of beliefs that led to witchcraft trials — belong to the past. Much of what has been written about witchcraft, and about witch-hunting in particular, includes some sort of statement of the scholar's need to "bridge the gap" between present and past, between modern scepticism and early modern belief. It is probably safe to say that, for most western scholars, mass witch-killings and the world views that produce them seem very distant. While we are, of course, aware of other atrocities, there is something comforting and intellectually liberating in the knowledge that history is unlikely to repeat itself in that particular way. But is it really so unlikely? Recent research shows that belief in witches has never disappeared and that witchcraft is a greater part of our world than we may have thought.

We begin, however, with medieval witch-beliefs. In *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief*, Hans Peter Broedel asks how the witch became a “composite entity” in fifteenth-century Europe and what role the *Malleus Maleficarum* played in this construction. He argues that the *Malleus* was more successful, and thus more influential, than other treatises on witchcraft because Heinrich Institoris and Jacob Sprenger integrated the explanatory mechanisms of village witchcraft narratives with their theological conception of the world in such a way that they “provided their audience with a window onto the discursive field in which their informants constructed witchcraft themselves, and in so doing gave their own construction of witchcraft a utility and persuasive force not found in its competitors” (p. 6).

The *Malleus Maleficarum* of Institoris and Sprenger is a much-maligned text, so it is refreshing to find that Broedel presents it as a logical, carefully constructed work within the theological context of scholastic demonology. While recognizing the *Malleus*'s idiosyncrasies, Broedel explains rather than mocks them. Much of what he has to say about the *Malleus* and its historical context will be familiar to witchcraft scholars, but his matter-of-fact treatment — a “fair and balanced” look at late-medieval belief, if you will — is an excellent synthesis and introduction to the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the evolution of witchcraft theory.

Broedel begins with a biographical discussion of Institoris and Sprenger, the background to the *Malleus*'s composition, and an introduction to the structure and main arguments of the treatise itself. Following this overview, Broedel examines late-medieval views on demons and the devil. His explanation of the scholastic/Thomist approach to demonology is clear, and he looks at a variety of authors whom one does not usually encounter outside more specialized studies, such as Nicolas Jacquier, Peter Mamoris, and Felix Hemmerlin. The next chapters cover the theological problem of misfortune and the formation of belief in witchcraft. In the final chapter, Broedel tackles the *Malleus*'s emphasis on female witchcraft. Throughout, Broedel incorporates material from a range of relatively obscure texts as well as from better-known sources, thus underscoring his point that the *Malleus* presented but one of many competing models attempting to explain the experience of witchcraft in the fifteenth century.

One of the enduring themes of modern witchcraft scholarship is the link between women and witchcraft: specifically, why so many more women were tried and executed than men. Some scholars such as Sigrid Brauner have pointed directly to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, suggesting that its publication was perhaps the decisive factor that turned witch-hunting into “woman-hunting”. The woman-hunting thesis has not stood up well against more recent research, but the question of learned misogyny and its impact on witch-hunting remains. In his final chapter, Broedel argues that Institoris and Sprenger were describing what they encountered: women accused of witchcraft. In other words, they did not “prejudice the issue” by defining witchcraft as a

female crime; they merely attempted to explain their own inquisitorial experiences, within a conceptual framework of traditional views about women, superstition, sexuality, and harmful magic.

Broedel does an admirable job of summarizing those views, and he devotes some space to a comparison of male and female witchcraft as it is presented in late-medieval demonology. However, his analysis is rather disappointing. Despite his suggestion that Institoris and Sprenger wrote about female witches because that is what they encountered, he does not provide details regarding gender and witchcraft in the trials in which they participated. He also fails to explain why those trials should have led to the “extreme” view presented in the *Malleus*. If, as Broedel suggests, Institoris and Sprenger were making a novel argument that harmful magic was an exclusively female crime (a point on which it is possible to disagree; Institoris and Sprenger did not say so, and one could argue about the supposed marginalization of male witches in the text), then it remains to explain why they interpreted their experiences in that particular way, when other inquisitors did not. Was Institoris angry because of his embarrassing failure at Innsbruck? Was the testimony in the Innsbruck trials unusual? Or was Institoris’s theory about women and witchcraft established before those trials, as his interrogation of Helena Scheuberin suggests? Broedel does not raise these questions, thus leaving a large gap in his discussion.

Another gap is evident when one considers Broedel’s argument that the *Malleus Maleficarum* was more successful than other witchcraft treatises because it integrated popular beliefs with theological concepts. He mentions a few early modern authors who cite the *Malleus*, but does not provide many details of the text’s reception. One would have liked to see, for instance, more discussion of contemporary opinions of the *Malleus*. Were its arguments accepted as a whole, or did readers accept some parts of the book and reject others? Again, Broedel does not raise these questions.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* remains an excellent introduction to an important text. Broedel has done a great service in providing this full-length study of the *Malleus* in English. It should be essential reading for students and for scholars from other fields who wish to incorporate the *Malleus Maleficarum* or other witchcraft treatises in their work. Witchcraft specialists will also find it useful, if less provocative than Walter Stephens’s *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt are both well known for their research on witchcraft in the modern era. In *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe* and *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*, Davies and de Blécourt bring together 20 essays, covering a range of European regions and methodological approaches, by an interdisciplinary group of established and new scholars. *Beyond the Witch Trials* focuses on the eighteenth century, while *Witchcraft Continued* tackles the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Davies and de Blécourt point out that

beliefs related to witchcraft and magic beyond the late seventeenth century have received very little scholarly attention due to an assumption that such beliefs declined to the point of irrelevance in the wake of the Enlightenment. Both volumes certainly succeed in demonstrating that modern European witchcraft is fertile ground for research.

Beyond the Witch Trials contains several outstanding essays, but also some weaker ones; on the whole, *Witchcraft Continued* is a stronger collection. In *Beyond the Witch Trials*, the best contributions include Marie Lennersand's study of what happened after a witch hunt in Dalarna, Sweden; Peter Maxwell-Stuart's discussion of declining records of witchcraft in eighteenth-century Scotland as a symptom of the breakdown in communication among Kirk, state, and the rest of society; Soili Maria-Olli's study of men accused of making a pact with the Devil in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sweden; Jonathan Barry's case study of the Lamb Inn case of 1761–1762 Bristol; Brian Hoggard's survey of the archaeology of counter-witchcraft and popular magic in the British Isles; and Willem de Blécourt's case study of the Dutch witch doctor Derk Hilberding.

Lennersand's study is particularly noteworthy. In examining the aftermath of a witch hunt, she asks genuinely new questions and shifts the research focus away from the well-worn ground of accusations and trial processes to the relationships within a community. As we might expect, she finds that witch-hunts were damaging to communities; more surprisingly, however, she also finds that those accused of witchcraft were able to go on with their lives in the same community, albeit under lingering suspicion.

Given that historians are accustomed to dealing primarily with documentary sources, Hoggard's essay on the archaeological evidence of counter-witchcraft will, at the very least, have the attraction of novelty. It is also, however, a fascinating and useful introduction to this subject. As he points out, physical artifacts can provide important material evidence of practices and beliefs, although they must be used with some caution due to the difficulty of accurately dating and interpreting them. Hoggard devotes most of the essay to a detailed discussion of five common finds: witch bottles, dried cats, horse skulls, concealed shoes, and written charms. He shows that there was "a continued preoccupation with witchcraft and evil influences" up to the early twentieth century, and argues persuasively that scholars ought to pay much more attention to the archaeological record of beliefs (p. 183).

The essays in *Witchcraft Continued* address witchcraft and magic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As in *Beyond the Witch Trials*, approaches to the subject vary considerably, but, as a whole, the collection is strong. The Scandinavian influence is less pronounced, with only one essay on Finland. There are two very different chapters on witchcraft-related crimes in nineteenth-century England, as well as an essay on Northern Ireland. Willem de Blécourt contributes another excellent piece on witchcraft in the Netherlands, and Owen Davies discusses witchcraft accusations in France from 1850 to 1990. Nils Freytag, Enrique Perdiguero, and Sabina Magliocco address the intersections of magic and medicine in Germany, Spain, and Italy.

The essays by Éva Pöcs and Richard Jenkins stand out for their unusual subject matter. Pöcs describes a unique form of “religious” witchcraft practised currently by Hungarians living in Transylvania. In this region, witchcraft is performed by a “mediator” employed by the villagers in order to harm others. What is remarkable is that the “mediator” is often a *kaluger*, or Romanian Orthodox priest or monk. Pöcs suggests that the curse of the *kaluger* “is a specifically religious method of projecting fate and divine justice” as a means of resolving communal conflicts (p. 175). The notion of “priestly magic” in modern times is fascinating, and Pöcs does it justice with a thorough analysis. As she notes, the field research she and her students conducted dealt only with the view “from below”; we hope that further research will be conducted on the views of the holy men who perform curses, divination, and “*maleficium* masses” at the request of their flock.

Sociologist Richard Jenkins’s colourfully titled “Spooks and Spooks: Black Magic and Bogeymen in Northern Ireland, 1973–74” examines a black magic scare that affected several counties. According to Jenkins, there was “an unprecedented rash” of press coverage of local witchcraft, black magic, and Satanism between August 1973 and early 1974. In his analysis of this unusual occurrence, Jenkins brilliantly draws together multiple explanatory strands. He begins by asking whether there was, in fact, any truth to the rumours of black magic and finds that there were several possible bases for them: recent local findings of occult paraphernalia; the gruesome, unsolved murder of a ten-year-old boy that September; and typical teenaged dabbling in the occult. None of these factors could be considered truly unique to Northern Ireland, but Jenkins uncovers evidence that British Army intelligence planted press articles and fake ritual sites as part of a black propaganda campaign designed to discredit paramilitary organizations by linking them to Satanism (among other things). From there, Jenkins asks why this particular disinformation had such an impact. Part of the answer, he suggests, lies in the intersection of Northern Irish religiosity and the violence of the Troubles. This very unusual look at beliefs thus will be of interest to scholars in a number of disciplines, including military history.

Wolfgang Behringer’s new survey, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History*, synthesizes historical and anthropological research on witchcraft, magic, witch-hunting, and related subjects in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe, from pre-history to the present day, to support his central argument that belief in witchcraft is a universal phenomenon. As one would expect from Behringer, he presents information clearly, concisely, and systematically. Relevant academic debates, theories, and interpretative models from several disciplines are integrated seamlessly in chapters on belief in witchcraft, witchcraft persecutions, the outlawing of European witch-hunting, modern witch-hunting, and “new witches”. A lengthy bibliography, conveniently divided into source types, is a treasure trove of primary and secondary research sources, and a detailed general index makes the book very “user-friendly”.

It is possible to appreciate *Witches and Witch-Hunts* simply for its densely packed, yet readable synthesis of a jaw-dropping array of multidisciplinary

scholarship. This book is also, however, an important contribution to witchcraft scholarship that is sure to influence the direction of future research. Behringer has something interesting to say about everything witchcraft-related, so it is difficult to select just a few highlights.

His discussion of early modern witch-hunting is, for instance, quite simply a masterpiece that could serve as a primer on early modern history and historiography. Behringer argues persuasively that witchcraft persecutions increased in response to the extreme weather events caused by the Little Ice Age, as the populace, which already believed in the power of witches to affect the weather, looked for the source of these “unnatural” occurrences. He does not suggest that climate change is the only explanation for the witch-hunts; indeed, he addresses a number of factors. Behringer does, however, shift the emphasis away from confessionalization, acculturation, demonology, learned misogyny, and other “top-down” explanations, while retaining a central role for the state as the “aider and abettor” of persecutions driven “from below”.

He continues the theme of persecutions from below in a chilling chapter on witch-hunting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps the most important contribution of this book to current scholarship is Behringer’s compelling argument that witchcraft is not merely a feature of past or “primitive” cultures, but is also a modern, global phenomenon. As he puts it: “witchcraft and witch-hunts are not a closed chapter in the history of mankind, or a matter of folkloristic curiosity ... more people have been killed for suspected witchcraft in the second half of the twentieth century than in most other periods in the history of mankind” (p. 8). He tells us that in Tanzania, for instance, 5,000 people were killed in witch-hunts between 1994 and 1998; thousands more were killed in the 1970s and 1980s. Lest the reader think that witch-killing is a feature only of far-off places, Behringer notes that the Inuit of Quebec summarily executed suspected sorcerers in the 1920s and 1940s and that witch-killings occurred in Germany and France in the 1970s.

Of course, Behringer does more than state frightening statistics. He shows how European scepticism regarding witchcraft clashed with Native beliefs during the colonial expansions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the local populations interpreted the outlawing of witch-persecution as an attempt by the colonial authorities to protect witches. As in his chapter on early modern witch-hunts, he demonstrates that modern witch-hunts are responses to specific triggers, rather than to general cultural change. Health, economic, social, cultural, and political crises have all sparked mass witch-killings in Africa, for example. He concludes the chapter with the interesting point that anthropologists have tended to avoid the issue of witch-killings in their explorations of modern witch beliefs; somewhat caustically, but perhaps correctly, he suggests that this is because actual bloodshed spoils the “pleasures” of reasoning. Although he does not come out and say so directly, Behringer indicates that scholars must pay more attention to witch-hunting — presumably to help states play their key role of stopping persecutions.

There is almost a sense of urgency in Behringer’s epilogue. He argues that

the “witchcraft paradigm” is a universal construct linking misfortune to negative human emotions such as envy and that it has the potential to cause panic and violence in civilizations that do not have ways of counter-balancing anxieties. He also points out that “it has never been possible to stop a ‘witch-craze’, or witch-beliefs, with medical, sociological or psychological arguments. The doctrine of the physical power of evil spirits invalidates any reasonable argumentation” (p. 245). One wonders, after reading *Witches and Witch-Hunts*, whether the pressures of global climate change, natural resource shortages, and terrorism and the war on terror might combine with current beliefs in the Devil and harmful magic to generate informal witch persecutions even in developed, industrial western states.

Adam Ashforth’s *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* is one of the best books, on any subject, that this reviewer has ever read. It deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in witchcraft, South Africa, HIV/AIDS, or governance in democratic states. It is a complex, highly nuanced, and thought-provoking study that tackles difficult epistemological questions while presenting Soweto and its people sensitively and un sentimentally.

South Africa, Ashforth tells us, is a world with witches. Hundreds of thousands (at least) believe that others are capable of doing them harm through magic. They live in fear of witchcraft and seek help from approximately half a million healers and prophets in their communities. Suspected witches are ostracized and sometimes killed. At the same time, the public discourse does not treat witchcraft as real and regards the killing of witches as an abuse of human rights. Ashforth, who has spent a considerable amount of time living in Soweto as part of an “adoptive” family, examines the fear of witchcraft within the framework of “spiritual insecurity”. He suggests that, “unless the dimensions of spiritual insecurity are understood, politics in Africa is incomprehensible” (p. 12) and asks what the political implications of witch-beliefs are for a modern democracy.

In the first part of the book, Ashforth discusses what he calls the social dimensions of spiritual insecurity — “the dangers, doubts, and fears arising from the sense of being exposed to invisible evil forces” — in Soweto (p. 1). Skilfully blending social statistics with personal testimonies, he paints a vivid picture of life in the township: poor, dangerous, fraught with family tensions over money and reciprocity, yet vibrant and often joyful. Ashforth makes the point that Sowetan life is essentially insecure, especially since the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Ashforth suggests that the disease, like other forms of misfortune, is understood by many South Africans as an affliction caused by witchcraft; the spread of HIV/AIDS, along with other post-apartheid social changes, has created a sense that witchcraft is increasing.

Witchcraft scholars will find Ashforth’s discussion of the epistemological challenges of witch-belief illuminating, and his analysis of gossip, jealousy, and the “presumption of malice” in a world with witches will be useful to studies of accusation dynamics in other contexts. Ashforth also addresses the

issues of rationality and modernity, arguing that these frameworks are unhelpful in attempts to understand spiritual insecurity in modern Africa. One of his most interesting insights is that Sowetans' attitudes concerning witches are dynamic and that they tend to try not to believe, in the hope that this will reduce the power of the witches.

The second part of the book deals in more detail with Sowetans' beliefs. Ashforth covers a great deal of ground in this section, including the "dialectics of *muthi*", missionary evangelism, dirt and pollution à la Mary Douglas, and the role of ancestors in South African life. Ashforth's personal relationships with the people of Soweto add vital texture to his discussions throughout the book, but his status as a "special outsider" is most clear, and most affecting, in the chapter on ancestors. Ashforth was "adopted" by a Sowetan family when he went there in the 1990s to conduct research; when he left Soweto, the family took him to their (and his) Grandfather's grave. Ashforth's description of the ancestor ritual, as well as his own feelings about it, introduces an insightful analysis of ancestors and kinship.

The book's final section deals with spiritual insecurity and the state. Ashforth opens with a grim narrative about the killing of a local thug and the murder of his mother, who was suspected of having helped her son with *muthi*, or witchcraft. Using this account as a springboard, Ashforth then discusses the problem of justice when witchcraft is suspected or alleged. He points out that demands for justice by victims of witchcraft are thwarted by the state, which does not officially recognize the crime and which deems it is an offence to name someone as a witch or to practise divination (which would identify witches). This does not protect witches from being punished or killed on a regular basis and leads to a deep sense of injustice in South African communities.

As Ashforth points out, if people cannot rely on the state (police, courts, local government) for justice when they are harmed, violence and counter-violence are the likely result. The broader issue, of course, is how a government that does not protect its citizens can maintain its legitimacy. If the citizens of a community believe they are being harmed by witches, and the government is failing to protect them or is even protecting the witches, how long will they tolerate that government? Should local governments address witchcraft accusations at the community level? Should the courts consider witchcraft charges? How would this work in practice, given the immense gap between those who believe in witchcraft and a legal system that denies its reality? Ashforth does a superb job of raising these issues and exploring their implications. He does not offer solutions, but one gets the sense that this is deliberate restraint on his part.

The past few years have demonstrated how interdependent the world is, and how instability in one part of it affects the rest of the globe. If the stability of certain governments depends on how they deal with witches and spiritual insecurity, then Ashforth and Behringer are absolutely right in arguing that belief in witchcraft is a problem of our times and that we need to understand it, not dismiss it as superstition or as a mere relic of the past. Each of the

books reviewed in this essay takes us, in its own way, closer toward the goal of comprehension.

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