Witchcraft, Witch-hunting and Politics in Early Modern England

Review Number: 1938
Publish date: Thursday, 19 May, 2016
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ISBN: 9780198717720
Date of Publication: 2016
Price: £58.50
Pages: 384pp.
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Place of Publication: Oxford
Reviewer: Imogen Peck

In his latest book, Dr Peter Elmer grapples with two of the thorniest, and most enduring, questions in the study of witchcraft and witch-hunting: How might we account for fluctuations in the number of witchcraft prosecutions? And what explains the eventual demise of witchcraft prosecutions (in England, at least) by the end of the 17th century? In doing so, Elmer follows in the footsteps of some of the most eminent historians of early modern English history. In the early 1970s, both Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane published works which attempted to explain surges in witchcraft prosecutions with reference to the political and religious structures of early modern society. Since then, numerous others have followed, perhaps most saliently for this book, the work of Brian Levack on the connection between witchcraft prosecution and political state building and Malcolm Gaskill’s comments on the relationship (or lack thereof) between puritanism and witch-hunting. Indeed, the quantity of existing literature is such that readers could be forgiven for wondering whether it is in fact possible to write anything truly new on the subject. That Elmer produces a text that engages closely with these earlier works while still presenting a largely original central thesis is a testament to the power of the highly detailed local case studies that undergird this work.

At the outset, Elmer expresses his unease with several of the existing scholarly interpretations, and two of them in particular. First, the claim that a fall in witch-hunting and witchcraft prosecution can be explained by a rise in sceptical thought engendered wider intellectual developments, such as the Scientific Revolution. While not entirely dismissing the influence of legal and scientific developments on attitudes to witchcraft, Elmer emphasises throughout the book the extent to which the opinions of judges, natural philosophers and physicians could be as shaped by political partisanship as by broader scientific, legal and medical judgements. Second, the suggestion that English witch-hunting, including the famous witch hunts that took place in East Anglia in 1645–7, should be understood as the result of a collapse of legal and political authority in these areas, which in turn allowed mass witch-hunting to take root. Instead, Elmer argues that the interaction of religious and political concerns, sometimes national but also often local in scope, help to explain not only many individual cases of witchcraft prosecution and hunting but also patterns of witchcraft prosecution and their eventual decline more broadly. In what is often a densely argued book, Elmer deploys a series of micro-historical case studies to show how an understanding of these local political and religious conflicts can shed light on why witchcraft prosecutions happened when they did. From these case studies, he
constructs a broader narrative in which he argues that such politicisation of witchcraft prosecutions goes much of the way to explain their eventual demise.

The book is structured chronologically, though Elmer is careful to state that this decision is not intended to imply ‘gradual, Whig-like change over time … but rather to show how the religious and political imperatives of specific occasions and periods helped to shape reactions, both for and against, witchcraft’ (p. 9). The first main chapter (chapter two) spans the period immediately following the passage of the witchcraft act in 1563 until the accession of Charles I in 1625. Here, Elmer argues that while witchcraft prosecutions initially served as a vehicle for unity in the Elizabethan state, the fragmentation of the Protestant religious consensus and the emergence of a Puritan opposition created new tensions within the body politic, and that it is these fragmentations that can help explain the rise in witchcraft prosecutions in this period. While the point about the consensus-building role of witchcraft prosecutions prior to 1580 is stated rather than demonstrated (a case study or two of prosecutions that illustrate this point would perhaps make a nice addition), Elmer provides some compelling evidence for the latter claim, not least in his analysis of Reginald Scot’s famous, witch-sceptic text, *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Elmer examines not only the national political context in which this work was produced, but also the religious conflicts that were unfolding in Scot’s local county of Kent during this period and his links to the various main players. Elmer suggests that reconstruction of these tensions should lead us to understand Scot’s assault on witchcraft as a response to local religious conflicts and national factional rivalries, rather than as a product of purely intellectual and academic misgivings. In his careful analysis of the patronage and political links that underlie a text’s production, Elmer’s method bears some resemblance to the approach advocated in recent years by historians of early modern print culture more generally, not least Jason Peacey, who has emphasised the extent to which a reconstruction of the complex networks of patrons and writers that lay behind a text may enhance our understanding of the meaning and significance of the text itself. (4) The chapter concludes with a discussion of how an understanding of local religious tensions may enhance our understanding of the oft observed link between witch-hunting and puritanism. More specifically, Elmer deploys a series of case studies from Essex to argue that while puritanism did not intrinsically cause cases of witch-hunting, it was far more likely to arise in communities where religious conflict was endemic, and that puritanism was a common ingredient in recipes for local religious divisions during this period.

In chapter three, Elmer moves on to examine attitudes to witchcraft in the context of the acute religious and political divisions of 1625–49. During this period there are two main patterns of witchcraft prosecution that demand explanation – the lull in prosecutions during the 1630s, and the localised episodes of witch-hunting that took place during the later 1640s. In tackling the former, Elmer rejects explanations that suggest the failure of Charles I and his spiritual, political and judicial advisers to promote witch-hunting was a result of their rejection of witchcraft belief per se. Instead, he makes a distinction between the idea of witchcraft and the practice of witch-hunting, emphasising that an absence of practice did not necessarily speak of an absence of belief. In fact, there is clearly much evidence for witch belief among Charles I and his advisers, not least the elaborate masques performed at court that often featured the forces of evil in the form of demons and witches. Utilising the content of these court masques as part of his evidentiary base, Elmer suggests that the lack of witch-hunts can be attributed to Charles I’s belief in his own divine and charismatic authority, which precluded the possibility that the body politic was infested with witches and demons. Perhaps inevitably, explaining why something did not occur proves more of an evidentiary challenge than explaining why it did, and Elmer’s arguments in this section feel more speculative and contestable than elsewhere in the book. He is on firmer ground, however, when he provides detailed case studies of some of those few witchcraft prosecutions that did occur during the 1630s. For example, in an analysis of three prosecutions that took place in Kent in the early 1630s, he shows that two of these were instigated by men who would later play a major role in fomenting opposition to the established church and the royal cause – in short, here, as in the later 16th century, local division and opposition, particularly of a Puritan bent, generated prosecutions. The picture is complicated somewhat, superficially at least, by the case of Dorchester during the same period, where the presence of a strong Puritan ruling elite appears to have inhibited witch-hunting. Elmer attributes this to an absence of local religious tension in this town, and, in so
doing, he once again provides evidence that complicates our understanding of the relationship between Puritanism and witch-hunting. Drawing these threads together, Elmer concludes his discussion of the 1630s by arguing that that ‘what we are witnessing here … is the politicisation of ideas and practices associated with witchcraft’ (p. 87); in the second half of the chapter he builds on this theme, exploring the ways in which the language of witch-craft became a powerful political weapon during the Civil Wars.

It is against this backdrop of the increased politicisation of demonological belief on the national stage that Elmer presents his discussion of the East Anglia witch-hunts of 1645–7. He begins by contesting some of the more established explanations of these phenomena, not least Jim Sharpe’s suggestion that the ‘witch craze’ flourished in East Anglia partly because normal legal restraints were lacking, particularly during the early stages. Instead, he argues that what happened in East Anglia was the result of an intersection of local and national factors which together created an environment highly sympathetic to witch-hunting. To support this, he presents a detailed analysis of the events and figures of the East Anglia hunts which, while perhaps not yielding anything startlingly new, does serve to demonstrate convincingly that the almost unique conditions present in parts of East Anglia – not least the absence of military action – combined with heightened national religious tensions to create a spike in witchcraft prosecutions. More intriguing still, however, and of more import for his overall thesis, are the wider conclusions Elmer draws from his explorations of the geography of witch-hunting in East Anglia. He provides a number of case studies from the region (most notably Colchester, Stisted, Great Yarmouth), suggesting that these demonstrate that Puritan belief, when combined with political or religious infighting, could also act as a break on, rather than a generator of, witch-hunting. That is, Puritanism and national and local tensions only combined to generate witch-hunting in cases where elites were agreed on who or what posed the threat; by contrast, when local tensions within Puritanism broke out, as they did in Great Yarmouth, consensus behind prosecutions often broke down. It is the long term disintegration of consensus that Elmer argues also accounts the ultimate demise of witch-craft prosecutions more generally, with witch-craft becoming ‘increasingly and inextricably linked in the imaginations of the ruling elites with the wider religious and political controversies of the age’ (p. 137).

Though the Hopkins trials may in these respects be considered a ‘landmark’ in the history of English witchcraft – a brief moment of consensus among the godly that meant witch trials flourished, before its eventual disintegration in the aftermath of civil war – witchcraft was far from extinct either as belief or crime in 1649. Elmer does, however, suggest that the politicisation of witchcraft which took hold during the 1640s sowed the seeds of its eventual decline, and the remaining chapters of the book trace this process through the various political and religious contexts of the later 17th-century. Chapter four explores the ways in which growing concern about the political ends to which accusations of witchcraft may be put generated renewed speculation about the realities of witchcraft, especially among those groups that were hostile to the republican states. In particular, Elmer focuses on the works of Robert Filmer and Thomas Ady. He suggests that these authors’ attempts to redraw the bounds of witchcraft should be understood as part of a broader concern among religious moderates about the extent to which witchcraft accusations were being deployed by some religious groups as a kind of Trojan horse to promote their own interests. As Ady wrote, witch-craft prosecutions could be used to silence diverse people, bar ‘such as are in places of Dignity, or so well esteemed in Commonwealths, or have such friendship among the potent of the land, that thereby they are able to withstand their Adversaries’.

In chapters five and six Elmer moves on to a discussion of witchcraft after the Restoration. He suggests that the process of the politicisation of witchcraft continued into the 1660s and 1670s, with a marked division between nonconformists – who continued to adhere to a belief in diverse forms of witchcraft – and their Anglican opponents, who tended to be interested in witchcraft only in so far as it constituted a form of rebellion. Further, he argues that these political divisions in attitudes to witchcraft had implications for contemporary jurors and physicians alike: for example, while nonconformist physicians, such as John Reynolds and Robert Whitaker, remained open to diagnoses of witchcraft and possession, their more High Church colleagues were far less likely to offer credence to such claims. It is in this part of the book that Elmer makes the strongest case for his claim that medical and judicial attitudes to witchcraft often played ‘second fiddle’ to the constraints of political imperatives. Finally, in chapter seven, Elmer traces the ways in
which political partisanship continued to inform witchcraft belief and prosecution into the later 17th and early 18th centuries. He notes that during this period, witchcraft prosecutions became caught up in the ‘rage of party’ and that while dissenting circles continued to support witchcraft prosecutions, Whig and Anglican elites were increasingly sceptical or indifferent to the issue.

There is a great deal to admire in Witchcraft, Witch-hunting and Politics in Early Modern England, not least its wide ranging temporal and geographic scope, forceful argumentation and impressive use of disparate sources. The local studies, in particular, are based on extensive and in-depth archival research that brings new evidence and a fresh perspective to even familiar cases – the reconstruction of the political tensions that may have led to Scott’s authoring a Discoverie of Witchcraft and the comparisons of witch-hunts in different parts of East Anglia and Kent during the 1640s are particularly illuminating. Indeed, in many ways, Elmer’s book could be considered to be a celebration and demonstration of the potential power of micro history, as well as a reconsideration of the causes of English witch-hunting. The overarching argument that many of the apparent puzzles posed by patterns of witchcraft prosecution can be understood by paying closer attention to the influence of political contexts on attitudes and beliefs is convincingly demonstrated in a wide range of contexts.

Of course, not all of the book is as innovative as its deployment of local studies. For readers familiar with the historiography of the civil wars and interregnum, for example, the lengthy discussion of the politicisation of demonological discourse offers nothing new. Further, the author’s desire to construct an argument about the causes of witchcraft prosecutions generally, while also doing justice to the complexities of local conditions specifically, may on occasion leave the casual reader feeling a little at sea. What, for example, are we to make of the fact that while in the later 16th century local tensions apparently generated witchcraft prosecutions, in parts of East Anglia in 1645–7 it was partially local religious divisions that prevented hunting taking place? Elmer does successfully navigate and explain these apparent tensions, partially by exploring the way local situations were coloured by different national contexts, and partially by distinguishing between the integrative and subversive meaning witchcraft prosecutions could serve, depending on the context in which they were deployed. However, perhaps inevitably in a book of such scope and nuance, there are times when those who are not experts in the area may benefit from a restatement of these points.

As a whole, however, this is a fascinating and thought provoking book which provides a fresh and compelling take on witchcraft in early modern England. Though some of Elmer’s claims are likely to prove controversial (not least, perhaps, his presentation of Matthew Hopkins as a ‘healer’), it will no doubt generate and invigorate further debates in the field; indeed, Elmer is generous in flagging many potentially fruitful areas of future research along the way. For this reason alone, it is likely to prove an essential read for all scholars of early modern witchcraft, though it also offers much which will be of interest to historians interested in the politics and society of early modern England more generally.

Notes


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