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Peter Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 384, £65.00, hardback, ISBN: 978-0-19-19-871772-0.

Building on the work of historians such as Ian Bostridge and Stuart Clark, whose seminal books, now twenty years old, focused on the ideological and intellectual roots of demonology and the political nature of witchcraft theory, Peter Elmer's book provides a fresh approach to understanding the peaks and troughs of English witch-hunting, from the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. Elmer convincingly argues that in England the practice of witch-hunting, along with the idea of witchcraft itself, was shaped by the country's ever-changing, often tumultuous, political and religious landscape. It is a hallmark of Peter Elmer's work that it is based on an impressive amount and variety of primary sources, combined with a strong command of the secondary material: his footnotes contain more detail than many historians pack into the main body of their text.

After laying out the trajectory of his main argument in the introduction, in Chapter 2 Elmer breathes new life into that most studied of all English demonological works, Reginald Scot's, *Discoverie of witchcraft* (1584). Elmer argues that Scot's vehement opposition to witchcraft (which failed to gain widespread support at the time) was rooted in the fact that it was increasingly used for partisan political ends by the Puritan wing of the Anglican Church, with whom Scot had parted religious company. The book also fed into local politics, forming part of an anti-Puritan backlash in his native Kent. During the next fifty years or so, support for witchcraft and demonic possession was largely, but not exclusively, the preserve of Puritans, providing a way to voice dissent in communities experiencing extreme religious conflict. In Chapter 3, Elmer argues that in the 1630s King Charles I and his advisors regarded witchcraft as a non-existent threat (without denying its existence) because its manifestation represented a state in chaos, unthinkable in their present divinely ordained and ordered kingdom. Charles was thus reluctant to promote witch-hunting, a stance that filtered down to royally appointed judges and magistrates, resulting in fewer trials and higher acquittal rates. However, in the years immediately before and after the Civil War of 1642 witchcraft was used by Anglican apologists on the one hand and by Puritan parliamentarian polemicists on the other as an oppositional tool in a bitter and bloody contest for the hearts and minds of English subjects. Widespread dissemination of these views at a local and national level, through newspapers, letters and sermons, increased popular fear of the Devil and witches, culminating in the mass trials directed by Matthew Hopkins and a number of senior, local Puritan figures.

Elmer challenges previous interpretations that have blamed the trials on Hopkins's excessive zeal or regarded them as a by-product of the collapse of the normal operation of local and central government. On the contrary, argues Elmer, they should be 'seen as part of a concerted attempt by a coalition of local interest groups to construct a godly society purged by its various enemies, including witches, and reconstituted on biblical principles' (p. 115). Chapter 4 however charts how this aspiration proved 'untenable and fell victim to the growing religious sectarianism that had plagued English Protestantism from its inception' (p. 10). In this context, Royalists and more traditional puritans opposed witchcraft and witch-hunting, while godly reformers, along with those radical sectarians determined to protect freedom of conscience, continue to regard it as a useful political tool. It was this latter outlook that underlay attempts to initiate mass witch-hunts in the late 1640s and early 1650s.

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Chapters 5 and 6 chart the profound effect that the Restoration of 1660 had on the cultural, religious and political life of the country, sparking a renewal of elite interest in demonology and witchcraft. Elmer demonstrates that the small number of witch trials that occurred after 1660 were promoted or encouraged by marginalised religious dissenters, whose providential world-view was permeated with witches, demons and spirits. Witchcraft was also defended by moderate Anglican churchmen, including Joseph Glanvill, 'as a bulwark against the threat of a creeping atheism and moral debauchery, but also as a way of promoting bridge-building with the voice of moderate dissent' (p. 229). Those who defended witchcraft were lent practical and intellectual support by non-conformist physicians (many of whom had clerical backgrounds or continued to provide pastoral care), who in their everyday practice diagnosed and treated demonically induced disease. In contrast, their conformist medical colleagues were much more likely to proffer natural or physical explanations for demonic possession and bewitchment, and it became increasingly commonplace in the late seventeenth century to medicalise them as neurological dysfunction. The scepticism of conformist physicians, along with that of loyal gentleman scholars, royal judges and magistrates, was deeply influenced by the redefinition of witchcraft by the restored clergy: it was no longer regarded as an actual crime but a metaphor for rebellion against the state. As a result there was little thirst by those who controlled the machinery of prosecution to either prosecute or convict witches.

In Chapter 7, Elmer argues that the institutionalised political partisanship that arose in the wake of the Exclusion crisis (1679–82) and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and peaked during the 'rage of party' that marked Queen Anne's reign (1702–14), determined the nature of debate about the existence of witches and spirits and highly politicised the few witchcraft trials that were held in that period. During these years support for witchcraft dwindled and became increasingly associated with the politically excluded, a development that reached fruition in the early years of the Whig and Hanoverian Ascendancy (after 1715). It was then that witchcraft became completely marginalised within mainstream elite culture and was now seen as fanatical, enthusiastic and ideologically redundant, which only those excluded from the Hanoverian body politic – Roman Catholics, radicals and 'high-flyers' – were willing to entertain.

This is a dense, detailed and important book that will make it difficult for future historians to ignore the ways in which specific religious and political debates and conflicts shaped and moulded early modern English belief in witchcraft and in witch trials and contributed to their eventual decline. It also provides a much-needed examination of the role of medicine and medical practitioners in early modern witchcraft. However, I believe its main strength lies in the fact it provides historians of witchcraft with another explanatory mechanism, along with, for example, social and gender tensions and the personal politics of reputation, with which to explore the specific contexts in which witchcraft accusations arose and trials were held. Peter Elmer's book is thus essential reading for any student of early modern witchcraft.

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