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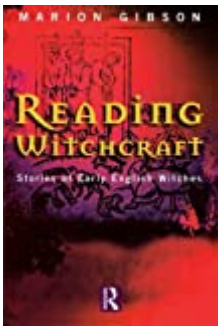

Marion Gibson. *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches.* New York: Routledge, 1999. ix + 242 pp. $24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-20646-4.

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Writing Witchcraft: witches and pamphleteers

Is it appropriate that a study of witchcraft should be written backwards? Marion Gibson's analysis of the surviving Elizabethan and Jacobean witchcraft pamphlets consists of five chapters. The final one deals with the mix of poetry, godly exhortation, and scholarly disquisition that *preface* these pamphlets. It is preceded by a discussion of the differences in the crafting and presentation of the stories that they tell. These two chapters are grouped in a section, entitled 'Pamphlets'. The first three chapters also form a section, 'Records', which evaluates the standing of these texts for the purposes of historical reconstruction. What information can historians – of witchcraft beliefs, or of judicial procedure; of economic polarisation and social tension, or of gender roles – distil from these pamphlets? The second section, it seems, should logically precede the first. And, while both sections contain some persuasive arguments and effective criticism, the analysis developed in the second part of the book is certainly the more sensitive and convincing.

Dr Gibson's book develops recent cross-disciplinary work that has blurred the distinctions between literature and record, and the methodologies used to approach them. Her close literary reading of the texts, emphasising style, structure and narrative convention, produces some compelling insights. Her demonstration (pp. 31-2) of the sophisticated defensive strategies that underpin Margery Sammon's apparently artless 'confession' is a splendid example of the interpretative power of her methodology. Her analysis (pp. 120-1) of the fragmented and multivocal quality of *The most strange and admirable discoverie* despite its reassuring pretence of straightforward, objective reportage, or her discussion (pp. 150-3) of the role of a boisterous humour in some of the texts, are equally fine. Her final chapter, analysing the prefaces, is the most sustained demonstration of the effectiveness of her technique. Gibson shows how these, as 'frame stories', engage with the main bodies of the texts, how they shape any readings of them, and how careful interrogation of the prefatory material may reveal authorial preoccupations or a scheme for the pamphlet.

Yet even this admirable discussion is vitiated by a diffidence in one key aspect. It occurs when Gibson confronts the question of the changes in the preface genre in the course of her period. She argues that the pref-

aces 'firm up': witchcraft is no longer treated as merely one example among many of human sinfulness; it has become a unique form of crime, and writers have to employ an extensive bibliography, and an appropriately specific scientific discourse. This is an interesting suggestion, but why does the shift occur? Gibson muses (p. 171) that she 'cannot help wondering about the direct or indirect influence of the demonological debates which had taken place' at the turn of the century, but, having tossed out this suggestion, argues it no further. No attempt is made to test the hypothesis by a serious engagement with the treatises of Harsnett, or Darrell, or to delineate the ways in which their debate inflected upon the witchcraft pamphlets. The question of changing format or emphasis is more problematic in other sections of the book. So in chapter 3, on Accusations, Gibson suggests that the testimony retailed in the early pamphlets displays the classic Thomas-Macfarlane denial narrative – I rejected the witch's request; she cursed me; I suffered. But later pamphlet-reproduced accusations stress that the witch's malevolence is fuelled by her desire to revenge other kinds of insults, or is simply motiveless. The effect is to enhance the impression of the witch's malignity, but is this the motive for the change? Gibson remarks (p. 94) that this distribution "might suggest patterning by narration rather than necessarily a change in reality, or it might suggest different constructions of witchcraft in different places." These interesting suggestions are not developed, nor is there any indication of how they might be pursued - in local judicial records, for instance; in practical treatises like Bernard's *Guide to Grand Jurymen*.

Dr Gibson is often illuminating in her delineation of the shifting conventions employed within the pamphlets, but her explanations of these are, however, often partial or ambiguous. The problem here stems from her refusal to stray far beyond the confines of the narrow class of pamphlets and to examine other bodies of evidence relevant to the mattes that she wishes to discuss. While this is most obvious when changes in the substance or rhetorical conventions of the pamphlets are the issue, it can also occur in passages of more static structural analysis. It seems odd, in chapter two, to compare pamphlet accounts of the shape of the witch trial with Cockburn's account of general criminal procedure to test the reliability of the former. Use of the Star Chamber records in cases that turn on malicious prosecution, and which therefore describe the procedure in cases of witchcraft, would provide a far better basis of comparison.

In some of the *longeurs* of this book – the "sustained nit-picking" [her own phrase (p. 18)] at the pamphlets; the sniping at the errors of Notestein or Thomas – the reader longs for Gibson to elevate her gaze and attempt to answer some of the intriguing questions that develop from her research. This would require a far fuller survey of the other classes of documents that intersect with the pamphlets and provide the fullest context for understanding them. Dr Gibson is suspicious of historians "over-hasty and careless readers; insufficiently explicit and often naive in their conceptual assumptions," but she is a historian. Despite some dalliance with the modish conceptual language of post-modernism she rejects the solipsism affected by more committed practitioners. Gibson believes trials happened; that witches were hanged; and, most particularly, that the pamphlets on which she focuses were produced. The pamphlets are, with all the difficulties of interpretation, historical data, and meanings "not always the obvious ones" can be teased from them. And this raises perhaps the two most troubling failures in the book.

The first concerns another aspect of the necessary contextualisation of the material. Dr Gibson's study is based on a small run of pamphlets, but she never discusses pamphleteering in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Neither the market forces nor the literary culture that impinged upon the pamphleteers are analysed in any sustained way. They are glanced at throughout the book. Her nice discovery that one of the pamphlets is based upon a play by Greene should locate the work in a literary culture of borrowing and interconnection, often in association with mockery and playfulness, that had a profound effect on the stylistic, structural and tonal elements of many pamphlets, including several of those relating to witchcraft. Again, seeking to explain the demise of the witchcraft pamphlet (a key issue that remains problematic throughout the work) she adduces an interesting theory that relies on the location of their decline in a market context. But there is no attempt beyond this suggestion to analyse the circumstances of the pamphlets' production.

Finally, Dr Gibson fails to recognise the force of her own epistemological position. If the texts constitute historical entities, if the representations and stereotypes are real events even as they conceal or distort other real events, then their narratives need to be considered as more than obstacles to be navigated, understood only to be peeled away. The texts must be used to investigate how narrative conventions functioned to influence the behaviour of those involved, and how stereotypes themselves were fluid, influenced by and influencing the cul-

tures that produced them. The tenuous search for a real witchcraft behind the representation, without considering the representation itself, weakens the analysis in the first section of the book. That Gibson's best analysis is of the arts of the pamphlets where she does not expect to find or tease out a record of real events – the preface – is perhaps no coincidence. Here, in the final chapter, are the most insightful observations in the book about possible contemporary perceptions of witchcraft, though this chapter like the others still lacks a discussion of the reciprocal and complex relationships between witch-beliefs, witch-narratives, and the means by which these were communicated.

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