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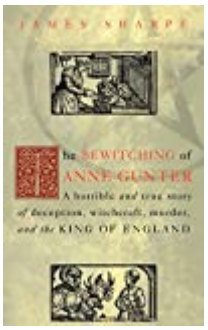

James Sharpe. *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: A Horrible and True Story of Deception, Witchcraft, and the King of England.* New York: Routledge, 2000. xvi + 238 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-92691-1.

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Witchcraft and Deception

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The story that James Sharpe tells in this book has two different levels. On one level it is a routine seventeenth-century witchcraft case, remarkable only for the wealth of documentation it generated and for the fact that it was deliberately orchestrated by the father of the bewitched girl. At another level it is distinctly unusual: it was investigated by Oxford dons, by a bishop and an archbishop, and even by King James I. It led to the acquittal of the witches and the trial of their accuser in Star Chamber. Earlier historians of witchcraft have briefly touched on the case, but Sharpe is the first to examine it in detail.

Anne Gunter grew up in the village of North Moreton, a dozen miles from Oxford. Her family had University connections. Her older sister was married to Thomas Holland, Regius Professor of Divinity and subsequently Rector of Exeter College. But the Gunters were newcomers to North Moreton and did not get on well with the group of yeomen who ran the village. Brian Gunter, Anne's father, was not one of the vanishing breed of paternalist squires idealised in rural mythology. He was in fact in the business of buying up impropriated tithes: Sharpe describes him as "an interloper who was creaming off wealth from local farmers" (p. 39), and it is no surprise that he was unpopular in the neighborhood. In 1598 there was a brawl at a local football match. Brian Gunter was a spectator, and in the course of the fight he assaulted two of the participants (the brothers John and Richard Gregory) so violently that they both died a few days later. Their relatives tried to get Gunter indicted for manslaughter. They were unsuccessful, but Gunter never forgave them for the attempt.

His revenge, a few years later, took the form of a witchcraft accusation against one of the Gregory clan: Elizabeth, wife of Walter Gregory. For Gunter, she was a good choice. She was a notorious troublemaker, always at odds with her neighbors; a scold, in the language of the times. Such women were often accused of witchcraft: the chief fault of witches, the sceptical Reginald Scot observed, "is that they are scolds." When in 1604 Anne Gunter began to exhibit the familiar signs of demonic possession – fits and contortions, trances, insensibility to pain – Elizabeth Gregory was a credible suspect, and Anne duly denounced her and two other, more

marginal, village women for bewitching her. Anne's most impressive symptoms were her ability to spit pins from her mouth, and to have them stuck into her without apparently feeling pain. People came from miles around to watch, and her brother-in-law took her to Oxford to be inspected by such well-known academics as John Prideaux and another Exeter don, Thomas Winniffe, who like Prideaux was to end his career as a bishop. All these great minds were convinced that Anne's fits were genuine, so Elizabeth Gregory and the two other women were prosecuted for witchcraft at Abingdon Assizes. As Sharpe reminds us, less than half of witchcraft accusations led to convictions, but Brian Gunter must have felt that his chances were good.

Enter the hero of the story, a Wiltshire gentleman named Thomas Hinton, who was distantly related to the Gunters. Hinton heard about Anne's fits, and came to join the spectators at North Moreton. Originally open-minded about her symptoms, he then had second thoughts and conducted some surreptitious tests which convinced him that she was a fraud. He also voluntarily attended the trial and used his connections to warn the judges that there were suspicious features of the affair. The result was a much more careful examination of the evidence than was usual at witchcraft trials, or indeed at any other kind of trial, and the three accused women were acquitted. Without Hinton's intervention they would probably all have been hanged.

This, however, was not the end of the story. Brian Gunter did not give up, and when King James I came to Oxford during the summer of 1605 he somehow managed to present Anne to him. It was a serious mistake. James had written a book on witchcraft, but he was not totally credulous, and he turned the matter over to Archbishop Richard Bancroft, who was distinctly sceptical. And so it all came out. Brian Gunter had induced Anne (by methods that included abusive bullying) to accuse the North Moreton women; he had coached her in spitting pins, and had used drugs to put her into trances and enable her to withstand extreme pain. He was tried before the Star Chamber for subverting the course of justice, and although Sharpe's sources do not reveal the final verdict, it is clear that he was permanently disgraced.

Sharpe is an admirable guide through these historical thickets. His book is aimed primarily at the intelligent general reader, and one can imagine its being extremely useful for advanced undergraduates in history or in English literature. But specialists will also find much to interest them, if only because of the clarity of Sharpe's writing, and his judicious balancing of possible interpretations. He provides useful explanations of the legal issues, and of the procedures in the Star Chamber and Assize courts in which the case was heard. His descriptions of church court and manorial records will enable people engaging with the early modern period for the first time to understand how historians do this kind of microhistory. Instead of footnotes, there are detailed bibliographical references for each chapter at the end of the text, and these adequately describe the sources, though scholarly readers are likely to wish for more precise annotation. Sharpe has written an earlier, more wide-ranging book on witchcraft (*Instruments of Darkness*, 1996), and has an impressive grasp of early modern publications on the subject; some of these were also sufficiently known to Brian Gunter to enable him to give his daughter the necessary coaching. Sharpe is equally at home in the even more mountainous accumulation of recent secondary works, though for this audience he wisely confines himself to summaries of a few of the best known interpretations – Keith Thomas's social explanation, for example – and avoids the complicated academic debates that are liable to scare off the non-specialist reader.

Inevitably there are places where eyebrows will be raised. Sharpe is sometimes inclined to take court depositions too much at face value, without making allowance for the biases of witnesses chosen by the two sides. He also tends to downplay the assumptions about gender that surely explain why witchcraft accusations were so overwhelmingly targeted at women; there is no evidence, he says, that Agnes Pepwell, one of the other defendants, was being "victimized by a male-dominated, misogynist clerical or legal establishment" (p. 89). Well, perhaps not, but the fact remains that when Brian Gunter wanted revenge against the Gregorys he accused one of women of the family, not one of the men. He is right that this time the judicial system was reasonably fair to the accused. But this was largely the result of Hinton's intervention, and the fact that both the judges and the jury at Abingdon were remarkably conscientious. We should not conclude that this was a typical situation, as the grisly outcome of Matthew Hopkins's accusations in East Anglia thirty years later shows.

One can easily question parts of a book and yet still recognize its value over all. From Sharpe's account we can learn a lot about community relations in early modern England, about folk beliefs, about how the legal system worked, about changing intellectual fashions among the elite, and other important matters. As in all the best examples of microhistory, an intrinsically interest-

ing story is successfully used to throw light on wider issues. *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter* is a model exercise in the genre.