

Marion Gibson, ed. *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550-1750*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. xiv + 270 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8874-0; \$68.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4224-7.



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The purpose of this finely edited and extremely useful volume is to show how a wide range of people in England and New England understood witchcraft during and after the period of the witch trials. Marion Gibson, the author of *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (1999) and the editor of two volumes of English witchcraft pamphlets, has assembled this collection of primary source materials in a format that is especially suitable for students. The sources, which vary widely in nature, represent the views of “housewives, conjurors, farmers, possession victims, lawyers, nurses, churchmen, physicians, exorcists, poets and a famous novelist” (p. x). Most of these people can generally be classified as elite or at least literate, but Gibson also includes sources that let us hear the voices of lower-class witches and their accusers.

Two chapters of the book deal with witchcraft trials. The first, “Witchcraft in the Courts,” presents the text of all three English witchcraft statutes (1542, 1563, 1604) as well as the British act of 1735 that repealed the English statute of 1604 and the Scottish act of 1563. Statutes are not the easiest texts for students to read, but they do illustrate how little concern English law had for the diabolical as opposed to the magical dimension of English witchcraft. Only in 1604 was it specifically forbidden to consult, covenant with, or employ an evil spirit. Decid-

ing what to include and exclude in anthologies of this sort is always a matter of preference, but Gibson might have excluded the act of 1542, which had little effect and was repealed shortly after its passage, and included the Massachusetts witchcraft law of 1641, which offers a striking contrast to all the English statutes by defining witchcraft exclusively in terms of the demonic pact. The other items in this chapter provide brief but valuable illustrations of information, examinations, and indictments in English witchcraft prosecutions.

The second chapter dealing with the trials, “Witchcraft in Elizabethan and Jacobean England,” provides the most interesting excerpts in the book. A church court proceeding against a cunning man, John Walsh, in 1566, for conjuring rather than *maleficium* or harmful magic, is interesting both because we can hear the accused speak for himself and because the court was particularly concerned with Walsh’s possession of a familiar spirit. The witch’s imp or familiar, which it was believed helped the witch perform her maleficent deeds, became one of the distinctive features of English witchcraft. The reference to Walsh’s imp in this early case of conjuration provides evidence for the origin of this English belief in ritual magic (the only context in which imps appear on the Continent) rather than in native English popular culture. The second document, superbly edited by Gib-

son, is the pamphlet describing the famous 1582 case of witchcraft at St. Osyth in Essex, in which the JP Brian Darcy took a leading role. The final item in this chapter is a manuscript abstract of the arraignment of a number of witches at the Northampton assizes in 1612. The manuscript possesses considerable interest for scholars trying to reconstruct the history of these prosecutions, since it differs in significant ways from the pamphlet, *The Witches of Northamptonshire* (1612). The full text of the printed pamphlet can be found in Gibson's edition, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (2001).

Two chapters of the book present excerpts from demonological texts. The first, consisting of three treatises written during the height of the trials, provides excerpts from the writings of the godly minister George Gifford (1593), the radical skeptic Reginald Scot (1584) and the physician John Cotta (1616). This sampling of English demonological thought can only be faulted for its tendency to emphasize the more skeptical approach to witchcraft, for even Gifford, despite his claims of credulity, manifests a providentialism that attributed misfortune to the deity—a salient theme of English and continental European Protestant thought. The other chapter on demonology, which focuses on the late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century debate, that took place as prosecutions gradually declined and came to an end, presents a more balanced selection, juxtaposing the credulous empiricist Joseph Glanvill with the Whig commentator and historian Francis Hutchinson. The most novel inclusion is an excerpt from Daniel Defoe's *A System of Magic* (1727), a skeptical work that develops the common eighteenth-century identification of magic with deceit.

The most distinctive feature of Gibson's anthology is the large number of literary sources, which appear in chapters titled "Stage and Page—Witches in Literature," "Learned Men and Magic" and "Magic and Money—Two Tricksters." The representation of witches in English literature has been the subject of much recent scholarship, and Gibson's selections provide a broad sampling of the most important early modern literary works on the sub-

ject. Whether these selections deserve such prominence in a volume on witchcraft and English society is nonetheless open to question. Two of these chapters do not really deal with witchcraft at all, but with ritual magic, which lent itself more readily than witchcraft to contemporary literary treatment. The main question regarding the chapter on witchcraft, which reproduces excerpts from the works of Middleton, Shakespeare, Dekker, Spenser and Jonson among others, is what they can tell us about English witch-beliefs or the way that English people viewed the crime of witchcraft. Since the writers drew indiscriminately on Continental and Scottish as well as English materials, and often did so to enhance the commercial appeal of their works, they are not the most reliable guide to what educated people in England, much less the lower classes, actually believed about witchcraft. Thomas Middleton's comedy, *The Witch*, for example, includes notions of flight that are alien to English witchcraft and draws on material (including the name of the character Stadlin) from a demonological treatise written by Johannes Nider in the early fifteenth century. It also draws on Reginald Scot's highly skeptical treatise. Gibson is certainly correct to identify the play as satirical and skeptical, but it is difficult to assess the impact it might have had on its seventeenth-century audience.

Although the title of the book includes both England and America, Gibson devotes only one chapter to witchcraft in England's North American colonies, focusing exclusively on the famous witch-hunt at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. The excerpts in this chapter, which include legal documents regarding the prosecution of Bridget Bishop and the published works of Cotton Mather, Increase Mather and John Hale regarding the trials, reflect the scholarly care with which Gibson has selected and edited all the sources in the book. One can only wish that she had included materials from other parts of British America where witchcraft trials took place (such as Bermuda), and that she had used the documents at her disposal to highlight both the similarities and differences between witch beliefs and witchcraft prosecutions in England and in its colonial possessions.

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