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Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xiv + 451 pp. Diagrams, halftones, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0226772616.

Review by Michael E. Hoenicke Moore, University of Houston.

The lurid title of this book, and the painting by Abilgaard (*Nightmare*) that haunts the dust-jacket, seems to invite the reader to indulge in a bit of voyeurism about the past and explore the devilish sex-lives of witches, as "exposed" by the witch-hunters and inquisitors of old. The imagined acts—nicely dressed young women pressing their lips to the backside of the Devil; *succubi* and *incubi* embracing their human victims in their beds at night—gained force from perversity: the tales did not aim for prosaic believability so much as shock-value, a carnival atmosphere of fetish and violation. Thus Pierre de Lancre's assertion, in 1612, that the Devil sometimes sported a three-pronged penis "so that he could simultaneously penetrate his victims vaginally, anally, and orally" (p. 101).

While taking seriously the problems raised by such bizarre assertions of sexuality, *Demon Lovers* does not devote much space to demonic titillations, in part for reasons of method. Walter Stephens directs our attention away from the witch trials, so heavily mined by generations of historians, with their painful records of imprisoned and tortured men and women trying to generate testimony gruesome enough to satisfy their captors (p. 6). Instead, he addresses the more austere realm of canon law and theological treatises on witchcraft, the work of official and unofficial scholars of various stripes, whom Stephens brings together under the term "witchcraft theorists." According to the usual modern stance, such men were arbitrary fanatics. If so, we should find in their books only mouth-foaming, ideological certainty. Instead, as Stephens shows, these men were genuinely exploring the truth about demons and their impact on the human world. They had a weak grip on their faith and were themselves unsure about the truth of demonic intrusions in the human world. "Witchcraft theory" was thus tentative and searching, the rational product of rational minds (p. 10).

Throughout this fascinating, intensive reading of manuals and treatises on witchcraft, composed in Europe from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Stephens strongly argues his thesis: the obsessive interest that clerics and theologians took in demons, and in their sexual (and otherwise physical) interaction with witches, was motivated by a hounding sense of loss, a barely suppressed crisis of belief in the reality of the spiritual world, on the part of the inquisitors themselves. Sexual encounters between the Devil and women (especially women) could serve as convincing, tangible evidence for the reality of the spirit-world and thus could support the entire edifice of a three-storied Christian universe. Thus Heinrich Kramer, one of the authors of the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*), "did not fear that women were associating with demons: he *hoped* that they were" (p. 37). His personal doubts about the spiritual world required confirmation, and the pound of flesh had to come from a woman.

This crusade against doubt explains why, for example, artistic portrayals of fantastic human-demon encounters were so important. Paintings such as that by Baldung Grien of a naked woman (p. 109)

sexually receiving the long tongue of a demonic, dragon-like creature, "could make the entire construct of Catholic theology seem more real to theologians themselves." It was not the illiterate who needed such pictures, but the learned, to shore up their shaky faith. On one level, therefore, Stephens' argument is developed as psychological criticism. All the machinery of inquisition, torture, and execution of witches was not set in motion as the action of a persecuting society, establishing its power by colonizing and dominating less well-protected bodies (R. I. Moore following Foucault), nor as the violent encounter between misogynistic male clerics and a still female-friendly social order (Anne Barstow). Rather, Stephens argues, the persecution of witches was undertaken in order to overcome the religious doubts and metaphysical fears plaguing the inquisitors themselves. For the first 200 pages or so, I resisted this argument, yet the steady supply of evidence from the sources at last wore down my resistance, and I began to take the argument seriously.

To assert, as Stephens does, that the witchcraft theorists were rational investigators plagued by religious doubt is not to exonerate them, nor to endow the witch craze with rationality. Peasants, especially women, brought accusations against each other, making paranoid connections between their misfortunes and the lurking presence of witches. Since Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory* it has been recognized that folk-belief could play a leading role in the development of the most refined theologies. The explanatory efforts of witchcraft theory also came from the "bottom up." New terrain was opened by witch-baiters, while theological novelties were wrenched from torture victims. Witchcraft theorists came along behind, eager to explain these new "discoveries."

The stakes were incredibly high: witchcraft theorists and prosecutors felt that their world-view and their personal role in the world as clerics and functionaries all rested on these prosecutions, while the accused faced torture, betrayal by friends and family, social as well as physical death. It is unnerving, these days, to read of an obliterating reaction to such vague threats of terror. Learning that the inquisitor Saint Bernardino had arrested a woman for killing thirty infants, while in the shape of a cat, the reader is left wondering whether the woman's life was destroyed for the mere idea of thirty dead infants and the unease inspired by black cats? Apparently so (p. 285).

Following Thomas Aquinas, theorists were willing to attribute a total power of deception to demons. Paranoid peasants and reckless inquisitors thus created a setting in which prosecutions could take place outside the most elementary standards of evidence (p. 294). But this seems to contradict another trend that Stephens has highlighted: the need of the witchcraft theorist for *experiential* proof of demonic contact and magical art. The whole purpose of these trials, according to Stephens, was to provide tangible evidence of the reality of demons and thus of the spiritual edifice of Christianity. Meanwhile, the trials themselves could apparently proceed without physical evidence and with a complete disregard of *experiential* or naturalistic evidence. Accusation and forced confessions were relied upon almost exclusively. On the topic of experiential evidence, therefore, the record of the witch trials was deeply ambiguous.

Doubt also extended to the sacramental use of holy water and the sign of the cross. By scholarly investigation (and experimental testing) of the power of sacramentals against witches and demons, the witchcraft theorists "hoped to restore their faith in the reality of sacramental processes" (p. 184). According to the logic of witchcraft treatises, such as the *De imaginatione* of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, "doubt is the Devil" (p. 338). Thus by conducting a witch trial, clerics could attack the Devil and their own doubts at the same time.

Stephens' method is literary critical, often with psychological premises. One feels the absence of historical explanations, and some readers, especially historians, will naturally self-provide them. It is unsatisfying, however, to think through these topics without the author's perspective to converse with. Why did the religious doubts felt by witchcraft theorists suddenly emerge after 1400? The year is adduced as a turning point but without explanation. Writing ca. 1437, for example, the Dominican

Johannes Nider recounted how his teacher had once confronted a confessing witch. The man rebutted the witch's claim that she had flown through the air in the company of the goddess Diana. The witch replied that "she believed more in experience [*se plus credere experiencie*]" than in a cleric's words (p. 154). The conflict between experience and the need for belief gradually emerges as the principal theme of the book: witches could provide both the experience and the belief that the inquisitors were lacking! Witchcraft theorists could see no way forward but to promote credulity and had to rely on the testimony of such witches (p. 87). The spirit Mephistophilis in Marlowe's *Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* served to convince the wayward doctor of the truths of Christianity, and the same role was assigned to European witches (p. 352). This argument would amount to a new explanation of the rise of the witch trials, but it is not thoroughly carried through.

Stephens makes his case by a "piling up" method. There is not much analysis explaining how, where, or why this crisis of belief emerged, or where else in the culture it was expressed. He repeatedly hints that a rediscovery of materialism might account for this loss of faith, but he does not mount a full-scale effort to trace this phenomenon or to explore other theological responses to it. The new 1417 edition of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* by Poggio Bracciolini fits with Stephens' turning point of 1400, but it may or may not explain anything, since "we will never know whether the Bohemian priest had read Lucretius" (p. 357). Certainly it represents a new interest in Epicureanism and atomism. At this point, I wondered why the rise of humanism and experimental science had no place in the narrative.

Historical points thus seem vague: "The need to convince oneself that the world of spirit was real increased dramatically from Aquinas's 1270s to the 1520s of Bartolomeo Spina" (p. 87). It is easy to concede such a broad claim, but we are not told why, or exactly when, this need emerged. Stephens is content with establishing, in a general way, the synchronicity of texts and concepts. He eschews discussion of such hoary topics as humanism and periodizations such as "the Renaissance." Yet in Renaissance humanism, as traditionally conceived, a new emphasis on *experience* as a source of true knowledge emerges, a trend found everywhere from Camoens' *Lusiads* to Lorenzo Valla's critique of the *Donation of Constantine*. The trend toward valuing experience over dogma seems paralleled in the witchcraft theorists. Silvestro Mazzolini, for example, an inquisitor and Dominican in Milan, called upon theologians from Gregory the Great to Aquinas, alongside classical authors such as Lucan, to explain demonic activity. But such men were even more eager to use the testimony of witches as experiential evidence of spiritual realities. Aristotle, meanwhile, emerged as the patron of experiential investigation and, as a materialist, of the need for such methods of study.

Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologica*, had given Aristotle a prominent place in his grand synthesis of revealed religion and the rational understanding of reality, while that Greek thinker came to be accepted as The Philosopher. Is it possible, as appears from Stephens' account, that Aristotle and his materialism lay within the European mind like a time-bomb waiting two centuries to explode? Who lit the fuse?

Stephens links the feeble faith of his witchcraft theorists to a rediscovery of materialism, encouraged by the re-reading of Aristotle, by scholars such as Pompanazzi. With his "rediscovery" of a materialistic Aristotle, "Pompanazzi jabbed the raw nerve of the scholastic fear of nature" (p. 360). Stephens overlooks the fact that Pompanazzi's reading of Aristotle was not only contested, it was also quite contestable: a slanted and inaccurate portrayal of this philosopher who can call metaphysics "the divine science" because it strives for the wisdom of God (*Metaphysics* 983 a). Repressed doubts about the Christian vision of the spiritual world came rushing to the fore as the secret attractiveness of materialism once more was made plain to Europeans. Only in the final pages are readers at last told about an assumption that has been hovering over the entire book. It was the naturalism of the Renaissance that made the God of medieval theology seem impossibly distant and in need of verification (p. 370). Witch-hunting was a palliative for troubled consciences and a salve for doubting hearts, and 30,000 victims paid the price.

Despite the caveats mentioned here, this is a deeply interesting work to be strongly recommended. The material under investigation is full of interest, while the author's intelligent reading and presentation will long prove engaging and valuable to scholars and graduate students studying the witch trials, early modern religion, or humanism.

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