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REVIEW ARTICLES

WITCHCRAFT, SEXUALITY, AND COLONIZATION IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

Thinking with demons: the idea of witchcraft in early modern Europe. By Stuart Clark. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. xvii + 827. ISBN 0-19-820001-3. £75.00.

The darker side of the Renaissance: literacy, territoriality, and colonization. By Walter D. Mignolo. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. Pp. xxii + 426. ISBN 0-472-10327. \$39.50.

Oedipus and the devil: witchcraft, sexuality, and religion in early modern Europe. By Lyndal Roper. London: Routledge, 1995. Pp. ix + 254. ISBN 0-415-10581-1. £13.99.

As Professor Richard Evans's spirited *In defence of history* attests, postmodernism continues to arouse strong passions and suspicions among distinguished practitioners of the discipline.¹ This is hardly surprising: in their most extreme and undiluted form, the theories of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and more particularly their many disciples, are stubbornly corrosive of the ethos and rationale of history as conventionally taught and written. To insist that the production of knowledge is inherently – indeed insidiously – political, and to claim that the veil of language which divides us from the past can never be pierced is to unsettle many traditional epistemological assumptions. And yet postmodernism and the so-called 'linguistic turn' have posed timely and fundamental questions about truth, discourse, and objectivity which historians can ill afford to ignore. They have also helped to generate some of the most innovative and provocative historical writing in recent years. In different ways, each of the books under review engages with and reacts to the swirling debate about this influential and controversial body of ideas. All three make strenuous demands upon their readers; all three challenge us to reflect critically upon the methodologies we employ and the categories, concepts, polarities, and narrative paradigms to which we instinctively resort. Taken together they highlight both the potential strengths and weaknesses, the rewards and dangers of injecting theory into the study of witchcraft, sexuality, and colonization in early modern Europe and the New World.

I

In the interval between its publication and the appearance of this review, Lyndal Roper's *Oedipus and the devil* has already established itself as something of a milestone in feminist history and gender studies. Based on extensive research in the archives of Augsburg, this bold and imaginative collection of essays explores a wide range of topics

¹ Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history* (London, 1997). See also his article 'Truth lost in vain views', in *Times Higher Education Supplement* (12 Sept. 1997), p. 18.

and themes: masculinity and femininity, sexual utopianism and resurgent patriarchalism, capitalism and magic, exorcism and witchcraft, the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the drive for moral discipline. In the process Dr Roper forges a new theoretical framework for scholars working in these fields. Her book embodies a radical critique of and retreat from the view expounded most famously by Joan Wallach Scott² that gender identities are simply products of social, cultural, and linguistic practice. In suggesting that sexual difference is not purely discursive but has ineluctable biological and corporeal roots, she confesses to committing ‘a certain kind of heresy’ (p. 38). Too much feminist theory, she argues, has involved a denial of and flight from the body and it is high time that a recognition of physiological factors was reinserted into interpretations of early modern subjectivity and culture.

This conviction is linked with a belief that we cannot understand key features of the period without reference to their psychic dimension. Here too *Oedipus and the devil* departs from current orthodoxy. Whereas historians like Stephen Greenblatt have asserted that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century people had profoundly foreign notions of the self and person from our own,³ Roper’s book asks us to set aside this assumption of ‘otherness’ and accept the existence of some enduring continuities in human nature and behaviour. This claim underpins her application of psychoanalysis to the stories and cases she finds in her sources: the core conflicts and primary areas of attachment they dramatize remain constant even if the cultural forms they take are historically contingent. She adopts Freudian psychology, as modified by Melanie Klein, as a heuristic tool for investigating the interconnections between the bodily experience and emotional life of the individuals who come under her scrutiny. This is an approach which avoids the appalling reductionism perpetrated in the name of psychohistory, but it cannot completely deflect accusations of anachronism. Roper herself admits that psychoanalysis is ‘an antique’, a ‘child of the nineteenth century’ (p. 13), the creation of a particular context and era, but says that the dilemma entailed in using it should be firmly refused, such conceptual difficulties being ‘inherent in the productive use of ideas’ (p. 218). Even so, some lingering questions about her methodology, like a grumbling appendix, just will not go away.

That said, one cannot but find Roper’s insights into early modern culture immensely compelling. Her book not only illuminates the very different ways in which contemporaries drew the boundaries between body and soul, nature and supernature, rational and irrational; it underlines the extent to which such distinctions were themselves in a state of flux. As she shows, Protestantism led to a re-conceptualization of the relationship between sexuality and holiness; by repudiating clerical celibacy and elevating the institution of marriage on a pedestal the reformers severed the medieval connection between sanctity and ascetic abstinence from the pleasures of the flesh. But the effects of this shift were complex and double-edged: on the one hand it encouraged the emergence of a stricter code of marital ethics, on the other it carried the Anabaptists along a path towards licensed promiscuity and polygamy.

Just as paradoxical were the consequences of the campaign to instil moral discipline and turn early modern men into dignified heads of households and law-abiding citizens.

² Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the politics of history* (New York, 1988).

³ Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Psychoanalysis and Renaissance culture’, in idem, *Learning to curse: essays in early modern culture* (New York and London, 1990). See also David Sabean, *Power in the blood: popular culture and village discourse in early modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), esp. p. 171, and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: the making of modern identity* (Cambridge, 1989).

In some respects what Norbert Elias called the ‘civilizing process’⁴ may actually have stimulated the problems and impulses it was designed to solve and repress. In the same way as the new crusade against prostitution made the figure of the whore all the more enticing, so did the reformers’ denunciation of the lasciviousness of dancing greatly enhance its erotic significance. Similarly, fighting, gambling, and drinking gave expression to manliness in a way which at once undermined and shored up patriarchal authority: the pugnacious and hedonistic culture of youthful males was (almost literally) the alter ego of civic respectability. Roper argues that the making and breaking of such moral taboos must be understood together, as equally vital components in the formation of Protestant identity. She thereby dissociates herself from the whiggery or inverted whiggery of models of cultural change which assume that the reformation of manners, religious confessionalization, and the rise of the bureaucratic state were necessarily accompanied by alterations in the way people behaved.

No less salutary is her emphasis upon the centrality rather than the marginality of magic in the culture, and indeed rationality, of the period. Opening out from an intriguing archival fragment which links the leading financier Anton Fugger with divination and crystal ball-gazing, the chapter entitled ‘Stealing manhood’ skilfully unravels the intertwining logics of sorcery and early capitalism. In showing how far the mental universes which supported both spheres of activity were mutually reinforcing, Dr Roper undermines one of the false dichotomies and distorting teleologies which still plagues the historiography of early modern Europe. Elsewhere, however, she seems in slight danger of perpetuating another. Her suggestion that the Reformation brought not so much ‘a secularization of the world as a desomatization of the spiritual’ (p. 177) may merely reinstate the Weberian paradigm of ‘disenchantment’ in a slightly different guise. Likewise, in stressing magic’s greater affinities with pre- and post-Tridentine Catholicism than with Lutheranism and Calvinism, she perhaps runs the risk of re-establishing Protestantism in its traditional role as an ally of rationalism. As Bob Scribner has reminded us, we must not underestimate the extent to which occult practices were spontaneously adapted and enabled to survive successfully in the new theological environment.⁵

One cannot quarrel, however, with Roper’s emphatic rejection of crude feminist characterizations of the witch hunt as a woman hunt. The trial records she analyses with such acuity concern allegations levelled by mothers against their own lying-in-maids and they revolve around emotions and anxieties associated with childbirth and maternity – above all with the feelings of envy experienced by both accused and accuser. Cases like these, which are ‘pre-Oedipal in content’ (p. 203), do nothing to bear out claims about a conspiracy against the female sex. Roper is also keen to shift attention away from the witch as victim and scapegoat towards the witch as agent. She seeks to wean historians off interpreting confessions as neat reflections of the stereotypes residing in the minds of interrogators, simple side-effects of cross-examination and torture. To read such accounts in this way, she declares, is not only to misunderstand contemporary attitudes to pain and its place in judicial procedure, but to sidestep the evidence they provide of the self-destructive capacity of the women involved. Discarding

⁴ Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (2 vols., Oxford, 1978, 1982; first. publ. Basle, 1939).

⁵ Robert W. Scribner, ‘The Reformation, popular magic, and the “disenchantment of the world”’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23 (1993), pp. 475–94.

attempts to distinguish between their factual and fictive elements as deeply misguided, she emphasizes the role of the witch herself in weaving a verbal narrative of her physical and psychological experience. Such depositions are thus seen as ‘psychic documents which recount particular predicaments’ (p. 201). This proves to be a very fruitful line of inquiry, though at times Roper does seem overly sanguine about her ability to disentangle the fantasies of the defendants from those of their persecutors and gain access to relatively unmediated ‘female discourse’. Possibly she also pushes the idea of the harrowing, sado-masochistic game of cat and mouse played between the witch and official just a little too far. Similarly, in her discussion of Regina Bartholome’s story about her sexual encounter with the devil some readers may find it hard to accept the suggestion that the councillors who questioned her were thereby expressing and exorcizing the tensions surrounding their own status as bulwarks of the patriarchal order. One has the sense here that the evidence is being pushed to, and sometimes even beyond, the limits of what it can yield. But to say so is simply to underscore the pioneering quality of this book: *Oedipus and the devil* is a work which future generations of feminist and cultural historians will undoubtedly acknowledge as a major landmark.

II

The same is true of Stuart Clark’s long-awaited study of the printed literature of witchcraft, *Thinking with demons*. The series of seminal articles which have provided a foretaste of parts of his argument and made him such a towering figure in the field in no way prepare one for the sheer scale and sophistication of this 800-page monograph. Like E. P. Thompson before him, Clark is concerned to rescue his subject from ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’.⁶ He seeks to and succeeds in convincing us of the cogency and rationality of texts which earlier commentators condemned for their inhumanity and barbarism. Reacting against the tendency to abstract demonology from the broader intellectual canvas which it inhabited, the book dissolves it into five overlapping frames of reference – language, science, history, religion, and politics. In each section Clark explores the interaction between beliefs about witchcraft and the concentric spheres of discourse which surrounded and sustained them. The result of this holistic approach is a profound contribution to our understanding of early modern thought per se. Displaying an awesome command of both primary and secondary literature in a range of European languages, this is a magnum opus of the kind which the current academic climate is rapidly turning into an endangered species. Superbly researched, lucidly written, and meticulously constructed, it is a work which no serious scholar will dare to overlook, though its prodigious density and length may well deter the more casual reader.

It is important to register the fact that *Thinking with demons* is a book about witch-hating rather than witch-hunting (p. ix). It does not present demonology as a key to unlocking the secrets of the unprecedented spate of trials which occurred in the course of the period. Indeed, Dr Clark is notably reticent about drawing direct links between the cognitive patterns he examines and the practical steps which contemporaries took to eradicate the witches in their midst. He is under no illusions about their possible lack of correlation with events: as he admits, recent research by Robin Briggs (among others)

⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (Harmondsworth, 1968 edn), p. 12.

confirms that most prosecutions were initiated by poorly educated neighbours rather than highly trained theologians, lawyers, and officials.⁷

For Clark, witchcraft is above all ‘an expansive forest of symbols’ (p. 82), ‘an intellectual resource’ (p. 396) utilized by the learned elite. His interest is in the intelligibility rather than the ontological reality of the phenomena which preoccupied early modern demonologists: their truth or falsehood is utterly irrelevant. Embracing the lessons of postmodernist and linguistic theory, he argues that the logical and rhetorical strategies adopted by writers on demonism were constitutive of what they discussed. The language of inversion, antithesis, and contrariety and the habit of binary thinking which permeated contemporary attitudes supplied the essential discursive framework within which the concept of witchcraft made sense. To put it another way, ‘cosmology was at the same time epistemology’ (p. 54). It would be unfair to castigate the author for failing to cover areas of his subject which he explicitly states are not part of his agenda, but in places the book does seem vulnerable to the criticism that demons, not to say witches themselves, become mere clusters and permutations of ideas and words. This is perhaps particularly apparent in the single chapter addressing the question of gender (ch. 8). When set alongside *Oedipus and the devil*, the experience of the anomalous men and women to whom this label was attached appears to have been effaced and eclipsed. Moreover, by concentrating on the products of a culture that was predominantly literate and male, Clark may have lost sight of the witch herself as demonologist.

Clark’s achievement in Parts II–V can only evoke sincere admiration. His demonstration that demonology was an integral strand in the scientific thinking of the age turns received wisdom completely on its head, exploding the opposition between science and magic which, it is now patently clear, has proved such an obstacle to our understanding. Since contemporaries believed that the devil could only work within the boundaries of nature, the study of his occult activities and illusory wonders was nothing less than a form of natural philosophy: great in ‘Experimental Knowledge’ (p. 160), Satan was conceived of as an astonishingly adept scientist himself (p. 154). Equally revealing is the section on history, in which demonological writings are situated squarely in the context of feverish speculation about and expectation of the apocalypse. Part III tackles the pastoral and homiletic intention and tone of many of these texts, emphasizing the way in which ministers sought to persuade their flocks that maleficia were providential afflictions sent to provoke them to repent. As Clark shows, the chief targets of their attack were not malevolent sorcerers but the practitioners of white magic – of the two, declared William Perkins, the latter was ‘the more horrible and detestable Monster’ (pp. 464–5). Scarcely less heinous were the clients of cunning men and women: to resort to them was idolatrous, superstitious, and tantamount to making a tacit pact with the archfiend. The fact that so much of this literature seeks to deflect the attention of victims of witchcraft away from vengeance and towards pious introspection raises very interesting questions about where the initiative for persecution came from and, moreover, how it gathered momentum.

The final sequence of chapters on politics, though deeply convincing at the level of detail, is much the most contentious. Here Clark argues that hostility to witchcraft presupposed a particular set of political principles and attitudes, namely those which conceptualized authority in theocratic and quasi-mystical terms. In short, it had a

⁷ Robin Briggs, *Witches and neighbours: the social and cultural context of European witchcraft* (London, 1996).

peculiar affinity with theories of divine right monarchy and royal absolutism. His illuminating discussions of the ritual of thaumaturgic healing by kings and of the notion that demonic power was nullified in the presence of the godly ruler or his designated representatives do compel us to appreciate these links, as does his brilliant reconciliation of the two faces of Jean Bodin, author of both the *République* and of *Démonomanie*. But it is much harder to accept the corollary that the structures of thought which underpinned demonology were ‘incompatible with those elements in early modern politics that historians have dubbed “constitutionalist”’ (p. 604). Having stressed the extraordinary flexibility of the discourse of witchcraft in other parts of the book (including its ability to transcend denominational barriers), it is somewhat surprising to find Clark insisting upon its near exclusive congruence with one particular branch of contemporary political thinking. To recognize witchcraft as a type of treason and rebellion is not to confine it narrowly to one ideological tradition. Particularly knotty problems arise when one tries to follow this thesis through to its logical conclusions: at least in the context of pre- and post-Civil War England, any attempt to correlate scepticism about the reality and seriousness of demonism with adherence to the idea of government by contract and popular consent seems destined to fail. In this regard, there is the worry that Dr Clark may overstate the consistency of intellectual views of witchcraft and leave too little room for the general untidiness of the human mind. Likewise one wonders whether the extent to which demonology acted as a normative discourse and a powerful buttress of orthodoxy might have been exaggerated: it could conservatively uphold the status quo, but as the vicious polemic of Catholics and Protestants shows, it was no less capable of eroding it.

As Clark remarks at the outset, *Thinking with demons* is a study of demonology as ‘a working system’ of thought ‘at the height of its powers to persuade’ (p. x) and not an account of its genesis or its demise. Indeed, his emphasis on the remarkable resilience of this discourse and its capacity to contain and absorb pockets and seeds of doubt and uncertainty in many ways makes it harder to solve the riddle of why belief in witchcraft eventually declined. Having thoroughly demolished the idea that the ‘Scientific Revolution’ automatically extinguished this ‘vulgar superstition’, he leaves us with an even more puzzling and intractable problem of explanation. Nevertheless the book does shed considerable light upon the scene. It suggests that demonology foundered on its own internal contradictions and that it lost credence as the scientific, historical, religious, and political theories which nurtured it withered and died – though the latent tension between these two mechanisms for change is not directly confronted. What Clark’s work unequivocally establishes is that this process was far more protracted than it has hitherto seemed. Far from witnessing the early stirrings of a secular ‘Enlightenment’, the early modern period emerges from this study as one which saw a partial ‘re-enchantment’ of the collective mental world.

III

Walter Mignolo’s *The darker side of the Renaissance: literacy, territoriality, and colonization*, the last book of the trio to be discussed in this review, carries us across the Atlantic to what European explorers arrogantly labelled the ‘New World’, implying that until it was discovered and named it did not exist. It also carries us across the divide from the more constructive aspects of postmodern and semiotic theory to their most obfuscating and irritating.

Professor Mignolo's subject, in itself, is extremely interesting. It is the rebirth of the classical tradition as a justification for colonial expansion in Central and South America. Appropriating insights from a range of academic disciplines, his monograph explores literacy, history, and cartography as instruments of conquest of the native peoples of Mexico, the Yucatán peninsula and Peru. It is a study of the politics of speech and writing, space and time – of ways of transmitting and organizing knowledge – in the building of the Spanish overseas empire. *The darker side of the Renaissance* is an analysis not of colonization as such, but of the sets of spectacles through which it was viewed and the texts and discourses by and in which it was articulated.

Part I considers the development of a Renaissance philosophy of language which equated alphabetic writing with 'civilization', sacralized the book as the archetype of wisdom, and sought to suppress the alternative sign systems of the Amerindians as relics of a primitive culture and a pagan religion. Part II pursues these suggestions into the realm of early modern historiography and attempts to demonstrate how the Spaniards subjugated indigenous methods of recording the past, sustained by the conviction that races which lacked the alphabet were peoples incapable of writing 'history' as such. Part III focuses on mapping as a strategy for claiming and controlling territory and repressing Mesoamerican cartographic traditions. Throughout these three pairs of chapters, Mignolo makes constant reference to a process he christens 'colonial semiosis': that is to say the interaction and hybridization of discursive practices associated with European and pre-conquest Indian cultures in a context of domination and power relations. A second overarching theme is the emergence in the course of the early modern period of the idea of the West: according to Mignolo one of the most ominous consequences of the spread of Western concepts of literacy was the 'Occidentalization of the globe' (p. 317). What he means by this is that the sixteenth century saw the beginnings of the claim that geographically marginal cultures were 'backward in time'; in other words, the evolution of the notion of progress and modernity was linked with the origin of comparative ethnology. Borrowing an arcane phrase from Johannes Fabian, Mignolo calls this development 'the denial of coevalness' (p. xi).

It is a central object of his abstruse and difficult book to expose and repudiate the modern as well as early modern manifestations of this powerful myth. For Mignolo, this sinister legacy of the Renaissance lives on in mainstream academic discourse. He presents his own study as a challenge to the Eurocentrism of recent research like that of Anthony Pagden⁸ and as an exercise in 'intellectual decolonization' (p. ix). There is nothing inherently wrong with his insistence that we must learn to examine the Spanish conquest from the perspective of the colonies, to respect and reconstruct sympathetically the outlook of cultures which history has long confined to the peripheries. Nor is it in any sense new – such aims have long animated students of other subordinate groups. What is harder to digest is the alienating postmodern jargon he employs to describe this enterprise: he speaks of the need to recognize different 'loci of enunciation' (Foucault) and to adopt a 'pluritopic hermeneutics'. Even more upsetting to the average historian's stomach are the overt ideological overtones of Mignolo's book: as he puts it, in trying to understand the past he is also 'speaking the present' (p. x). As well as seeking to reverse the vantage point from which colonial experience is assessed, he also appears to be attempting to strike a blow against conventions and premises at the very

⁸ Anthony Pagden, *The fall of natural man: the American Indian and the origins of comparative ethnology* (Cambridge, 1982).

heart of the humanities themselves, against 'the established discourse of official scholarship in which the rules of the academic game are the sound warranty for the value of knowledge independent of any political agenda or personal interest' (p. 5). Few would be naive enough to dispute his point that historical writing can never be totally neutral, but ultimately his heavy-handed theorizing seems both nihilistic and narcissistic. There is something distinctly self-contradictory about spending a third of one's book unmasking history as a tool of cultural imperialism only to use it as a weapon against colonialism's intellectual legacies in the late twentieth century. Mignolo sees no inconsistency in employing methods of analysis forged by members of the same cultures he is busy debunking, but his confidence that the ideological baggage attached to them can be discarded at will looks rather contrived (p. 9). Above all one cannot help feeling that the impenetrable fog of trendy terms and concepts in which his study is swathed simply serves to replicate the very structures of exclusion and marginalization he is so intent on discrediting and deconstructing. His introduction entitled 'On describing ourselves describing ourselves' leaves the reader in a room full of refracting mirrors, disorientated by multiple distorted images of images. Neither it nor the chapters which follow are a good advertisement for theory in any shape or form: in places frankly incomprehensible, they exemplify the worst excesses of hyper-relativism. *The darker side of the Renaissance* surely shows us the darker side of postmodernism. It casts the achievements of *Oedipus and the devil* and *Thinking with demons* in sharp and vivid relief.