



Review of Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), xix + 364 pp.

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Between 1645 and 1647 two minor gentlemen, Matthew Hopkins and his associate John Stearne, directed a brutal witch-hunt in East Anglia in which three hundred people, the vast majority women, were arrested and upwards of one hundred hanged. This episode will be known to many through Michael Reeves' cult movie of 1968, *Witchfinder General*, in which Hopkins was played by an austere Vincent Price. Indeed the subject-matter of the witch-hunt was perfectly suited to a horror film in which sadism and Bataille-like visions of excess were notoriously dominant. It is the achievement of Malcolm Gaskill's thoroughly researched and readable study, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy*, that he debunks many of the popular myths surrounding Puritan fanaticism and places the witch-hunt firmly in its historical context as a manifestation of civil war mentality. Yet Gaskill achieves this at the cost of neglecting to analyze the innumerable manifestations of male psycho-sexual anxiety exhibited throughout his narrative.

Gaskill opens his account by stressing the power of occult beliefs in seventeenth-century England, an era in which the Devil was not an abstract idea but a reality in the daily lives of ordinary people. This is of course a standard approach in the history of mentalities, but Gaskill shows how through this satanic presence the "godly" of East Anglia felt justified in accusing, torturing, and condemning their neighbors. Such people, he suggests, resembled "the provincial nobodies of the twentieth century who engaged in genocide" (p. xv). Yet for all its horror, the witch-hunt was an exceptional event which came about because of the chaotic circumstances of England in the 1640s.

Gaskill is at pains to point out that witchcraft executions were in steady decline in the first half of the seventeenth century; when James I became embarrassed by his early interest in witch-hunting, magistrates all over England took the hint, making prosecutions more difficult and unusual during the reign of Charles I. However by 1645 the order of things seemed to be upside down. Parliament was ruling without a king as various armies clashed throughout the Three Kingdoms, while appalling weather conditions seemed to presage a curse on God's people, a fate supported by astrologers such as William Lilly. From this melting pot of fear and paranoia came two men who offered their services as professional witchfinders.

In the absence of many of the details surrounding Hopkins' biography, Gaskill reconstructs his youth in Suffolk with attention to his clergyman father's fierce opposition to the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, and the coalescing of Puritan vitriol towards the "idolatry" and "popery" of Catholics, royalists, and anyone else considered ungodly. The main theme of Gaskill's study is the superimposition of paranoia about witches on to these political and religious

causes of the Civil War: “The battle-lines were ideological, even metaphysical, the fighting thought to mirror the conflicts of the celestial sphere, where Christ would vanquish the forces of evil” (p. 21). Therefore local misfortunes became acts of spiritual malevolence as marginal, poor, older women were accused, typically, of causing the deaths of children and livestock through the intercession of their “familiar” – devilish imps in the form of animals which they were believed to suckle and let loose to cause havoc. One such case in Hopkins’ hometown of Manningtree in March 1645 kick-started the career of the self-styled “Witch-finder General”.

Hopkins and Stearne, the latter of whom had connections with local magistrates, announced their interest in addressing the problem of witchcraft and were given leave to interrogate Elizabeth Clarke, a local widow accused of causing the deaths of a landowner’s newborn son and some of his cattle. Clarke, who admitted that she was a witch, was duly arrested and her body thoroughly searched by local women for signs that she had suckled familiars. This process of searching for teats became the central investigative tool of the witchfinders, a sign, argues Gaskill, that

English law was becoming more inquisitorial, in the Continental style, meaning that authorities were increasingly demanding and discerning in the matter of evidence...Rather than discouraging accusations, however, the call for material proof actually encouraged humiliating ordeals, tests and examinations: in 1645 the job of the searchers at Manningtree was not to prove that Elizabeth Clarke had committed acts of *maleficium*, but to lay bare her demonic pact. (p. 47)

This shift in the history of English witch-hunting was manifested by the witchfinders’ obsession with the unnatural suckling of familiars and whether Satan had ejaculated or not when he lay with the suspect witch. Despite this aggressively legal framework, what we have here are the basic ingredients of a significant study into the male psychology of the period. The fact that the Manningtree case was replicated in its basic characteristics as Hopkins and Stearne traversed the region suggests the power of psycho-sexual motivations, both on the part of the witchfinders and on the part of their suspects (many of whom confessed and accused others). For the witchfinders, vaginal polyps, genital warts, and hemorrhoids were taken as signs of a demonic covenant when discovered on the body of the post-menopausal woman.

If we take a step back and examine the cases which the witchfinders investigated, it becomes clear that what they had in common was a male response to female infertility (or to be more general, female sexuality), played out on the level of spiritual warfare. Lyndal Roper has argued this point in the German context in her studies *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (1994) and *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (2004), which detailed how old and isolated women became scapegoated by their communities when things failed to thrive—be they children, crops, or livestock. Marginalized women, in their turn, were fearful of the aging, unproductive, and un-reproductive future they faced, or already experienced. As Gaskill writes, their “life-force became a death-force” (p. 97). Yet Gaskill does not expand upon this comment and fails to pose the obvious questions: Why did men target older women as

witches, and why did some of these women readily admit to heinous crimes and erotic flights of fantasy?

To be sure, the historical causes for the emergence of the witchfinders were central. The social disarray caused by the Civil War had given opportunities to men of faith and action willing to open up a new front in the spiritual war between the godly and the forces of the Antichrist. Hopkins and Stearne were both young (Hopkins in his twenties, Stearne in his thirties), educated, and highly mobile men committed to rooting out witchcraft wherever their crusade took them. Gaskill's analogy between the witchfinders and the crusaders of Cromwell's New Model Army is therefore not an unsound one, especially as accusations of royalism and witchcraft tended to overlap during the period. Yet for all the exceptional status of these men, the horrible truth at the heart of *Witchfinders* is that Hopkins and Stearne did not emerge from a vacuum as fully-formed villains in the Vincent Price mode, but were rather the figureheads of a widespread network of magistrates, ministers, and whole communities committed to mapping evil on the bodies and souls of its womenfolk. The applications of psychoanalytic insight to this episode of mass paranoia would greatly benefit our understanding of the masculine subjectivities involved in directing such a terror.

Gaskill does not ignore dissenting voices in his study, pointing out how Colchester rejected the advances of the witchfinders due to concern at their exorbitant fees and the danger of prison overcrowding should a general witch-hunt commence. On a more intellectual level, the beginning of the end for the witchfinders came when people of influence began to cast doubt on the confessions garnered by Hopkins and Stearne. Hopkins' nemesis proved to be a Puritan minister named John Gaule who published a tract in the summer of 1646 attacking the bloodthirsty methods of the witchfinders as an inversion of the divine order: "The Country People talke already, and that more frequently, more affectedly, of the infallible and wonderfull power of the Witchfinders, then they doe of God, or Christ, or the Gospell preached" (cited p. 223). Hopkins' death in 1647, probably from tuberculosis contracted during his interrogations, brought an end to this particular tragedy. Stearne soon published his own account of the witch-hunt, but as the years passed and stability returned to East Anglia, he encountered constant hostility from the local community, appalled at the inquisitions carried out on their behalf.

*Witchfinders* will appeal to the general reader on witchcraft in the early modern period and will no doubt become the standard text on the East Anglian witch-hunt of 1645-47. Gaskill is an authoritative historian with a sharp understanding of the daily lives of people in the midst of war, both spiritual and temporal. References are made to social ambiguity, female guilt about sexuality, and the fantasy of witchcraft as an escape from suffering. However, this reviewer cannot help but feel that more could be said on this subject from an analytical perspective. This, of course, is a hope only made feasible now that Gaskill has so strongly researched its historical content.

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