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The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England (review)

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The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England. By Nathan Johnstone (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006) 334 pp. \$85.00

Despite its focus on Protestant demonism (and more specifically on the role of diabolical temptation) in England from Reformation to Restoration, Johnstone's book probably holds little interest for most readers of this journal because it offers few interdisciplinary insights and essentially recycles old-fashioned religious history with relatively modest methodological dressing. It never engages with theology, either Protestant or Catholic. Johnstone quickly acknowledges that there was no reformation of demonic theory during the Reformation (29), that English Protestantism never tackled the problem of theodicy or explored what might be called demonic political geography (that is, the names, ranks, and numbers of demons). Those who wish to learn about the devil's preternatural powers in early modern England should read Clark's work.¹ Although Johnstone describes diabolism as a "language of negotiation" (17), he insists repeatedly that demons possessed an "agency that was experienced rather than speculated about" in Protestant England (30), a "profound experiential reality" that revolved around temptations in various forms.

In addition to shunning theology, this account never engages with English literature. William Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Macbeth* are compressed into a footnote alongside two minor playwrights (171 n. 97); John Milton appears once (235), but only to justify regicide. Because he stops abruptly at the Restoration of 1660, Johnstone mentions neither of the greatest English Protestant masterpieces built around Satanic temptations—Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1677)—a *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas—like proportions about Johnstone's topic—and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–1688).

Johnstone's work thus offers a largely familiar portrait of England's internecine Protestant struggles mainly from the Elizabethan era through the Civil War, drawn from the almost inexhaustible well of tracts and pamphlets and employing a recipe that might be uncharitably described as "add Devil, season with a large dash of temptation, stir, and print." Diabolical temptation certainly forms a *locus communis* of Protestant—indeed, Christian—experience, but its very ubiquity makes it slippery and difficult to contextualize effectively. For this reason, we have, for example, no history of blasphemy. The enterprise seems even more futile when the perspective is as relentlessly insular as Johnstone's is in this book.

A few memorable nuggets stick in the memory—the wonderfully evocative adjective "ugglesome" (131), or the early Restoration comedy (which, notes Johnstone, was too brief to be actually performed), in which Nicolo Machiavelli presides over a squabble in Hell among Oliver Cromwell, Gustavus Adolphus, and Jules Cardinal Mazarin about which of them had served Satan best (248). This is the only sentence in

1 Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (New York, 1997).

the book that mentions as many as three non-English personages, but it is also one of very few that does not derive from an earnest Protestant.

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The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England. By Phil Withington (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005) 298 pp. \$75.00

This book of paradoxes argues that the period in English urban history between 1530 and 1688, heretofore considered stagnant, was actually dynamic. It contends that oligarchic urban corporations were hotbeds of democracy and that the utopian prescriptions of English humanists were accurate descriptions of the experiences of urban denizens. It also claims that the exclusion of women from borough government was the source of influence and power and, most incongruously of all, that the “democratic” values of city commonwealths, which made the English Republic possible, were among the Revolution’s first casualties (83).

Withington’s arguments about the vitality of early modern urbanites rest largely upon the dramatic increase in the number of royal charters of incorporation granted following the English Reformation. He defines urban areas by their incorporation rather than by criteria like central place, demographic density, or occupational diversity. By these traditional tests, towns and cities stagnated during the early modern period, with the exception of the tenfold explosion of London’s population. Chartered boroughs, however, increased throughout the period. Although charters were a set of specific legal rights, Withington maintains that they more importantly enabled a definition of community that provided its citizens a primary identification and cultural loyalty. Freeman status within a corporation conferred more than the simple rights bestowed by enrollment in a company or participation in an election. It conferred the values of citizenship upon its holders, encouraging both a sense of ownership within the community and a sense of sacrifice to it.

This ethos of citizenship gave individuals a “calling” for government that they exercised in the places that “adopted” them (113–115). It was the vital characteristic of urban life, expanding political consciousness and political participation in the early modern world. This expansion is unhelpfully labeled “democratic,” sometimes because it manifested itself in struggles against corporate oligarchies (sixteenth-century Ludlow) and sometimes because it encompassed such humble occupations as tallow chandlers and plumbers (late seventeenth-century Newcastle-upon-Tyne). Yet, even the most optimistic estimates of the numbers of borough freemen excludes more than half of the adult males from citizenship; an even larger percentage of them was barred from meaningful political participation. Not even the smallest urban corporations were democratic. All of them were deliberately established as oligar-