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*Witch Hunters: Professional Prickers, Unwitchers & Witch
Finders of the Renaissance* (review)

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(Review)

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the *Malleus* as uniquely unique, its depictions of witchcraft seemingly set against some sort of otherwise universally accepted standard.

This is not to say that I find Broedel's analysis to be wrong. I agree with many of his points. Yet even where I agree, I would like to see more extensive and systematic comparisons of the *Malleus*' approach to that of other treatises. Thus, while this is the first scholarly book in English devoted to the *Malleus*, I hope it will not be the last. In making the *Malleus* the focus of sustained attention, Broedel has begun to address a serious gap in the study of European witchcraft. More work remains to be done.

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P. G. MAXWELL-STUART. *Witch Hunters: Professional Prickers, Unwitchers & Witch Finders of the Renaissance*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2003. Pp. 157.

The problem with witchcraft in early modern Europe was that although almost everyone agreed it was real, there was much uncertainty and disagreement about its definition and demonstration. It was especially unclear how to prove individual guilt, and most convictions relied on the persuasiveness of witness testimony derived from circumstantial evidence and the sheer strength of conviction. Thus, most legal tribunals, eager to pass judgment with a clear conscience, valued the expert opinion of theorists and investigators.

This is the starting point for P. G. Maxwell-Stuart's compendium of case studies, six in all, which explores the problem of identifying witches. The book really needs a more substantial introduction; it only has a flimsy preface. Students and general readers (at whom this book must in part be aimed) would have benefited from a guided tour of contemporary debates and difficulties, likewise a potted history of the witch trials to hold the more persistent myths at bay. Witchcraft was an unstable concept, and its fragile reality at law depended on the strength of ties between the conceptual and the empirical. When it actually came to burning people, even a robust consensus could disintegrate.

The intellectual foundations of witchcraft combined reason based on ancient wisdom with contemporary experience. In one of the most influential treatises of its time, *Investigations into Magic*, Jesuit polymath Martín Del Río shaped a mass of ideas and accounts into a comprehensive reference work for theologians, jurists, and physicians, published in three volumes between 1599 and 1600. Del Río was a sponge for stories about the occult and not afraid of fieldwork either; sometimes curiosity drew him dangerously close to com-

plicity. No tale was too tall for him: a clairvoyant boy in Madrid, a shape-shifting barmaid, a Westphalian werewolf who made a demonic pact, a monk who confessed to enjoying an orgy with Beelzebub.

A scholar of extraordinary erudition like Del Rio was able to believe such things, Maxwell-Stuart argues, because, like all the characters in this book, he was “a man of his own times, not ours, and so responded to what he saw and read . . . in much the same way as any of his contemporaries in the complex and frightening world of post-Reformation Europe” (p. 12). War, rebellion, schism, famine, and plague stood alongside the flowering of the arts and natural philosophy, the expansion of commerce, and the voyages of discovery. With the apocalyptic end of mankind in sight, it seemed certain that witches and heretics were rushing to infect Christian society. It was the duty of men like Del Rio to fight back using the word of God, the force of rhetoric, and the criminal law.

However repugnant witchfinders seem today, their campaigns were usually sincere, “an attempt to occupy high moral ground in the face of a tidal wave of Satanically inspired evil which was threatening to overwhelm and destroy humanity” (p. 13). We glimpse a mentality where it was folly not to take witch-tales seriously, in contrast to our own, where in the absence of evidence, the opposite inference might be drawn. But even with these relativist standards in place, the French magistrate Pierre de Lancre seems extraordinarily credulous and ruthless. Much of what we know about him originates in his own account of investigating an outbreak of witchcraft accusations in the Pays de Labourd in 1609. His advice was more pungent than that offered by Del Rio: if the substance of confessions matches the other supporting evidence offered by witnesses then judges could rest easy after condemning the accused—and condemned these witches must be.

De Lancre shows how the methods of the Renaissance witchfinder can be seen as scientific rather than superstitious: he entered the Pays de Labourd like an intrepid ethnographer recording a newly discovered land. He found a population of seafaring families and demons, the latter refugees from the religious cleansing of missionaries in the New World and Far East. Beliefs and suspicions were recorded in lurid detail: witches’ sabbats, aerial flight, grave-robbing, vampirism, and so on. Faced with these nightmarish facts, de Lancre insisted, it would be perverse to cling to skepticism. His discoveries indicated not just the contagious depravity of individuals, but an anti-Christian conspiracy on a grand scale, which in the short-term, might spread from this remote region to all France. Confessions of attendance at sabbats where the devil was exalted and the Mass mocked—mainly from girls and young women—left de Lancre in no doubt.

Chapters 3 (on medicine) and 4 (on possession) concern the physical proof of a spiritual crime. Battista Codronchi, an Italian physician, stressed the mutual agency of body and soul, and drew parallels between witchcraft and the alleviation of sin by priestly confession. Codronchi was especially interested in forensic medicine, but drew no sharp distinction between religion and science: doctors should observe Christian principles. He described the common belief that toxic substances in the bodies of menstruating and menopausal women might leave the eye as maleficent energy against an enemy—often a helpless child, the perfect image of innocence and regeneration. Magic and medicine were intertwined, just as illness could be traced to divine or demonic origins. Maxwell-Stuart explains the difference between possession and obsession, and separates the different moral responsibility each implied. His case study here comes from early eighteenth-century Scotland, and suggests that contemporaries were fascinated with demoniacs. Although easily faked, possession was considered a potential source of “knowledge and experience not only other than human but greater too” (p. 97). One detects a modern scientific impulse in this interest, not just medieval mumbo jumbo.

The final chapters examine individuals claiming to be able to identify witches by a glance or by pricking their bodies to find the devil’s mark. The most notorious practitioner of the latter method was a Scot named John Kincaid, working in the mid-seventeenth century. His activities were brought to an end in 1662 when, as many witchfinders discovered, the authorities would no longer tolerate such disorderly conduct. Campaigns against witches, initiated and energized by professional witchfinders (of whom the most famous was the Englishman Matthew Hopkins), tended to be localized, intense, and short-lived, and demonstrated how charismatic leadership from an individual professing special insight could have devastating results. The ordeal by water, another means by which the intangible could be made manifest for all to see, was also a way of “publicly demonstrating to one’s friends and neighbors a fellowship in right thinking and right behavior” (p. 122). The truth was always just out of sight, but vitally important, so that any means to a clearer view was appealing.

Like the introduction, the conclusion to this fascinating if somewhat randomly organized book is disappointingly short. This is a shame, as there is no shortage of fruitful insights and implications to draw out. Toward the end, Maxwell-Stuart makes an important point about the dangers of seeing early modern people through modern eyes. Belief in witchcraft was endemic, and this made it a reality for witchfinders and suspects alike. He deftly puts down “the facile rush to suggest that one side oppressed the other” (p. 123), and reminds us that practitioners of magic were, by contemporary standards,

guilty. And unless we take those standards seriously, historical understanding of the history of witchcraft will remain elusive.

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P. G. MAXWELL-STUART. *Wizards: A History*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2004. Pp. 222.

Recently, in a brief review for another journal of another work by the same author, with the same publisher and year of publication as this book, I called it “a brief and eclectic survey of a vast subject” where “pell-mell, one finds brief descriptions [of disparate material],” and further complained that its bibliography “avoids mentioning many modern classics on the subject.” This tiger has obviously not changed his stripes, and has here produced yet another farrago with similar shortcomings.

The book provides a prime example of UK insularity by devoting its longest profiles to John Dee (pp. 90–100) and Aleister Crowley (181–92) and giving more space to an obscure late sixteenth-century *magus* from Aberdeen (138–41) than to Doctor Faustus (79–81); even its fictional protagonists tend to be British males, from Merlin to Gandolf or Harry Potter. If its longest section treats Renaissance magicians, one searches in vain for any trace of their greatest scourges, Johan Weyer or even Reginald Scot—perhaps the most prominent British absentee.

Like most male experts on this subject from the UK, Maxwell-Stuart seems ill at ease with the (elsewhere) much-discussed issue of shamanism. When he cannot completely avoid the term in connection with particular hypotheses (e.g., on p. 48), he skips past it in a phrase; another time (p. 138), he devotes two sentences to the protagonist of Wolfgang Behringer’s *Shaman of Oberstdorf* without introducing shamanism. Similarly, Maxwell-Stuart (like some other male UK experts) shows little awareness of gender issues. For example, while emphasizing more than once (esp. p. 70) the quasi-sacerdotal clothes of his protagonists, he never connects this feature to the almost-complete invisibility of women from his collection of ancient and modern wizards until the twentieth century (pp. 195–99); and if Harry Potter gets four mentions in three different chapters, we are never told that his creator is female.

Maxwell-Stuart has obviously read widely about this subject, and he has produced worthwhile scholarship, including a useful abridged translation of Delrio’s *Disquisitiones on Magic*, and a study of Scottish witch trials, *Satan’s*