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Rachael MacLean
racmmacl@vols.utk.edu

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Vulgar Superstitions: Why Elite Anglicans Stopped Believing in Witches

RACHAEL MACLEAN

Advisor: Dr. Denise Phillips

Witch persecution rose to an all-time high in England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. However, by the turn of the eighteenth century, witch trials and witch belief had sharply declined, especially in elite circles. The accepted explanation for this historical shift has, for centuries, been that the rise of rationality, scientific reasoning, and secular humanism was incompatible with “superstitious” witch belief. Thus, the forces of enlightened thinking illuminated the ridiculousness of witches and discounted them. However, this simplistic explanation does not stand up to careful scrutiny. It contains several flawed assumptions: first, that enlightenment and post-enlightenment thinkers were definitively more rational than those in preceding time periods; second, that scientific discoveries led directly to disbelief in magic and witches; and third, that thinkers who sought to disprove the existence of witches did so through secular means. I argue that elite English disbelief in witches was caused not by new science or newly rational thought, but by a new mode of Anglican religious thought, and that this religious shift was engineered to promote a stable social order beneficial to elites.

The author can be reached at racmmacl@vols.utk.edu.



Witch persecution rose to an all-time high in England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. However, by the turn of the eighteenth century, witch trials and witch belief had sharply declined, especially in elite circles. The accepted explanation for this historical shift has, for centuries, been that the rise of rationality, scientific reasoning, and secular humanism were incompatible with “superstitious” witch belief. Thus, the forces of ‘enlightened’ thinking illuminated the ridiculousness of witches and discounted them. Certainly, later Enlightenment thinkers posited that this was the case, often with some nostalgia for the childlike “wonders” of an irrational age. However, this simplistic explanation does not stand up to careful scrutiny. It contains several flawed assumptions: first, that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers were definitively more rational than those in preceding time periods; second, that scientific discoveries led directly to disbelief in magic and witches; and third, that thinkers who sought to disprove the existence of witches did so through secular means. While some scholars have produced convincing evidence to show that earlier witch-believers were influenced by nonscientific thought, especially social and religious thought, in their decision to accept witch belief, there is also evidence that later, non-witch-believing scholars were influenced by these same kinds of forces. Certainly, no matter the time period or personal scholar’s conviction to truth and rationality, no human being remains uninfluenced by their historical, social, and religious surroundings. I argue that elite English disbelief in witches was caused not by new science or newly rational thought, but by a new mode of Anglican religious thought engineered to promote a stable social order beneficial to elites.

Early Seventeenth Century Witch-Believers

While elite arguers against witch belief placed a high value on rational thought, it is also clear that their witch-believing predecessors were equally convicted to rationality and fairness. One of the most dramatic examples of educated, rational thinkers involved in witch belief was the large number of professionally educated doctors involved in diagnoses of malificium (or harmful magic). Doctors were heavily involved in the high profile Ann Gunter witch trials of 1604, which made their way to the notorious Star Chamber. Both Roger Bracegirdle and Bartholomew Warner, a pair of Oxford physicians, believed that Gunter was, indeed, a victim of bewitchment. They cited her strange symptoms, such as quick weight and height loss and gain, fits, foaming at the mouth, and vomiting, sneezing, and even urinating pins.¹ Drs. John Hall and Robert Vilvaine, also of Oxford University, were especially convinced by her ability to “prophesy” what had happened in other rooms. They believed this was a side-effect of her connection to the person bewitching her. For example, she was able to closely recount conversations about her witch which had happened while she was not present.²

While this willingness to consider supernatural causes may seem out of line with scientific thinking, this was not out of the ordinary. Although doctors were always encouraged to first explore natural causes of illness, if no natural cause could be found and there was substantial evidence of witchcraft (such as the patient being tormented by the face of the witch, negative reactions to prayer, vomiting pins, or “prophesying”), doctors were encouraged to consider supernatural possibilities. This consideration did not contradict their medical training. Rational, learned, scientific thinking had, for centuries, accommodated and even endorsed witch belief. The main school of medical thought in the seventeenth century was Galenic medical theory, based on bodily “humours.” This theory accommodated the idea that the humours could be manipulated by evil spirits and health could be restored by correcting the balance of humours.³ Bewitchment diagnoses, then, were not based on ignorance, but on the medical knowledge of the time period. Therefore, the professionalization of the medical field, long held up as an example of the enlightenment’s shift to scientifically-based, professional solutions, could not have automatically produced a shift away from belief in witches.

Clearly, these doctors had scientific theory on their side, but, one could argue, they also had other influences that could have interfered with the scientific process. Bonzol explains how these doctors were socially pressured to diagnose Ann Gunter as a victim of witchcraft. Ann Gunter's father, Brian Gunter, firmly believed that his daughter was bewitched. He was also the father-in-law of Thomas Holland, the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, who these doctors had every reason to try and prove themselves to for the sake of their own careers. They may also have been influenced through sheer intimidation. Brian Gunter was, on multiple occasions, described as a formidable, litigious, even violent man who these doctors likely wanted to appease.⁴

However, it is inaccurate to believe that witch-deniers were not subject to external influences as well. The Gunter case, for its part, attracted its own share of medical skeptics, chief among them being Dr. Jorden. He argued that Ann Gunter was a victim of a malady he termed "Suffocation of the Mother," in which womb irregularities caused "vapours" to negatively affect a patient's health.⁵ This early explanation of "hysteria," while mistaken and sexist, certainly seems to be an attempt at scientific natural explanation. However, Dr. Jorden was also influenced by the church politics of his time. Henri IV of France had recently commissioned a doctor, Marescot, to provide a non-witch-based explanation for a French witch trial. Henri IV commissioned this doctor because of his political concern that popular witch fervor was causing anti-Huguenot riots.⁶ The idea of anti-Protestant riots was certain to scare the church hierarchy in newly-Protestant England. It should come as little surprise, then, that Jorden was perhaps unduly influenced in his findings by his cozy relationship with the Church of England.⁷

The Religion of Late Seventeenth Century Witch-Deniers

The church and religious belief, then, had an early role in the denial of witches for the sake of calming social unrest. However, two important distinctions lie between Dr. Jorden and witch denying elites a century later. First, Dr. Jorden, while thinking many cases were misdiagnosed, did not actually refute the possibility of witchcraft altogether. Second, those most vocal in their denial of witches in the late seventeenth century were, in fact, not scientists, but religious/historical scholars. The second point, I believe, provides further evidence against the argument that scientific discovery led to witch disbelief. If it did, one would expect those professions most in tune with the sciences, such as medical or natural professionals, to be the main arguers against witch belief. Instead, they were those most involved in social and religious issues. Witch deniers also emerged before most important enlightenment scientific discoveries.¹ To take one significant example, Newton did not publish any of his works until 1687, more than 30 years after Filmer wrote "An Advertisement to the Jury Men of England Touching Witches" in 1652.² In fact, Newton's 'mechanical' view of nature very well may have supported witch belief for some. After all, witch proceedings often included evidence so far from mechanical, such as the vomiting of sharp foreign objects, it could only be considered 'unnatural' to a Newtonian. Even scientific advances that provided direct evidence against certain phenomena took place well after those phenomena were discredited as superstition.³ For instance, Hysteria, the eventual result of Dr. Jorden's 'Suffocation of the Mother' theory, did not see wide diagnosis until the mid-nineteenth century.⁴ It seems likely, then, that since the first publishers against witch belief were elite religious scholars, the cause of witch disbelief was an elite religious shift.

Authors Filmer and the anonymous author of the pamphlet "The Impossibility of Witchcraft, Plainly Proving..."⁵ (who, for sake ease, I will here call "Author JB" due to his relationship with the publisher John Baker) were two witch deniers who based their arguments on scriptural analysis. Both argued that the English conception of a witch was flawed and possibly heretical. Filmer had a distinctly legal sway to his analysis. This was because he was responding to new witch statutes which, he believed, did not properly define a witch.⁶ He argued that this was a problem

for the judiciary. He then deconstructed some previous definitions of what a witch was and how to catch one by scholars like Perkins.⁷ Up until that point, he had not departed greatly from earlier scholars who merely questioned the amount of witches sentenced and not the concept of witches entirely. However, midway through, his argument turned, and Filmer began a historical scriptural analysis of the meanings of the words “witch,” “sorcerer,” and “consulter with familiar spirits” in their original Hebrew context. Here, he naturalized these terms, showing that, to their original audience, they were not supernatural beings, but merely imposters, tricksters, duggisters, and, especially, spreaders of false prophecy. He concluded, then, by denouncing the idea that witches had some supernatural, devil-granted power. He especially denied that Satan had the power to grant such abilities in the first place.⁸ Author JB made a similar argument to Filmer’s about the mistranslation of “witch” from the Hebrew, also arguing the term merely meant something close to imposter. He also took Filmer’s claim about the impossibility of Satan’s power even farther, arguing that the idea that Satan had the power to work “wonders” was blasphemous.⁹ He further speculated on how the idea of a supernatural witch, imbued with power from Satan, may have come about. He argued that this notion stemmed from heathen (mostly GrecoRoman but also Persian/Zoroastrian) belief, was perpetuated by a corrupt and politically manipulated Papacy, and that those who still believed in witches were either irrational or impious.¹⁰

When deconstructed, these arguments clearly indicate a new elite Anglican religiosity. The first tenant of this religious movement was a clear Protestant affiliation.¹¹ Both Filmer and Author JB explicitly relied on the divine nature of the Bible for their analysis. They were careful to place the Bible in its historical and translated context, but they clearly believed that the unedited, untranslated Bible was perfect and contained everything one needed to know about religion. For instance, after showing that the Hebrew word *mankelh* should have been translated to something closer to “imposter” rather than “witch” or “enchanter,” Author JB made the argument that, since there was no authentic mention of witches in the bible, witches must not exist, because God surely would have warned the Israelites about them if they had.¹² This emphasis on bible-reading, biblical truth, and even the careful analysis of biblical translation was a deeply Protestant idea, stemming from Luther’s arguments against the exclusivity of the Latin Bible in Catholic traditions. Also Protestant was Author JB’s denouncement of Papal corruption and earthliness. He clearly made Fredrick II, the inquisition, and the related popes the villains of his narrative, calling their actions “covetousness and folly.” Certainly, these authors had no fond Catholic leanings.

It means little, however, for these elites to merely be Protestants; most in early modern England were, and many of them, witch believers and non-believers alike, made the papacy their villain du jour. What is unique, then, about these authors’ brand of Protestantism is their strict insistence on two of God’s “omnis”: omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. Author JB gave the clearest picture of Satan’s limited power as opposed to God in his explanation of staffs turning into snakes. He did not even grant Satan the power to grow an animal “from its seed” at a swifter rate than humans could.¹³ Both Author JB and Filmer traced their belief in the limited power of the devil to Job.¹⁴ Author JB even mentioned Calvin’s sermon on Job, stating that all supernatural power must come from God. Calvin argued that God would never grant the devil such destructive power under normal circumstances but only in special trial circumstance such as Job’s.¹⁵ Their references to God’s omnibenevolence were subtler, mostly implicit in their assumption that God would never grant the devil much power, but the assumption of omnibenevolence nonetheless rings clearly in the words of Filmer, “yet hee (Satan) hath no Commission to destroy the Lives or Goods of Men, it is little lesse than blasphemy to say any such thing of the admirable Providence of God, whereby he preserves all his Creatures.”¹⁶

The Cultural Climate of Late Eighteenth Century Witch-Deniers

It is by now clear that English elites of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century were involved in a specific type of Protestant religiosity that focused on God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence, and discouraged witch belief. This type of religiosity did not arise *ex nihilo* but was shaped by specific historical trends and social anxieties of late seventeenth century elites. By the time Filmer was writing "An Advertisement to the Jury Men of England Touching Witches," the English Civil War had officially "ended" but popular, political upheaval was still rampant, Cromwell was in power, and Filmer's memory of his own imprisonment from 1643 to 1647 on account of being a royalist was still fresh on his mind.¹ While less can be known about the anonymous Author JB, it is certain that, in 1712, the English Civil War would still be a present force in political memory. With rampant social polarization, religious fractioning, and political upheaval in the present and near past of these authors, they likely craved stability and feared popular uprising.² Their religious system provided this stability. It was not a religious mystical tradition that put religious feeling at the forefront, but rather, a religious argument that used cool rationality, careful reasoning, and detached textual analysis. It also assured others that God was benevolent and all powerful, while Satan was weak. Thus, there would be little need for religious crusading or extremism, as any cosmic war would be against a weak foe. Their religious system made few earthly enemies, except for the Pope and those national powers allied to the papacy, and those were familiar, uncontroversial foes in England by the end of the seventeenth century. In short, their religion was a religion of and for the comfortable, those who wanted to maintain social order and avoid popular upheaval.

An effort to maintain social order also explains the specific focus on witch belief and witch trials. Both Filmer and Author JB wrote their essays partially in response to specific witch trials with a strong popular following: for Filmer, it was the Kent Summer Assizes, during which six women were hanged,³ for Author JB it was the Jane Wenham witch trial, which had a strong popular following through pamphlets.⁴ Raymond and, to some degree, Chaemsaitong claim that witch pamphlets themselves were a way of reasserting the social order by showing its inverse in witch trials. Instead of showing patriarchy, domesticity, and kinship, they showed the horrors of non-familial female power enacted outside the home.⁵ While it may be true that condemning witches reasserted familial patriarchy and separation of spheres, witch pamphlets, witch trials, and witch belief certainly did not functionally support public social order. Trials could be tinderboxes for popular unrest, and the threat of an unruly mob emerging in response to witch accusations never seemed far off in publications concerning witch trials. Roger North's account of Sir Francis North's time as a judge depicted this feeling of popular hysteria and the elite judge's distaste for it. He stated, "It is seldom that a poor old wretch is brought to trial upon that account, but there is at the heels of her a popular rage that does little less than demand her to be put to death."⁶ Likewise, in Ann Gunter's case, there was intense collective panic surrounding the witch trial. This was likely not only because of Ann Gunter's individual illness, but because plague deaths mere weeks earlier convinced the grieving village that the devil was at work in their lives.⁷ Rejecting the very idea of witch belief, then, was a way of diffusing these explosive situations.

Finally, these authors presented their arguments in tactical ways to diffuse social unrest and protect themselves from backlash. The authors significantly presented their arguments in a religious light, accusing witch-believers of impiety. This strategy protected authors from the charge of atheism so often aimed at witch deniers.⁸ They also generally dismissed and even mocked "popular" witch hysteria, especially North and Author JB. Since their intended audience was "learned men,"⁹ associating witch belief with the lower class could be extremely effective, since no self-respecting member of the seventeenth or eighteenth century elite would want to be associated with the rabble. As Danton and Park explain, the supernatural became identified with the "vulgar," the unfashionable, and the poor, which were stacked in direct opposition to the enlightened, the bourgeois, and the elite.¹⁰ This created a way to disarm the power of witch belief by presenting it as ridiculous and unworthy of respect, a product of outdated lower-class superstition. This way,

even if the “masses” brought up cases of witchcraft, they were not given a platform to speak, and those elites that did accept witch belief could be discredited. This created a “ridiculousness” around witch belief.

Conclusion

Clearly, then, English elites did not denounce belief in witches in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century because of a rise in rationality, greater scientific advances, or secular humanism. Instead, religious scholars, motivated by Protestant ideology and fear of social unrest, denounced witchcraft as irrational and impious for the sake of social stability. They were only later supported in their belief by scientific advance. It is important that historians dismantle these too-easy explanations of past beliefs and enlightenment thinking, else they run the risk of creating a “vulgar” past in the same way early enlightenment thinkers created a “vulgar” poor.

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1. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150-1750* (New York: Zone, 1998), 330-331.
2. Daston and Park, 361.
3. Judith Bonzol, "The Medical Diagnosis of Demonic Possession in an Early Modern English Community," *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26.1 (2009): 115-39.
4. Bonzol, 115.
5. Bonzol, 117.
6. Bonzol, 121.
7. Bonzol, 132-133.
8. Bonzol, 119, 127.
9. Bonzol, 132.
10. Bonzol, 137.
11. Daston and Park, 330-331.
12. Robert Filmer, *An Advertisement to the Jury-men of England Touching Witches* [1653] Reprint: Exeter: Rota, 1975.
13. Daston and Park, 330.
14. Lindsey Churchill, "Hysteria," *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* Vol. 2 (Sage Publications, 2009).
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16. Authority. *The Lawes against Vvitches, and Conivration.* Early English Books, 1641-1700; 2172:15. London: Printed for R.W. 1645.
17. Filmer, A2-10.
18. Filmer, 10-23.
19. *The Impossibility of Witchcraft*, 3, 16.
20. *The Impossibility of Witchcraft*, 7-12, 16-17.
21. Please note that Anglicans had differing levels of Protestant allegiance. Anglicanism was a Protestant religion by virtue of being separated from the Pope, something Anglicans made much of by denouncing 'Papists.' However, some Anglicans agreed more with Lutheran or Calvinist Protestant ideas, while others, 'High Anglicans,' wanted the Anglican Church to be more like the Catholic Church, just replacing the Pope with the Monarch of England.
22. *The Impossibility of Witchcraft*, 14-15.
23. *The Impossibility of Witchcraft*, 5.
24. Filmer, 16.
25. *The Impossibility of Witchcraft*, 16.
26. Filmer, 15-16.
27. Filmer, ii. In the prefatory note.
28. Daston, 331-336.
29. Filmer, i. In the prefatory note.
30. *The Impossibility of Witchcraft*, 1.
31. Krisda Chaemsaithong, "Discursive Control and Persuasion in Early Modern News Discourse: The Case of English Witchcraft Pamphlets and Their Prefaces (1579-1621)," *English Text Construction* 4.2 (2011): 232.

32. Roger North. Roger North's Account of Sir Francis North's Attitude to the Popular Belief in Witchcraft in *English Historical Documents, 1660-1714*, ed. Andrew Browning and David C. Douglas (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966): 484.
33. Bonzol, 133-134.
34. North, 484.
35. The Impossibility of Witchcraft, 27.
36. Danton, 344.

