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Solomon's Secret Arts: the Occult in the Age of Enlightenment

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This important work provides the first informed, well-researched and highly nuanced account of the fortunes of ?occult? thought and practice in England from the middle decades of the 17th century to its demise at the end of the 18th century. Building on the work of a wide range of scholars from various disciplines (not just historians), Paul Monod has produced a highly readable account of an important, though often marginalised, subject within the broader history of the period.

The book itself is structured around a tripartite arrangement in which the fortunes of the occult are argued to have peaked in the second half of the 17th century, dipped in the period from the Glorious Revolution to 1760, and then re-emerged in the last four decades of the 18th century in somewhat different but revitalized form. There is much to commend this broad chronological overview, though I have to express some reservations as to the depiction of the second half of the 17th century as encompassing the golden age or zenith of occult speculation in England. While there is little doubt that the outbreak of the civil wars and onset of religious and political division culminating in the Restoration provided the opportunity for occult theorists and practitioners to flourish, it is arguable that similar peaks were reached in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The promotion of occultists at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I would appear to stand

comparison with similar developments at the restored court of the ?Merry Monarch?. Here, the claim for the later period is made mainly on the grounds of the boom in publication of occult titles after 1640, and while I would not wish to dismiss this fact, it should not be forgotten that much of the occult tradition was disseminated not in print, but rather in a thriving market for manuscript writings on the subject ? one many considered more suited to the esoteric and potentially powerful nature of the material.

However, with this minor quibble put to one side, I have no qualms in acceding to the major claims of the work on behalf of the place of the occult in early modern Britain. As Monod shows convincingly here, the occult (defined broadly as alchemy, astrology and natural magic) was rarely perceived as a uniform movement of ideas, its adherents frequently picking and choosing those elements of the ?occult? which most appealed to them. It was thus a protean body of ideas, susceptible to frequent re-interpretation according to the personal preoccupations of the initiated. At the same time, while some of its adherents may have (in the earlier period especially) seen it as a body of ideas capable of replacing older systems of science and philosophy, it more often than not was studied and developed alongside other, competing systems of thought. This much has been evident to scholars of the earlier period for some time. What is invigoratingly original here is Monod?s application of the same accommodating features of occult thinking with regard to Newtonianism and the Enlightenment in the later period. While he leaves open the intriguing question regarding the existence of an ?occult enlightenment?, he has surely made the case for further exploration of the potential importance of the relationship between the various strands of occult thinking in the 18th century and those which dominated the thought of the ?disciples of reason? in the same period. Whatever the case, it is hard to disagree with his conclusion that ?the assumption of many historians, that occult thinking was debunked by experimental science ? is essentially wrong? (p. 341).

As a scholar whose main interests lie in the field of witchcraft, I was also struck by another of Monod?s conclusions, namely that all the arguments against astrology, alchemy and natural magic had been fully developed long before 1650. This is equally true of witchcraft, and strongly suggests that neither it nor the occult owed their demise to the ability of opponents to expose the deficiencies of the logical assumptions upon which both were based. The occult was not simply argued out of existence. Only wider factors can help to explain this process. Here, I found myself in complete agreement with Monod?s claims that in order to understand this process, we need to pay more heed to the wider social, religious and political context in which these ideas were promoted and debated. This is, however, a contentious and tricky subject, where many have been prone to seek over-simplistic explanations equating one set of religious and political beliefs, and their proponents, with either a credulous or skeptical position. In the period between 1660 and 1715, for example, I would argue that, with regard to witchcraft at least, it is impossible to depict one individual party ? Whig or Tory ? as belonging in a single camp. More often than not, positions changed dependent upon which group or party was in power at any given time. In the period before 1688, for example, mainstream Anglicans and their Tory supporters exhibited very little interest in witchcraft, which was largely promoted by Whigs and their dissenting allies. After 1688, when the tables were turned, a different pattern emerges so that by 1715 it was the Tories and their nonjuring allies who seem to have been more receptive to the reality of witchcraft. In both cases, it would seem that belief in witchcraft and the promotion of witch cases was predominantly attractive to those who felt themselves marginalized within the body politic. Much the same process is suggested by Monod, especially after 1715 when the exponents and apologists of the occult tended to be drawn from the ranks of disaffected Tories, non-jurors or Protestant evangelicals.

While much more work needs to be done in teasing out evidence for such theories (I hope to publish, at length, on this aspect of witchcraft in the near future), it is good to see such thinking being applied to other areas of intellectual life in 17th- and 18th-century Britain. What is particularly exciting is the extent to which scholars like Monod are keen to resurrect a large cast of extraordinary characters ? many of whom, no doubt, would have been dismissed as a bunch of idiosyncratic cranks by earlier generations of historians ? and to explore their connections with writers, artists, politicians, clerics and patrons drawn from the ranks of the establishment. The picture that emerges here is of a fascinating mix of ideas and people who cannot be readily pigeonholed into fixed positions or backgrounds.

Monod?s work is essentially one of synthesis, bringing together the disparate work of others in this field

over two centuries, and he does a fine job of demonstrating the many layers of interconnectedness underscoring any discussion of the occult. Two approaches are highlighted here, which are well worthy of further study if historians of the occult are to shed further light on the history of this movement of ideas and people. Firstly, there is the significance of networking, and a need to understand more about how such networks of interested individuals came together in order to share their knowledge of occult wisdom. One area that I am currently exploring in this respect relates to the attempt to create a Society of Chemical Physicians in Restoration London (see my collection of biographies of the Society?s members at practitioners.exeter.ac.uk/sample-data [2]). If successful, the Helmontian reformers would have overthrown the monopoly exercised by the Galenic-dominated College of Physicians, and may, in due course, have steered English medicine on a very different path. Defeated, they nonetheless continued to exert considerable influence at the court of Charles II, where new networks of alchemical reformers sprang up under the patronage of the King. There is little doubt that Charles? passion for chemistry was shared by many other luminaries of the court, including the archbishop of Canterbury, Gilbert Sheldon, who almost certainly encouraged many chemical physicians to achieve legitimacy through the grant of ecclesiastical medical licences. The end result was an efflorescence of alchemical and iatrochemical speculation and experimentation at the court of Charles II, which still awaits a major study. Of course, in order to uncover networks, one has first to know more about the individuals who make up such networks. Here, a vital tool is prosopography, made increasingly possible by the advance of electronic methods of locating and gathering historical and biographical information. Combined, these two approaches will, I am convinced, shed further light on some of the important issues raised by Monod in his work.

One example will suffice. Monod himself refers to Daniel Defoe?s encounter with a mysterious Dr Boreman, whom Monod depicts as a ?learned cunning man? (pp. 174?5). William Boreman, however, was a far more interesting and complex figure than your average rural conjuror. He was an early adherent of chemical medicines (he signed the petition of the Chemists in 1665) and a founder member of the early Philadelphian group in London that coalesced around the celebrated Behmenist mystic John Pordage. In 1683, Boreman, with the assistance of Jane Lead and a medical colleague named Edward Hooker, helped to bankroll the publication of Pordage?s Behmenist manifesto, the *Theologia Mystica.* However, Boreman was not an ivory tower thinker. A radical Whig, who claimed to have known John Lilburne, he was frequently in trouble with the authorities for his outspokenness and made a living from assisting the victims of witches, many of whom he lodged at his house at Wilmington in Kent. (1)

There is still much work to be done, but there is little doubt that Monod?s work has laid impressive foundations for anyone wishing to engage with the broad appeal of occult thinking in England between 1650 and 1800. In particular, he has helped to shift historical discussion of these issues into the 18th century, and to have ably demonstrated in the process that much like the 17th century, the Enlightenment was a fluid battleground of ideas in which occult speculators played their part. Monod is to be praised for the highly readable way in which he has made some of these writers and thinkers accessible to mainstream historians of the Enlightenment. In doing so, he is surely following in the footsteps of the late, great E. P. Thompson, who so movingly wrote of ?the enormous condescension of posterity? with regard to the fate of working men in early industrial England. We now have no excuse to impose a similar disregard on those men and women attracted to occult speculation as a means of understanding a world that was changing rapidly before their own eyes.

Notes

1. For a précis, see my edition of Defoe?s *A System of Magick* (1727), (London, 2005), pp. 13?14.Back to (1)

The author is very happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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