

## The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories

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Diane Purkiss

This volume is based on a conference held in April 1999, and it is the first time in English witchcraft studies that a single group of cases has been taken as subject of such a volume. This is an excellent idea, not only because the complex truth about the witchcraft beliefs of early modern Britain probably lies in careful local study rather than in rash generalisation, but also because the local focus seems to liberate the editors to be creative in other ways, offering not only analysis of the events themselves, but also an analysis that from the outset questions the way in which those events were and still are represented to us, the kind of significance assigned to them, and their appeal as topics and stories. Though strong on uncovering facts, the volume is also strong on consideration of how this particular trial has been fictionalised and become part of other kinds of story. The tone is set when the introduction opens by pointing out that, regardless of their importance historically, the Lancashire witches have been elected 'Truly Memorable' by popular history, with souvenir stalls and a T-shirt industry.

However, the problem with the volume is also immediately apparent. No-one assays the question of why and how this trial got itself a T-shirt. This is an interesting question, the more so because we learn from the final essay that the 'usual suspects', neo-pagans, are not responsible. So who is? We never learn, and there is a pattern here that is repeated throughout; interesting observations are not followed through with thorough analysis.

This is not the only difficulty. One problem of which the contributors are aware is that accounts of the trials themselves are necessarily based on the only detailed source for them, Thomas Potts's lengthy pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancashire*, printed in 1612. *The Lancashire Witches* is innovative in bringing in the Salmsbury witches of 1612, and of course the arrests of 1633-4, but both are

very slenderly documented. The result is that accounts must rest shakily on Potts. His pamphlet is hailed in the introduction (by James Sharpe) as a 'rich vein', but little is said to justify this belief, and Marion Gibson in Chapter 3 ('Thomas Potts's 'dusty memory': reconstructing justice in *The Wonderful Discoverie of Witches*'), at any rate, wants to maximise its compromised status. It may be that the Lancashire witches are not the ideal subject for a case history of this kind, precisely because the evidence does not allow us to compare a pamphlet account with the (equally but differently problematic) assize or session accounts. The evidential reliance upon this pamphlet is a problem for a book that wants to say that pamphlets are not disinterested sources. If the Potts pamphlet isn't evidence, then what exactly is the book about? If it is to be treated as evidence, then how can we decide which parts are reliable, and which not? These questions are often ducked rather than tackled head-on.

Another problem is the restricted theoretical and historiographical range of some of the contributions and of the editor, which limit what the volume as a whole can do and say. The only explanations canvassed in the editorial material are sensible ones: religious conflict, social change. The wilder side of witchcraft studies, drawing on anthropology, folklore and psychoanalysis, is neglected. There is also no attempt to review the historiography of the 1990s, or to locate the volume in relation to anyone but Thomas and Macfarlane, though arguably a kind of tacit review is implied in each contributor's choice of mentors. This is a pity, as the theses of (say) Stuart Clark, Robin Briggs and Lyndal Roper seem to have some *prima facie* applicability to the material. Local should not come to mean parochial.<sup>(1)</sup>

There are some difficulties, too, with how local this volume wants to be. Ironically for microhistory, the first three essays are not interested in the witches or their accusers, so much as in 'the full range of forces coming to bear on the case of a few miserable witches in a remote corner of England'. It is a return to a top-down history of witch trials, and the splendid innovations of Briggs and Roper (among others) in demanding that we look at what trials meant to participants are sidestepped without explanation. Even Jonathan Lumby's essay (Chapter 4: "Those to whom evil is done": family dynamics in the Pendle witch trials') devotes itself in a very effective but curiously old-fashioned way to explaining why someone would be wicked enough to accuse a woman of witchcraft. It is a splendid piece of historical reconstruction, however, and is rightly the centre of the efforts of others to grasp what was happening and what it meant. Lumby argues very persuasively that one of the key movers in the Pendle trial was motivated by dislike of his father's mistress, Jennet Preston. This is exactly the kind of story that can only be recovered by the kind of patient sifting through dusty archives that Lumby has plainly accomplished, and it is a rebuke to the academic world that the best discovery here is made by someone outside its ranks.

Such simple discoveries, like the mistress story, are extremely welcome, and they point to the kind of painstaking and slow archival work that needs to be done if microhistory is to work. But they do not end the story. We still need to turn to culture and interpretation to understand and how and why a father's adultery might promote feelings or acts of this kind: honour? lies? manhood? What does it tell us about (neglected) connections between possession by witchcraft and sexuality? The fact that Lumby's essay stimulates important questions, however, compliments it rather than dispraises it.

In general this volume does boldly go where witchcraft studies have sometimes feared to tread. An especially valuable example is Kirsteen Bardell's illuminating reading of what she terms the 'lost' Lancashire witches, the cunning women and healers tried at the Quarter Sessions (Chapter 7: 'Beyond Pendle: the 'lost' Lancashire witches'). This is probably the most promising route to understanding two of the oldest of the accused, Anne Whittle and Elizabeth Southern, but for the connection to be fully exploited there needs to be an understanding of how the magic of cunning folk fitted into a system of beliefs about magic. Though it provides new local material, this discussion does not take us conceptually beyond Keith Thomas's listing of cunning practices in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Indeed, it does not take us even that far. And yet it is only through an understanding of how 'good' magic worked that we can begin to comprehend the reasons that *maleficium* was so feared. One of the most helpful sources are the European anthropological writings by authors such as Michael Herzfeld, Jill Dubisch and Michael Stewart, all of whom work on modern Greek village life, and all of whom offer a mode of analysis that helps to knit together its disparate aspects into something like a series of world-pictures. Of course, these analyses cannot

simply be mapped onto early modern England's very different social structures, but they do provide a model of rather more adventurous and wide-ranging thinking than is on offer in the less ambitious essays here. If we abandon the effort to do this for early modern England, instead making assumptions about how people thought and felt, then we will never understand the historical difference that witch-trials like Pendle seem to mark. It is important to break up premature historical consensus by pointing to local and personal investments, but some attempts at synthesis are also required.

Another area relatively neglected is religion; it is mentioned often, but in terms of local conflict, persons rather than discourses. In a fine piece of local history, Michael Mullet offers an account of the dissolution of Whalley Abbey (Chapter 6: 'The Reformation in the parish of Whalley'), but this is only related to the witch-trial in the last paragraph, and then by persons rather than topics, as is the tendency in this volume as a whole. The fact that some of the leading figures in the Pendle trial lived on what had formerly been church lands has relatively little explanatory force, and certainly cannot be used to assert that there were 'new Protestant clerical demands for the intensive policing of public conduct, a line of interventionist approach that culminated in the Pendle dragnet of 1612.' (p. 102)

Yet there is ample evidence in the trial reports, doctored or not, that religion was a vital factor. One of the most significant elements in the trial narrative is the lengthy quotation from one of Old Demdike's spells, a spell that contains clear recusant elements, and also what may just be a Gaelic word. It is possible, of course, that Potts doctored the text to make it look more guiltily recusant, and it is also possible that the deponent garbled it through misunderstanding. But it is also possible that this charm is garbled because it was garbled by its user, that it represents a moment when religion, in decline, but surviving, becomes magic. To interpret this text aright, we need other texts that we do not have: a copy of the local mystery plays, pre-reformation breviaries, songs and dances, nursery rhymes, perhaps some receipt books that brush up against magic. Differentially, we need other pamphlets by Potts on similar subjects. But the fact that none of this is available does not mean we can never risk reading these texts. We can and must read them and we can and must see that they point sharply to religion as a major focus for the participants in the trial; not as a badge of social exclusion or inclusion, but as a way of thinking about the world. If religion ceases to be that, what does it become? It becomes horror, otherness, magic. How can the children not condemn the parents in such a space?

The final chapters on literary representation are extremely welcome, but it is difficult to justify the inclusion of a piece on modern paganism (except that it is always fun). The problem with Joanne Pearson's article (Chapter 11: 'Wicca, paganism, and history: contemporary witchcraft and the Lancashire witches') is that it is never clear whether the goal is to uncouple modern paganism from history altogether; or to see history as a kind of theme park in which pagans (and anyone else) are free to invent themselves in relation to it. Is it really all right for modern Lancashire witches either to neglect or to invoke their forbears, without too much regard to historical accuracy? Where do we draw the line? Like many others, Pearson appears to draw the line at the frivolous historical invocation of the Holocaust. It is nice to see this argument reiterated, but its implications should be allowed to disturb us considerably more than they do here. At what point do fantasies about witches become permissible? Or is historical truth always to be asserted, spoiling some otherwise benign parties?

What also remains questionable is the place of the essay in the volume, since central to its argument is the irrelevance of modern paganism to the Lancashire story, past as well as present. One might ask whether modern paganism is not being unreasonably privileged over other aspects of popular culture; I would have liked to hear more about the tourist industry tantalisingly described in the introduction, the infantilisation of witches in that industry, and what this suggests about the packaging of the past. Much more interesting and far more relevant is the lively chapter by Jeffrey Richards on Harrison Ainsworth's novel *The Lancashire Witches* (Chapter 10: 'The 'Lancashire novelist' and the Lancashire Witches'), a fat and marvellous historical blockbuster sniffed at by modern critics, but deserving of a much wider audience. Correctly historicised in terms of medievalism and romantic nostalgia, it is a pity that the Ainsworth discussion is not allowed to inform the discussion of modern paganism, which could claim a similar discursive ancestry.

Alison Findlay's sound essay on *The Late Lancashire witches* (Chapter 9: 'The Late Lancashire Witches: sexual and spiritual politics in the events of 1633-4'), while neglecting the comic potential of the play, nevertheless teases out useful connections between the tale-tellers of 1633, Margaret Johnson and Edmund Robinson, and the play's own concern with fiction and story. A subtle reading of the witch as 'surplus' and a careful examination of the possible links with Laudian church reform are enriching and powerfully suggestive. It is interesting that this is the only essay in the collection to engage both with recent re-thinkings of witchcraft historiography (especially Clark) and with high theory, notably Bataille. Less satisfying, but still stimulating, is Richard Wilson's vivid and intriguing analysis of *Macbeth* in relation to the Gunpowder Plot (Chapter 8: 'The pilot's thumb: *Macbeth* and the Jesuits'). It is also the only piece to address the superstition of recusancy, the transformation of Catholic rituals, symbols, prayers and objects of devotion into inscrutable or mumbled mutterings, magic mumbo-jumbo. This is an important – perhaps the important – issue in these trials. But in the reading of *Macbeth* this is done with so heavy a hand as to carry little conviction. There seems little reason why the cauldron ingredients should make us think especially of relics, and even if it did it is hard to see why this should be further grounds for reading Shakespeare as himself Catholic, an always-tendentious argument which indeed has a great deal to do with local politics (local politics now, that is, and the wish to make Shakespeare as native to Lancaster as possible through the identification of him with the William Shakeshafte who served in a recusant household). Were this identification to be sustained, the tourist industry around Pendle would be less reliant upon witches. This might be a pity in more ways than one, because this volume proves conclusively that their stories are not yet exhausted, but still have much to teach us about the past. The field is now open for other, similar volumes – on the Northern circuit, on the St Osyth or Hopkins trials, perhaps. This volume sets a demanding standard for those future editors to meet.

## Notes

1. For a review of Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours* from the *Reviews* archive, please click [here](#) [2].  
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