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BAD REASONS: ELITES AND THE DECLINE OF MAGIC

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Jan Machielsen has written on early modern demonology and early witchcraft historiography. He argues that the rise of witchcraft skepticism was part of a social process which fashioned elite identities out of opposition to perceived popular credulity and “old-womanish” superstition.

Why did European elites come to reject magic and witchcraft? The question has been posed as long as there have been witchcraft historians to ask it. Already in 1865, William Lecky opened his study with the observation that there was “no change in the history of the last 300 years more striking or suggestive of more curious enquiries” than this change in elite attitudes. “At present nearly all educated men” treat magic, witchcraft, and miracles “with an absolute and even derisive incredulity, which dispenses with all examination of the evidence.”¹ How to explain the change? Like much of witchcraft historiography, the question proceeds from the understandable, yet methodologically problematic, premise that witchcraft beliefs are *false*—but with a twist. Social historians have long grappled with the issue of witchcraft’s “obvious” falseness; it has supported the ascription of a whole host of ulterior motives for witch-hunting, from state-building to woman-hating.² As a false belief, witchcraft was always a vehicle for the expression of other things.

1. William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1865), 1. <http://archive.org/details/rationalismeuro01leckuoft>. Accessed November 23, 2021.

2. See the criticism advanced in Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4: “because [the people of the early modern period] were making a huge empirical mistake, their animosity towards witches has to be explained by something other than conviction.”

By contrast, the discovery of the “truth” does not seem to call for extrinsic—let alone cynical—motivations; falsehood must have been detected and exposed on intrinsic grounds alone. Several such intellectual reasons have been advanced—Hugh Trevor-Roper, for instance, credited the philosopher René Descartes for forging “a rival [mechanical] faith,” which broke the system of witch-beliefs “at its centre.”³ Lecky already pinpointed the key difficulty with this approach some hundred years earlier: if one were to ask “why it is that the world has rejected what was once so universally and so intensely believed, why a narrative of an old woman who had been seen riding on a broomstick [. . .] is deemed so entirely incredible, most persons would probably be unable to give a very definite answer to the question.”⁴ The types of answers expected—that these beliefs were tested “scientifically” and found lacking—have not held water. Their demise, as Ian Bostridge put it in 1997, cannot be attributed to “the discovery of a previously unrecognized, if commonsensical, truth.”⁵ Here, too, Lecky was ahead of the curve: “if we ask what new arguments were discovered during the decadence of the belief, we must admit that they were quite inadequate to account for the change.”⁶ The chronology simply does not fit; skeptical voices had never been absent and were, for a time, easily enough refuted.⁷ Indeed it is even possible to argue, as Michael Hunter has recently done, that when Enlightenment thinkers finally came to reject magic, they did so not “for good reasons but for bad ones.”⁸

Even so, the belief that the Western world, or at least its well-bred ruling classes, rejected witchcraft and *did so on intrinsic, intellectual grounds* is deeply rooted in contemporary culture in ways that are hugely revealing of modernity, both as a “disenchanted” intellectual construct and as a lived experience. Witchcraft’s defeat has, for instance, underpinned the arguments of free speech absolutists who have argued that the truth will inevitably win out

3. Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, “The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 167, 177. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/roper-the-crisis-of-the-seventeenth-century>. Accessed November 23, 2021.

4. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, 9.

5. Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c.1650–c.1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4.

6. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, 11.

7. On the proximity of the arguments of “believers” and skeptics, see Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 195–213.

8. Michael Hunter, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), vii. <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/login?url=https://dx.doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300243581.001.0001>. Accessed November 23, 2021.

(with more and better speech). “Men feared witches and burnt women,” as US Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis put it in 1927, and “it is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears.”⁹ Witchcraft beliefs, located safely in the past and aligned with reactionary forces, have lent support to progress narratives that, from the nineteenth century onwards, depict an ongoing struggle in which reason triumphs over superstition—or, more polemically, science over religion.¹⁰ (Contemporary advocates of the “warfare of science” thesis criticized Lecky for underestimating the influence and importance of the witchcraft skeptics.¹¹) This type of light-versus-darkness dualism—surely itself Christian in origin—saves the phenomena by presenting all that is offensive about the present as holdovers; relics from the past, which will be cast out by those “thinking the future thought of the world.”¹² As Helen Cornish notes in her contribution to this Forum, history has played a vital role in the construction of a scientific, rational modernity. Within this worldview, magic, as modernity’s foil, may well forever be declining, but it will never be gone.

Often when an answer appears elusive it is the question itself that is at fault. The evergreen nature of our opening question is revealing; it suggests that modernity is a rhetorical rather than an intellectual construct.¹³ Yet Lecky’s one-hundred-fifty-year-old formulation points us to two further ways in which the question can help us think through the emergence of elite skepticism. First, it makes clear the extent to which non-belief in witchcraft is the product, not of knowledge, but of “derisive incredulity.” It is an emotional response: “The idea of absurdity is so strongly attached to such narratives, that it is difficult even to consider them with gravity.”¹⁴ It is also then

9. *Whitney v. California*, 274 U.S. 357 (United States Supreme Court, 1927).

10. Jan Machielsen, *The War on Witchcraft: Andrew Dickson White, George Lincoln Burr, and the Origins of Witchcraft Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/war-on-witchcraft/F9BD33B7BD1FCF7D5A20902DE45E0C6A>. Accessed November 23, 2021.

11. Machielsen, 38.

12. Note Hugh Trevor-Roper’s use of the darkness and light metaphor: Trevor-Roper, “The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” 82. For the quotation from Andrew Dickson White see Machielsen, *The War on Witchcraft*, 21.

13. For an introduction to the concept of modernity and modernization, see Garthine Walker, “Modernization,” in *Writing Early Modern History*, ed. Garthine Walker (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 25–48. As William Pooley pointed out to me, the meaning of “modernity” inevitably also changed between Lecky’s time and our own, but the role witchcraft has played in its construction and legitimacy clearly did not change.

14. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, 9.

a *response*, a visceral reaction to something; witchcraft is what the “educated man” (to use Lecky’s gendered phrase) is not. That ridicule underwent something of a renaissance during the Enlightenment is therefore probably not a coincidence. One contemporary school of thought even presented ridicule as a “test of truth,” which could be employed against religious enthusiasm but would rebound on the jester when directed at the virtuous.¹⁵ Just as important for our purposes, derision also widens as much as possible the gulf between the non-believer and the thing-to-be-disbelieved. The distance that separates the two comes to define both.

This brings me to a second, related point, also embedded in Lecky’s observations: elites became skeptical of witchcraft *because they were elites*. Skepticism, Lecky maintained, became “accepted by all enlightened men, even though they have not themselves examined the evidence on which it rests.”¹⁶ It was the result “not of any series of definite arguments, or of new discoveries, but of a gradual, insensible, yet profound modification of the habits of thought prevailing in Europe; that it is, thus, a direct consequence of the progress of civilisation.”¹⁷ Originally “it was nearly confined to men who were avowedly freethinkers, but gradually it spread over a wider circle, and included almost all the educated, with the exception of a large proportion of the clergy,” until skepticism “last of all” even took possession of them.¹⁸ Notably absent from this enumeration is any reference to the uneducated poor, for theirs was the kingdom of witchcraft.

What Lecky described as the “progress of civilisation,” then, can better be understood as the refashioning of elite identity which made, to quote Lord Byron’s memorable poem, the “burning of aged women . . . an act of inurbanity.”¹⁹ The opposition between skeptical elites and witchcraft beliefs, then, maps on to an opposition between elite and popular identity—and it does so in a highly totemic fashion. Ridicule was both an expression of elite incredulity and served as one of the forces that called it into being. Enlightenment philosophers expressed concern for the dangers of ridicule within elite discourse; no less a figure than Thomas Hobbes had warned of the dangerous consequences of humiliating an equal.²⁰ Yet laughter at social

15. Ross Carroll, *Uncivil Mirth: Ridicule in Enlightenment Britain*, 2021, esp. chapters 1 and 2.

16. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, 10.

17. Lecky, 10–11.

18. Lecky, 11.

19. George Gordon Byron, “Don Juan,” in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1905), vol. 6, 610 (Canto XVII.vii).

20. Carroll, *Uncivil Mirth*, 5–10.

inferiors was a different matter. In contrast to the humor of protest so often studied by historians, such ridicule “worked to maintain social structures rather than subverting them.”²¹ (In the same poem Byron still urged a light singeing “not [of] witches but b—ches who create mischief in families.”²²)

If at least part of the answer—*because they were elites*—was, in fact, encoded in the question itself, then another vehicle (aside from ridicule) appears to be an operational flaw within early modern demonology itself. Witchcraft beliefs could not function, either in theory or in practice, when the words of social inferiors, including accused witches themselves, could not be trusted. Historians have long noted the importance of legal skepticism; doubts about whether the accused was truly a witch were more successful than wholesale attempts to upend the spirit world.²³ One could certainly identify a humanitarian component to judicial concerns about confessions extracted under torture and other legal irregularities. The *Cautio criminalis* (1631) by the Jesuit Friedrich Spee was not only a denunciation of false confessions, but also an attempt to save the souls of those forced to bear false witness.²⁴ Yet these worries were part of a wider and growing suspicion that those testifying could not be trusted. Why would an “educated man” accept “a narrative of an *old woman* who had been seen riding on a broomstick”?

Part of the issue here is that the realm of the demonic—and in particular the sabbat with its feasting, dancing, and devil worship—were strictly off limits to pious Christians. Even the actual harm allegedly caused by witches was inaccessible; there was no crime scene and no murder weapon (the Devil?). Witchcraft and the demonic could only be observed secondhand through the confessions of witches. Other witnesses had no firsthand knowledge of witchcraft at all; they could only voice suspicions about its presence

21. Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 130.

22. Byron, “Don Juan,” 610.

23. See, for instance, the emphasis on growing “judicial caution” in Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), chap. 8. Levack, almost in passing, approaches the issue of elite identity from the opposite angle as I do here: “The persistence of superstitious beliefs among the peasantry may have actually contributed, in a somewhat ironic way, to the triumph of scepticism among the elite”: Levack, 244.

24. Friedrich Von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis or a Book on Witch Trials*, trans. Marcus Hellyer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10627967>. Accessed November 23, 2021. The work provides advice to confessors of witches seemingly rooted in personal experience.

and consequences. As Virginia Krause has observed, “demonology [was] crippled by its dependence on audible truths.”²⁵

Walter Stephens pointed to the same evidentiary problem that placed witchcraft outside the realm that could be directly observed but drew a different conclusion from the one I am developing here. Stephens’s controversial yet extremely thought-provoking study of late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century demonologists argued that demonology reflected not belief, but spiritual anxiety. “Witch hating” was nothing more than “the self-styled hater’s *envy* of persons whom he imagines experiencing those devastating proofs of spiritual reality that he craves, but knows he cannot have.”²⁶ Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola’s *Strix* (1523), probably the most Latinate and erudite of Stephens’s sources, is structured as a dialogue in which three educated men and one illiterate woman—“Strix,” the Witch—establish the reality of witchcraft. As Stephens showed, “the star of the dialogue” was not one of the men but the witch: “an expert witness” whose “testimony is often conclusive” and who persuades Apistius, the skeptic among the learned male threesome, that witchcraft is real.²⁷ My argument (focused on a somewhat later period) is the opposite of Stephens’s: I argue that demonology became problematic because it increasingly came to be seen as an elite edifice built on the words of (old, poor, uneducated) women.²⁸

Witchcraft skeptics exploited this incongruity. Misogyny was perhaps their most effective weapon and a secret one, given that historians have studiously ignored its potency.²⁹ Reginald Scot’s 1584 *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* offers a good example of the rhetorical (ridiculing) strategy involved, even if (judging from the reprints) it only found a receptive audience several generations later. One fairly typical passage dismissed those witches who were “women which

25. Krause, 101.

26. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 99.

27. Stephens, 92–94. Stephens’s translation of *Strix* is forthcoming in Harvard University Press’s prestigious *I Tatti* series.

28. My argument centers on *perceptions*. It does not contradict the well-established view that such testimony was often elicited under torture and, therefore, in reality, often reflected precisely what interrogators wanted to hear.

29. See my identification of several such passages quoted in Michael Hunter’s *The Decline of Magic*, and his dismissal of my argument as a “slightly lazy one.” Jan Machielsen and Michael Hunter, Review of “The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment,” *Reviews in History*, no. 2393 (2020), <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2393>. Accessed November 23, 2021. The misogyny of demonologists has been, by contrast, very well studied.

be commonly old, lame, bleare-eyed, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious, and papists; [. . .] They are leane and deformed, shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them. They are doting, scolds, mad, divelish.”³⁰ Historians have delighted in Scot’s sarcasm, even though they acknowledge that it likely blunted his contemporary impact: “What an unapt instrument is a toothless, old, impotent, and unwieldy woman to flie in the air; Truely, the Devil little needs such instruments to bring his purposes to pass.”³¹ Gender, age, social status, and education all structure this implicit contrast between the foundations of witchcraft and the book’s hoped-for enlightened audience. The 1665 reprint already makes the contrast explicit on its title page: *The Discoverie* was “very necessary to be known for the undeceiving of Judges, Justices, and Jurors, before they pass Sentence upon Poor, Miserable and Ignorant People; who are frequently Arraigned, Condemned, and Executed for Witches and Wizzards.”³²

By the time Francis Hutchinson chose 1 Timothy 4:7—“But refuse profane and old Wives Fables, and exercise thy self rather unto Godliness”—as the motto for his 1718 *Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft*, he was following down a very well-trodden path.³³ Much had changed—Hutchinson was no solitary voice, but an ambitious young clergyman on the way up—yet much had also remained the same. Hutchinson’s *Essay* shows that witchcraft skepticism “last of all” had at least reached the gates of religious orthodoxy. The arguments that were now considered persuasive were age-old, however. Hutchinson had not achieved Radical Enlightenment. Changing *modes* of thought likely played a considerable role in making the intellectual terrain more receptive.

The “historicizing” of beliefs, as Michelle Pfeffer argues elsewhere in this Forum, is one such factor. The shifting epistemological fortunes of the senses—seeing for oneself, rather than hearing others speak—is another.³⁴

30. Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft Wherein the Lewde Dealing of Witches and Witchmongers Is Notablie Detected* (London, 1584), 7.

31. Scot, 13.

32. Reginald Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (London, England, 1665), <http://www.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2240962075/citation/BC1E0C678DE5493FPQ/5>. Accessed November 23, 2021. Emphasis added.

33. Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft: With Observations upon Matters of Fact; Tending to Clear the Texts of the Sacred Scriptures, and Confute the Vulgar Errors about That Point* (London: R. Knaplock and D. Midwinter, 1718).

34. On this point, see not only Krause, *Witchcraft, Demonology, and Confession in Early Modern France*, but also Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Changing conceptions of the meaning of “religion,” “superstition,” and the “supernatural,” and how these were employed also play their part.³⁵ Yet the gradual fashioning of elite identity out of witchcraft skepticism (and the accompanying construction of an inferior credulous popular alterity) intersects with all these factors—even if the directions of causality are unclear.

I am mindful that my argument invites new questions, as theories always do. In particular, it raises the issue as to how and when the adoption of witchcraft skepticism began to take root as a part of elite identity. After all, Strix’s gender, illiteracy, or social status did not bother Pico; nor did the strategy succeed when pushed by Scot. My final suggestion, then, would be that taking account of group dynamics and human psychology may provide at least a partial solution. Admittedly, this means moving out of the historian’s comfort zone to the more treacherous business of applying insights from sociology and social psychology to the past.

It is worth exploring to what extent the spread of elite witchcraft skepticism could be viewed through the prism of the “bandwagon effect”; I would suggest that its embrace and ostensible profession are motivated, at least in part, by perceptions of skepticism’s popularity amongst one’s peer group.³⁶ After all, as Lecky already noted, its profession was not a carefully reasoned decision, and, perhaps, it was also often more rhetorical than real.³⁷ At some point, once stripped of subversive or unsettling implications, elite skepticism became a self-fulfilling prophecy. In May 1768, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, who very much refused to join the bandwagon, bristled in his diary “that the English in general, and indeed most of the men of learning in Europe, have given up all accounts of witches and apparitions, as mere old wives’ fables.”³⁸

Scholars of intergroup relations have advanced a range of theories—“integrated threat,” “social dominance,” and “social identity”—which could be fruitfully applied to the problem. As a fundamental part of elite identity,

35. Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also Kristof Smeyers’s contribution to this Forum.

36. Matthew Barnfield, “Think Twice before Jumping on the Bandwagon: Clarifying Concepts in Research on the Bandwagon Effect,” *Political Studies Review* 18, no. 4 (2020): 553–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929919870691>. Accessed November 23, 2021.

37. See Will Pooley’s deconstruction of belief in this Forum.

38. John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 3d ed., vol. III (London, 1829), 324, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000083732994>. Accessed November 23, 2021.

witchcraft skepticism provided a way for “educated men” to maintain their self-esteem and dominance over their social inferiors.³⁹ Yet perhaps the fear of being deceived, tricked, or mocked by them might have been just as powerful.⁴⁰ After all, welfare “queens” and “scroungers” are a mainstay of our modern tabloid media, transmuting fears that others may be living it up at our expense into moralizing judgements against those in need. We refuse charity to the homeless fearing that they may spend our money on drink or drugs.

There is a final point to be made here about the role of morality in history writing: the more that it guides us, the more that it blinds us. The end of witch-hunting and the apparent decline of witchcraft beliefs are the bedrock of modernity’s creation myth. We may be thankful that the times when witches were burned—or “b—ches” singed—are long in the past. Yet the quest for “enlightened,” “civilized,” or “good” reasons for an outcome of which we morally approve has led us astray. The spread of elite skepticism is not a tale of moral edification. If we truly want to understand witchcraft in all its complexity, we need to first of all admit that we are no better than those who came before us.

39. For an introduction, see Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan, *Improving Intergroup Relations* (SAGE, 2001), 27–28.

40. Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan, “Intergroup Anxiety,” *Journal of Social Issues* 41, no. 3 (1985): 157–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1985.tb01134.x>. Accessed November 23, 2021. Much of this literature is focused on racism and interethnic tensions but can also be usefully applied to relationships between different social classes.