

Erika Gasser, *Vexed with Devils: Manhood and Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 272 pp., \$89 (hardcover), \$30 (paperback), \$30 (ebook)

Erika Gasser's *Vexed with Devils* examines the cultural history of early modern witchcraft-possession cases in Old and New England. Starting from the first published English case in 1564 through New England's Essex County witch scare around 1700, Gasser views prominent and lesser-known published possession cases with a gendered lens. Given that the majority of accused Anglo-American witches were female, this intersection has been a well-trodden path for many historians. There is no shortage of strong literature revolving around the "witchy woman." By focusing on the role of patriarchy in possession phenomena, Glasser contributes a fresh perspective toward correcting a dearth of analysis on masculinity in witchcraft. Thoroughly researched and leaning on strong resources, this book brings valuable insight to anyone wanting to learn more about the crucial role of gender in witchcraft-possession.

In this book, Gasser moves away from causation and toward gendered correlations of possession and witchcraft within a case-study structure of possession pamphlets. These pamphlets were crucial pieces of literature documenting paranormal instances of the spiritual takeover of a person. Equipped with several examples of possession pamphlets, Gasser navigates the complex intersection of the natural and supernatural world, highlighting the pitfalls of sexism that can arise from their collision. Her work also emphasizes transatlantic connections and hones in on geographic specificity. *Vexed with Devils* accomplishes the difficult task of broadly discussing early modern transatlantic witch history while also scrutinizing specific possession pamphlets and demoniac cases. In referencing these specific cases, Gasser is able to write with nuance and clearly articulate complicated concepts. Generally, Gasser regards witchcraft possession as the spiritual takeover of a person by a supernatural entity/entities. Typically, this is a malevolent process. One of the most important distinctions that Glasser threads is the difference between possession and obsession. Possession "involved a foreign spirit that took control over the afflicted individual from within- a condition some suggested required the individual's

consent- whereas the latter [obsession] involved an assault upon the innocent subject from without." (5-6) This differentiation opens up these studies for broader theological debate.

As argued, possession granted unprecedented significance and agency to women. This was a rare phenomenon when women, whether intentional or not, could subvert the social norms of patriarchy within their families and communities. While one individual experiencing possession did not threaten the patriarchal hierarchies in place, slews of possession cases within a relatively short period of history were potent enough to cause men in power to suppress them. On the other hand, the men who took advantage of these situations inserted their authority to define the moment and forward partisan religious and political agendas. Men who fell victim to accusations of witchcraft were subjected to a particular form of scrutiny different from the methods used in women's cases. Chapter 3, "Disputing Possession in England," effectively discusses preeminent arguments against male witches. However, the author's arguments would have benefitted from defining or detailing terms like "masculinity" and "manhood" since they can have different meanings in scholarship. Utilizing manly credit (using reputation as currency), reason and excess, occupation, and the making and unmaking of a man, accusers were able to systematically discredit arraigned men.

In contrast to the categories exploited against manhood, witchcraft accusations in womanhood typically fixated upon behavior, speech, and ultimately, restoration of the body. As Gasser outlines, "Sex and gender were not supposed to matter conclusively in either witchcraft or possession, as all people were vulnerable to the Devil's temptation and all could sin." (23) However, she continues to explain that women's bodies, minds, and temperaments are already susceptible to the Devil, following a long trail of theology stemming from Eve's sin—a perspective that justified the subjugation of women. In theory, any gender could be an agent of the Devil, but in reality, women bore the brunt of suspicions and accusations due to entrenched beliefs in their inherent vulnerability. The witch, therefore, is most commonly female. In analyzing the fundamental categories used against witchcraft cases, it is clear that there is a theme of discrimination against physicality in women (behavior and speech) and discrimination against societal value in men (occupation and reputation). Another asset of this chapter is that while gender is the primary category of analysis at hand, the author also includes helpful commentary on the role of social class in accusations and

possessions. Gasser's examination in Chapter 3 stands out as one of the most insightful moments in this book.

This leads to another strength, Gasser demonstrates a strong grasp of the difference between Protestant and Catholic views on demoniacs. The contrast between these theological views is key to understanding the history of witchcraft-possession. As Gasser illuminates, the Catholic ritual of exorcism had become the official stance in the Edwardian prayer book in 1552, leaving the Protestant church without an official ritual to cast out devils. Over time, the Church of England relied upon the dispossession methods found in Scripture such as prayer and fasting. The tension between these traditions in dispossession frequently arises in the accusations and punishment of witches in the pamphlets.

The author briefly frames the various bewitching case studies as a distinct genre of literature: "This fusion of possession, propaganda, and power recommends the reading of possession narratives as cultural texts (15)." In building support for the main argument of the book, the author sometimes overstates certain points to the neglect of others. In particular, Gasser observes that bewitching narratives deserve to be treated as a kind of literature; however, she does not delve deeper into their cultural significance. Building on the theory surrounding bewitching as literature, Gasser draws an important parallel. On a small scale, possession cases can represent the larger ongoing battle in the spiritual realm of God and Satan, good versus evil. Gasser forces the reader to question: are the published cases a testimony of wonder? Are they a tool of conversion? Or are they something more? In this aspect, I hoped for more clarity with the author's opinion.

Vexed with Devils is a valuable read for anyone hoping to gain a more granular understanding of demoniac cases in the early modern period. This book provides social context of the religious and cultural climate of a time that saw witchcraft as a serious threat. Analyzing the documented supernatural occurrences, Gasser substantiates her claim that manhood articulated a distinct judgment from implicated womanhood. Questions surrounding the role of gender and its interplay with class, race, religion, and politics in 1692 are just as salient today. In her surgical study of possession, she raises important historical and theological questions that still vex scholars with devils and the reminder to resist simple explanations of complicated history.

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