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Valerie Kivelson, *Desperate Magic: The Moral Economy of Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013), 349 pp., $79.95. (cloth), $27.95 (paper).

Valerie Kivelson established herself in the 1990s and 2000s as one of the leading experts on seventeenth-century Russia, and over the past ten years has emerged as the leading one on its witchcraft beliefs and prosecutions. This book is therefore one which most scholars of the subject have been awaiting with great interest. Hitherto, they have known two things about Russian witch trials which have made these seem extraordinary: that they were relatively few for the size of the country, with even fewer executions; and that the majority of those accused were male. Kivelson now substantiates these peculiarities in detail, and does much to account for them.

She establishes that there are records of about five hundred people accused of witchcraft in seventeenth-century Russia, of whom about 15 percent of those with documented sentences were executed (the eighteenth century produced more or less the same numbers, in both categories). The pattern of prosecution was "endemic" rather than "epidemic," with no large-scale panics leading to mass trials. Some of those tried were itinerants and some ethnically non-Russian, but over two-thirds were socially normal people accused by their kin or neighbors, like most who have featured as targets of witchcraft suspicions across the world. A quarter were folk healers, a much higher proportion than among the accused elsewhere in Europe but still a distinct minority; and three quarters were male. Some forms of magic did attach more to men or women, but such differences were rare and subtle: men were more likely to engage in violent curses and written spells, and women to suffer reputed demonic possession.

Carlo Ginzburg's model of an archaic shamanism as a basis for European witchcraft beliefs has no relevance to Russia, despite its proximity to Siberia, the classic homeland of shamans: in Kivelson's words, "neither shamanism nor paganism makes the least detectable appearance in Muscovite magical practices" (21). Nor was witchcraft viewed as an ideological negation of society and culture, its alleged practices being regarded instead as the continuation of routine ambitions and undertakings by other means. There is little trace

in the Russian trials of night-flying, Satanism, the witches' sabbat or cannibalism, so that the classic construction which underlay most of the early modern European witch hunts is missing. Instead views of magic rested on non-diabolical foundations, and trials depended on charges of committing harm to others by supernatural means; the older and more fundamental definition of witchcraft all over Europe. There was little interest in the way in which magic worked, and so no equivalent to the literature of demonology produced by western Europeans. Witchcraft featured in the courts as a prosaic practice with prosaic goals, employing easily gathered, everyday, material objects which were joined to charms and curses. Indeed, the only way in which Russian witchcraft cases resembled most of those found elsewhere in early modern Europe, apart from the social make-up of the accused, was in the process of trial itself. Russia had a relatively low rate of prosecution and conviction in common with other states in which justice was administered by professional judges controlled by a large centralized state, and just as everywhere, prosecutions represented a process of collusion between local officials and ordinary people.

Establishing all this is a very useful achievement of scholarship in itself, and a solid one; explaining it is another matter. The essential problem, which Kivelson clearly identifies, is that early modern Russia had all the ingredients of the demonologies and witch trials found further west in Europe—a central government aggressively extending its policing of subjects' lives; a traditional fear of witchcraft and an association between it and women, reflecting a wider cultural misogyny; and a Christian theology which emphasized the role of devils—and yet somehow these factors failed to unite to produce the pattern found in most European witch hunts. Kivelson suggests that much of the difference derived from the great importance that Russians attached to a person's place in the social and political hierarchy, which far surpassed that accorded to their sex. Most cases of witchcraft related directly to tensions within this hierarchy, and men stumbled into them more often because of their greater mobility and engagement with social interaction. Magic was often used or suspected as a form of retribution against superiors who had breached acceptable modes of treatment of inferiors, an extension of the politics of petition and supplication; and men were more often engaged in such politics.

This is a good argument, and may indeed be the answer, but the problem could be more intractable. On the far side of Europe in the

same period was England, another expanding state with a centralized system of justice which resulted in relatively low overall rates of accusation and conviction. There too the demonic element in witchcraft was generally played down in favor of its presumed practical consequences, and historians have recently emphasized that hierarchy was more important to the social standing of the early modern English than their gender. The gender ratio of accusations of witchcraft was, however, precisely opposite: three-quarters of those tried were female; and there is no obvious functional explanation for the contrast. Likewise, it is notable that Orthodox Christianity in general, and not just the Russian church, failed to turn a belief in demons and one in witchcraft into a terror of witchcraft as a demonic conspiracy. The latter development was distinctively one made by Western Christians, Catholic and Protestant; but we do not really know why. It could have assisted discussion if Kivelson had provided a working definition of witchcraft: at times she seems to apply the term to magic in general, benign or malign, while at others she appears to contrast it with healing. An initial careful consideration of the Russian words for different kinds of magic and magical practitioner, onto which terms like witch could be mapped, might have added significantly to the book.

As it stands, it remains a considerable achievement, in the tradition now long established among historians of early modern European witchcraft beliefs, of making trial records the main source material. These lend themselves naturally to an analysis of the number and identity of the accused and the power structures operating in the legal processes; and these are precisely the issues most considered by Kivelson. It is a mark of how much gender has come to preoccupy English-speaking scholars of witchcraft that she devotes a long section to it even after proving that it was in itself fundamentally irrelevant to the Russian trials. She also engages in a tangential, though valuable, discussion of the nature of torture as part of the Russian judicial process, intended explicitly to condemn its use in the world today, not least by her own (American) government against suspected terrorists. Indeed, one of the further oddities about Russia's witch trials was the routine brutality with which those accused of witchcraft were tortured to elicit confessions, coupled with the relative mildness of most sentences meted out on conviction and the astonishing resilience of many of those arrested, in refusing to confess even when flogged, racked and torn with red hot pincers. What tends to get lost amid such a preoccupation with the trials as

manifestations of power politics is a deep interest in beliefs in witchcraft themselves, and the sources of them; but those are issues of which the records themselves are often less revealing.

All told, Valerie Kivelson has provided the goods splendidly here, filling out another corner of our picture of Europe's witch hunts with a fine study which is the more important for the manner in which so many of its features run counter to the continental norm.

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