

## *Book Reviews*

### **PRE-1800**

PHILIP C. ALMOND. *England's First Demonologist: Reginald Scot & "The Discoverie of Witchcraft."* London: I.B. Tauris, 2011. Pp. 256. £54.50 (cloth).  
doi:10.1017/jbr.2013.2

This is the first book-length study of Reginald Scot's skeptical treatise on witchcraft, which was published in 1584, just before witchcraft prosecutions reached their peak in England and on the Continent. Scot is widely recognized today as the most radical of the sixteenth-century writers who called into question the reality of witchcraft. Only with the publication of Balthasar Bekker's *The Enchanted World* in 1691 and 1693 did another demonologist present an equally forceful critique of European witch beliefs.

Unlike the great majority of demonologists in the early modern period, Scot was not a theologian, clergyman, physician, or judge. A country gentleman from Kent who had studied at Oxford, he was familiar with the pamphlet literature on English witch trials and with many of the demonological works written by continental authors, especially Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus maleficarum* (1487), Lambert Daneau's *A Dialogue of Witches* (1575), and Jean Bodin's *De la démonomanie des sorciers* (1580). While not a biblical scholar, he displayed a solid grounding in scripture.

Philip Almond divides his closely reasoned analysis of Scot's treatise into four parts. In a chapter on witchcraft, he credits Scot with creating a popular, nonliterary stereotype of the English witch and explains how Scot's belief in the witch's inability to exercise supernatural powers proceeded from his Protestant belief in Providence and the sovereignty of God. In a chapter on demonology, Almond credits Scot with introducing English readers to the main elements of continental European demonology, including the pact with the devil, the witches' sabbath, nocturnal flight, sex with the devil, and metamorphosis. A chapter on magic explores Scot's belief that magicians, like many witches, were charlatans, but he also shows that Scot's belief in the efficacy of natural magic contributed to the distinctly English tradition of secular magic. Scot's belief in the reality of natural magic was predicated on his classification of magical effects as preternatural rather than supernatural. Almond's final chapter, on philosophy and religion, deals with the sources of Scot's skepticism, the suggestion that he may have been a member of the Protestant sect known as the Family of Love, and the

claim that he was a secret Sadducee, that is, one who denied the existence of spirits, despite his adamant rejection of this charge. Almond argues persuasively that Scot's trinitarianism, his "theology of the spirit," and his rejection of the view that the Bible was entirely allegorical made it unlikely that he was either a Familist or a Sadducee.

Almond emphasizes Scot's belief that demons were incorporeal, that is, that they were pure spirit and had no innate physical properties, but in this respect Scot did not dissent from a broad consensus of both Protestant and Catholic theologians and philosophers. The alternative Neoplatonic theory that accorded demons at least a measure of corporeality was a minority position held mainly by a few Byzantine demonologists and later by witchcraft skeptics such as Thomas Hobbes and John Webster. The key to Scot's radical skepticism was not his belief in the immateriality of spirits but the further claim that these purely spiritual entities could have any influence on the material world. This was the same position that Bekker adopted more than one hundred years after Scot wrote. Denied this power in the world, demons could not possess a person's body, conclude a pact with a witch, or have sexual intercourse with human beings. Nor could demons, as incorporeal spirits, compress or manipulate the air to form an aerial body, as Aquinas and other scholastic theologians contended. They could only tempt human beings internally or mentally, an argument that became a hallmark of English Protestant thought.

Almond argues that Scot's book had considerable influence on contemporary writing about witchcraft, but there is little evidence that it made a significant impact on subsequent demonological thought. Almond is able to identify only a handful of references to the *Discoverie* in the works of either English or European demonologists. James VI of Scotland railed against the book in his *Daemonologie* (1597), but there is no evidence to support the claim that he ordered all copies of the book destroyed upon his arrival in England in 1603. Neither James nor any European demonologist ever responded to Scot's arguments in detail, as many did in criticizing Johann Weyer's skeptical treatise, *De praestigiis daemonum* (1563). Scot's book also failed to influence writers in the skeptical tradition. None of the continental European witchcraft skeptics of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, including Bekker, acknowledged Scot's contribution to that tradition. The fact that *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* was written in English and only partially translated into Dutch in 1609 may have also helped to keep it on the fringe of mainstream European demonological thought.

Almond's claim that Scot introduced continental demonological ideas to English readers should not be accepted without qualification. Scot may have been the first English writer to discuss such beliefs in a demonological treatise, but a skeptical work such as his was unlikely to have served as a vehicle for the transmission and unintended reception of those notions. Indeed, the continental witch beliefs that the more credulous English demonologists Henry Holland, William Perkins, Alexander Roberts, Thomas Cooper, and Richard Bernard discussed in their witchcraft treatises between 1590 and 1627 were more compatible with English views of witchcraft than those subjected to criticism and ridicule by Scot. For example, in discrediting the continental belief that the devil imprinted a mark on the witch's body as a sign of allegiance, Scot made no reference to the corresponding English belief that the marks found on witches' bodies were small teats used to feed demonic imps or familiars. By contrast, Richard Bernard's *A Guide to Grand-Jury Men* (1627) accommodated the English belief (which may have had a popular origin) by saying that the devil sucked on the mark. Scot's treatise may have done little to change the early modern discourse on witchcraft, but Philip Almond's commentary on *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* has offered us valuable insights into early modern Protestant thought regarding the demonic realm.

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