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THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EARLY MODERN HUMANITIES TO “DISENCHANTMENT”

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Michelle Pfeffer studies the declining reputation of astrology during the seventeenth century. She argues that greater attention should be given to the role of history and the humanist scholarship in the decline of magical beliefs in the early modern period.

In *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), Keith Thomas suggested that the most “baffling” aspect of the already challenging history of witchcraft was the apparent paradox that, although educated attitudes toward witches shifted in the seventeenth century, the standard arguments for and against the reality of witchcraft had “hardly changed at all.” There was, to be sure, continuous controversy, but, in terms of new arguments, this “revolution in opinion” was remarkably silent.¹ In “The European Witch-Craze,” Hugh Trevor-Roper made a similar point. Arguments deployed against witchcraft in the seventeenth century were “the arguments which have always been used,” and this is perhaps not all that surprising because “in matters of ideology, it is not generally the ideas which convince.”² It has long been recognized that it is difficult to point to new arguments against magic at the very moment when the intellectual legitimacy of such beliefs was increasingly in question. George Eliot was already musing over this apparent puzzle in the 1860s. Reflecting on the processes by which cultural attitudes toward magic are modified, Eliot found food for thought in the historian William Lecky’s idea that beliefs can be rendered obsolete even in the absence of direct arguments against them.³

1. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1991), 681.

2. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, The Reformation and Social Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 168–69, 134.

3. George Eliot, “The Influence of Rationalism” in *The Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Nathan Sheppard (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 259.

People disbelieve magic “not because [they] examined the evidence and found it insufficient”; on the contrary, “disbelief always precedes, when it does not prevent, examination.”⁴

Today, historians for the most part have let go of the idea that “superstition” is a case of arrested development resolved only through scientific enlightenment and that scientific or “rational” arguments against magic must therefore be responsible for its decline.⁵ While Thomas left room in his account for the intellectual changes brought about by the new science, particularly experimentalism and mechanical philosophy, Michael Hunter’s recent *The Decline of Magic* (2020) argues that the science of the scientific revolution actually left a lot of scope for supernatural belief.⁶ As Charles Webster suggested some time ago, “we must look in places other than science for the explanation of these changes.”⁷ Moving beyond science—and the history of what the witchcraft critic John Wagstaffe called “logical arguments either pro or con”⁸—in the last fifty years, historians have profitably turned to social, religious, legal, and especially political developments to account for changes in magic’s fortunes. While intellectual history has often taken a backseat in recent historiography in this subfield,⁹ the study of early modern intellectual developments still has an important part to play and may, in fact, be well-equipped to contribute answers to some of the questions that remain in the history of magic.

If not science, might we turn instead to other early modern fields of study to account for disenchantment? Here, I make a preliminary case for the pivotal role played by early modern disciplines that would now fall under the banner of the humanities and social sciences. In the seventeenth century in particular, scholars in these fields of study not only critically examined magical and supernatural phenomena but also studied the phenomenon of *belief* in and of itself. In other words, rather than simply scrutinizing witches,

4. William Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism*, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1866), 1:9.

5. Cf. David Wootton, *The Invention of Science: A New History of the Scientific Revolution* (London: Harper Collins, 2015), 459.

6. Michael Hunter, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (London: Yale University Press, 2020).

7. Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 100.

8. John Wagstaffe, *Historical Reflections on the Bishop of Rome* (Oxford, 1660), sig. F4r.

9. Though a historian of science and intellectual historian, Hunter, who cites Lecky warmly, suggests that the Enlightenment rejected magic for “bad” reasons, and that the changes he charts do not seem to have come about through intellectual argument. *Decline of Magic*, vii, 46, 197ff.

astrology, or ghosts, instead *belief* in witches, *belief* in astrology, and *belief* in ghosts increasingly became the object of study. In the early modern period, fresh ways of thinking about the ancient world, new encounters with other contemporary cultures, and the fracturing of the church all encouraged the close, comparative study of belief in its cultural and historical contexts. Magical and supernatural beliefs began to be seen as social and cultural phenomena, and, ultimately, as the remnants of a superstition that belonged only to the past. This important shift occurred on the back of the findings of humanist scholars and the emerging social sciences.

My focus here will be on early modern historical scholarship, but a similar case can be made for related nascent disciplines such as comparative religion and anthropology. Moreover, although my examples will be drawn from England, I take this to be a pan-European phenomenon that warrants further study. I argue that new histories of beliefs deemed “magical” or “superstitious” increasingly exposed the origins of these beliefs to lie not in scripture or legitimate philosophy, but instead in idolatrous and fraudulent pagan religion. In the early modern period, these beliefs were historicized, treated as the ephemeral products of certain historical developments whose historic roots undermined their legitimacy. Once belief in the supernatural was widely recognized as a social and cultural phenomenon, it could be studied at a distance, more effectively “othered,” and, ultimately, mocked. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all this amounted to a powerful new argumentative strategy against such beliefs.

My argument builds upon several decades of important scholarship on the history of thinking and writing historically in the early modern period. In his groundbreaking *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* (1992), the late Justin Champion made historical practices central to his account of the development of anticlerical critiques of revealed religion in the seventeenth century. Champion made the case that in the early modern period, the practice of history expanded such that its chief purpose was no longer simply the promulgation of “moral injunctions,” but now also encompassed the legitimization of social practices and institutions. In an age of reformations and revolutions, polemicists of all stripes were on the lookout for “authoritative leverage,” something that could lend legitimacy to their own positions and delegitimize rival beliefs. Champion contended that, for deists and freethinkers, it was history, or more precisely manufactured “presentations” of the past, that fulfilled this need.¹⁰

10. Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chap. 2, esp. 25–26, 34.

Since Champion's important book, the polemical uses of history in early modern Europe have become the subject of a vast and still growing literature.¹¹ We know that in this period, "the sanction of history" became a deeply desirable commodity.¹² In contrast to earlier views of this period as marking an epochal shift from humanism to philosophy, it is now clear that early modern thinkers very often "eschewed abstract philosophical reasoning in favor of historical modes of discourse."¹³ This holds true for many of the great names of the seventeenth century, including major philosophers, but it becomes all the more obvious when we look beyond the world of elite academics.

Given this turn to early modern historiography—and the concomitant realization that this historical mode was a standard way of approaching issues in almost every field of study in this period—it is surprising that the role played by historical evidence in the so-called decline of magic has gone unexamined. This is despite the fact that almost all high-profile early modern attacks on superstition and supernatural beliefs put history front and center.

When the Dutch pastor Balthazar Bekker (1632–1698) attacked traditional doctrines about the Devil in his bestselling *The World Betwitched* (*De Betoverde Weereld*) (1692–1693), he largely approached his subject historically. For example, Bekker offered persuasive reinterpretations of scripture that were historically grounded, in the sense of treating them as the historical products of their time. Likewise, when discussing reports of witchcraft, Bekker contextualized them as artifacts of specific historical moments. Most strikingly, his huge first volume, which Bekker described as the foundation of the whole,

11. The literature is huge, but see Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Christopher Ligota and Jean-Louis Quantin, eds., *History of Scholarship: A Selection of Papers from the Seminar on the History of Scholarship Held Annually at the Warburg Institute* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Katherine Van Liere, Simon Ditchfield, and Howard Louthan, eds., *Sacred History: The Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Nicholas Hardy and Dmitri Levitin, eds., *Confessionalisation and Erudition in Early Modern Europe: An Episode in the History of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

12. This is Alexandra Walsham's phrase in "History, Memory, and the English Reformation," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 4 (2012): 899–938, esp. 907.

13. Dmitri Levitin, "From Sacred History to the History of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European Historiography from Reformation to 'Enlightenment,'" *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 4 (2012): 1122.

was a detailed comparative history of pagan, Jewish, and early Christian ideas about the spirit world. Far from a topic of mere antiquarian interest, or simply an irrelevant prelude, the point of this history was to reveal apparently “Christian” ideas about incorporeal spirits to be erroneous pagan inventions, ideas grounded in ancient idolatry rather than in scripture or good philosophy.¹⁴

Bekker’s first volume was no major innovation. It was simply the culmination of a mainstream early modern trend of thinking about beliefs and practices in historical, and indeed in *intellectual*-historical, ways. When reformers took aim at Roman Catholic rituals and doctrines, a common strategy was to argue that they had their roots in idolatrous pagan religion.¹⁵ Many early converts to Christianity, it was said, including many Church Fathers, remained wedded to their beloved pagan philosophy and religion, and assimilated them into Christianity. This polemical strategy only became more popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it was elaborated with more empirical (historical!) data and was also used to attack new Protestant sects, who were in turn accused of maintaining pagano-papist corruption.¹⁶ For example, opponents of seventeenth-century “enthusiasts” attacked the historical validity of enthusiast practices, emphasizing their historical origins in paganism rather than in any true Christian tradition.¹⁷ Importantly, these polemics were supported by, and in turn encouraged, serious scholarship on the history of religion. While, in general, many Renaissance scholars wanted to synthesize ancient pagan thinking into a Christian framework, new historical discoveries led to a widespread rejection of this syncretic paradigm, and the concomitant realization that much ancient knowledge looked a good deal more pagan than Christian.¹⁸ This in turn prompted a broader paganization of the ancient world that wedged an even

14. Balthasar Bekker, *The World Bewitch'd* (London: Richard Baldwin, 1695), esp. sigs. b12v-clv.

15. This was, of course, not limited to Protestant reformers. Erasmus, for instance, claimed that several Catholic ceremonies were vestiges of ancient paganism (*vestigia veteris Paganismi*).

16. E.g., Quantin, *Church of England*, chaps. 4–5.

17. Liam Peter Temple, *Mysticism in Early Modern England* (London: Boydell Press, 2019), 94–101.

18. For an overview, see Dmitri Levitin, “What Was the Comparative History of Religion in Seventeenth-Century Europe (and Beyond)? Pagan Monotheism/Pagan Animism, from T’ien to Tylor,” in *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology*, *Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture*, ed. Renaud Gagné, Simon Goldhill, and Geoffrey Lloyd (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 49–115.

bigger fissure between Christian doctrine and now unavoidably flawed pagan ideas.

Those who wanted to attack ideas about spirits, souls, and similar beliefs could simply dip into these arguments. Mortalists who denied the existence of the immortal, immaterial soul built much of their case on the claim that the soul was a concept invented by pagans, folded into Christianity by corrupt Church Fathers, and then maintained by greedy Catholics to bolster the lucrative doctrine of Purgatory.¹⁹ Thomas Hobbes, himself one of these mortalists, famously employed a similar method against demons and spirits in a chapter of *Leviathan* tellingly entitled “Of Daemonology, and other Reliques of the Religion of the Gentiles”—but this was no particular innovation on Hobbes’s part.²⁰ Astrology was attacked in much the same way. Although its proponents publicized histories of their art that stressed its pedigree among biblical patriarchs, detractors portrayed it as the invention of idolatrous pagans.²¹ Others took up this strategy against folkloric practices: John Aubrey’s *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme* maintained that, to gain followers, the early church made use of Gentile festivals and rituals “fetch’d from the very dregs of Paganisme.” Many contemporary superstitious practices were no more than “reliques of Heathenisme.”²²

The same approach was taken against belief in the reality of witchcraft. John Wagstaffe’s much-reprinted *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (1669) began with the claim that “the affirmers of Witchcraft, may more justly be accounted Heathens, then the deniers of it Atheists.”²³ Wagstaffe’s evidence for this, which took up the remainder of his book, was historical: the very notion that witches existed at all had its beginnings in ancient heathen fables. This idea entered Christianity by means of the uptake of Platonic philosophy by “Primitive Christians,” and it was then expanded by papists who sought

19. Michelle Pfeffer, “Paganism, Natural Reason, and Immortality: Charles Blount and John Toland’s Histories of the Soul,” *Intellectual History Review*, 31, no. 4 (2021): 563–583.

20. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 45.

21. Michelle Pfeffer, “The Society of Astrologers (c.1647–1684): Sermons, Feasts and the Resuscitation of Astrology in Seventeenth-Century London,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 54, no. 2 (2021): 133–53.

22. John Aubrey, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, ed. James Britten (London: W. Satchell, Peyton, and Co., 1881), 6, 55, 132.

23. John Wagstaffe, *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (London: Edward Millington, 1669), sig. a1v. It is likely no coincidence that Wagstaffe wrote his book in the 1660s, a decade that saw the publication in England of dozens of books on the pagan origins of “popish” practices and beliefs.

“private gain.”²⁴ We should be careful not to attribute to these writers too much originality—few of them were actually doing the primary research themselves, and all of them were simply expanding and twisting the evidence and rhetoric already in play in confessional debates.²⁵ Nevertheless, each of these writers helped to rebrand certain beliefs as “pagan” rather than Christian.

These are only a few examples of a widespread tendency in the early modern period to think about the supernatural in historical-critical ways. What appeal did history have as an argumentative strategy? Most obviously, making a certain belief the progeny of heathens served to strip it of any legitimate Christian foundations that it might have appealed to, and instead recast it as part and parcel of the idolatrous paganism that Christians must avoid. In this way, various ideas about the supernatural could be paganized. This was an effective way of making certain ideas and practices the stuff of “the other,” and, in turn, this made for more potent satires and caricatures. Moreover, historical attacks against magic were often effectively combined with accusations of priestcraft or princecraft. In both cases, such beliefs were said to not only have been dreamed up by pagans but deliberately invented by their priests or leaders for nefarious or power-hungry ends. All this made certain beliefs seem inescapably *human*, the product of particular cultural contexts rather than eternal or natural truths.

The argument from history thus fit well with arguments from philosophy or scripture. If a belief had its origins in pagan superstition, it was unlikely to be supported by science, and we shouldn’t find it in the Bible (and vice versa, if such beliefs were not in the Bible, and not supported by philosophy, then a mechanism was needed to explain where they had come from in the first place). It is also likely that, compared to complicated philosophical or philological arguments, historical narrative was more accessible to non-specialists. It appealed to the lay populace, not only because it employed a way of thinking about the relationship between paganism and Christianity that had been familiar since the Reformation, but also because it told a compelling story.

24. Ibid., 20, 75–77, 29.

25. Pfeffer, “Paganism.” Jan Machielsen has noted that many of Wagstaffe’s historical examples were pilfered from the scholarship of Martin Delrio: *Martin Delrio: Demonology and Scholarship in the Counter-Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 265–66. Notably, Wagstaffe’s first book used historical arguments to attack Roman Catholicism, and he is therefore a nice example of how an interest in “pagano-papism” could lead directly to similar attacks on Protestant doctrines.

In the early modern period, history could do a great deal. It offered an attractive repository of empirical data that could serve ideological ends and supplement other forms of argument and proof. Ultimately, historicizing magical and supernatural beliefs helped to banish them to the past. This new argumentative approach could thus prop up important emerging cultural oppositions between “enlightened” and “vulgar,” which are discussed in Jan Machielsen’s contribution to this Forum, because the credulous masses could be dismissed not just as unlearned, but also as atavistic throwbacks.²⁶ This in turn paved the way for anthropological and other accounts of human progress as a process that involved the progressive shedding of superstition and the embrace of science and reason.

After all, “disenchantment” was itself an idea pioneered by the humanities and social sciences, and one that was built on this very same historicizing tendency. Michael Hunter has recently argued that in this period “the influence of antiquity can be argued to have had a crucial ‘modernising’ effect.” What Hunter meant was that by examining ancient texts about magical beliefs, early moderns were exposed to fresh arguments from ancient authors against such beliefs.²⁷ I would argue instead that it was simply not antiquity itself, nor ancient arguments against magic, that had this effect, but instead historiographical engagements with the past and the concomitant tendency to *historicize*. This is not to say that historical revisionism alone can account for shifts in educated thinking about magic. Instead, I have tried to suggest here that the developing discipline of history is nevertheless an additional piece of the puzzle of disenchantment that warrants further investigation.

26. This elitism was often already baked into the historical critique. Wagstaffe claimed that “the wiser sort of Heathens” did not believe “such ridiculous absurd fopperies. . . according to the Fable or Vulgar opinion”: *Witchcraft*, 25–28.

27. Hunter, *Decline of Magic*, 51.