Marcus Hames and Victoria Bladen, eds.

Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England. Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate, 2015. Pp. ix + 237. Hb., \$124.95.

This is a well-balanced and, for the most part, rewarding volume. It adds fresh insights to a familiar topic: the variously conflicting claims of supernatural and secular power in early modern English culture. It must be said that neither the introductory essay nor the specific studies comprising the volume engage very deeply with recent conceptual re-framings of how to think about secularity and secularization. (For example, neither the work of philosopher Charles Taylor nor the theo-cultural polemic associated with the Radical Orthodoxy movement gains traction here.) Readers of this journal will likely also have cause to wish for more sustained engagement with the complex role played by Jesuit thinkers in the gradual realignment of spiritual and secular affairs in early modernity. Brief mentions of the robust participation of Robert Parsons, S.J., in interconfessional polemics (57–58) whet the appetite for a companion volume addressing more frontally the vexed associations of “Catholic magic” (67) and Jesuit statecraft. To be fair, the long-range perspective on Catholic and Jesuit involvement in the engines of secularization is not advanced as a goal. Instead, at the outset the editors establish modest parameters for the volume’s guiding terms. Thus the construal of the secular as “designating power perceived as originating from ordinary human capacities, power and ability, and as initiated by human motivations” (3). Correspondingly, the domain of the supernatural “references forces perceived as originating with non-human sources, beyond ordinary human capacity” (3).

The minimalist framework suggests another confining feature of the volume. Its concerns do not venture far into considerations of the kinds of power indicated in the title. The suppleness of the term may be inferred, however, from the cumulative range of evidentiary resources (e.g., recorded skirmishes over the scope of ecclesiological offices, the mix of regulatory and punitive motives prompting juridical or legislative actions, and the rhetorical tactics observed in theatrical, poetic, and pamphlet materials). All of this is to say that while the diffuseness of the volume’s governing terms is frustrating conceptually, in practical terms this feature gives wide berth to the inductive energies driving the assembled topics.

Topics range over several distinct areas: the tactical appeal of allegations of witchcraft and magic in the expression of dynastic anxieties in Elizabeth I’s reign; territorial conflicts traversing the reformed episcopate; symptomatic evidence in non-canonical dramatic literature of the era’s readiness to interrogate Reformation-era doctrines concerning cultural shibboleths such as suicide and

the range of admissible communication with the dead; and a highly suggestive pairing of canonical works—Ludwig Lavater's *Of Ghosts and Spirites Walking by Nyght* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*—that testifies to the extended interest, across decades and genres, in scrutinizing the political implications of metaphysically-tinged wonder at the perception of the supernatural.

The volume is intelligently divided into three parts: “Magic at Court,” “Performance, Text, and Magic,” and “Witchcraft, the Devil and the Body.” The three essays included in “Magic at Court” make for a conceptually coherent ensemble that presents a compelling picture of the recurrent ideological and political cocktail of advantage and risk associated with avatars of supernatural agency in the first two decades of Elizabeth I's reign. Building on his important work on John Dee, Glyn Parry assesses the volatility of Dee's reputation in alchemy in the scramble for control of the queen's rhetoric of sovereignty. As Parry shows, Elizabeth's and Robert Cecil's known patronage of alchemy was linked to the discipline's association with prophecy—and its corresponding utility in advancing “Elizabeth's anticipated alchemical imperial destiny” (29)—even as it also waged a losing battle with conservative ecclesiastical voices, notably John Whitgift's and Richard Bancroft's, whose politically-inspired suspicion of alchemy's subversive potential helped sequester “radical occult philosophy from the ‘public sphere’” (40). The welcome pairing of strong essays by Pierre Kapitaniak and Michael Devine (dealing respectively with the career of Reginald Scott and the deep context of the 1563 witchcraft legislation) gives a nuanced picture of the politically significant association of anti-Catholic sentiment and the felt danger of witchcraft in the architecture of Elizabeth's dynastic and ideological legitimacy as monarch of the reformed church-state.

The second part (“Performance, Text, and Magic”) fulfills the introductory chapter's promise to mobilize “interdisciplinary dialogues” between the “disciplines of history and literary studies” (5) as a means of gauging the era's supple reservoirs of language and gesture for tracking contemporary investments in the idea of supernatural agency. Early modern fascination with witchcraft and the spirit world are recurring tropes here, but the fundamental coherence of the section turns on the essays' collective fluency in demonstrating the performative character of expression across diverse genres. Victoria Bladen's essay shows how the polyvocal design of the collaborative play *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) offers an acute diagnosis of the maneuvers through which the scandal of witchcraft, and its supernatural charge, triggers scapegoating mechanisms in the play-world that ironically give the titular protagonist “a forum in which to voice her opposition” to the stigmatizing apparatus (116). Fiona Martin's analysis of William Sampson's *The Vow Breaker* (1636) shows how the play's homage to

Hamlet de-theologizes the earlier play's treatment of suicide and ghostly visitation—a tactic that decouples the question of supernatural life from the answers provided by Christian doctrine. In a related vein of thought, Martin Dawes's inspection of the political edginess of supernatural wonders in *Paradise Lost* points up Milton's provocative harnessing of the linkage (inherited from Greek philosophical tradition) between wonder and the onset of critical inquiry in order to dramatize the secular world's illegitimate manipulation of wonder to promote a political atmosphere of enthrallment. One of the strongest essays in the volume, Catherine Stevens's discussion of Ludwig Lavater's seminal treatise on ghosts, brilliantly demonstrates how the performative character of Lavater's "polyphonic" discourse (162) creates a textual symptom of the era's uncertain navigation between incompatible legacies of understanding the division between life and death.

Marcus Harmes's treatment of the reformed episcopate's fraught gambit for administrative control of cases of demonic possession and Charlotte-Rose Millar's assessment of the overlooked "sexual nature of English witchcraft" in early modern discourse (207) round out the volume with a timely reminder of the ways in which the trope of the contested body was a flashpoint between secular and supernatural concerns in early modernity.

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