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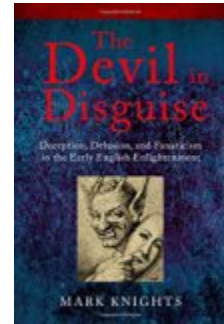
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Knights. *The Devil in Disguise: Deception, Delusion, and Fanaticism in the Early English Enlightenment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 336 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-957795-8.

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Only Connect

Britain is in crisis. Riots have erupted on the streets of London; questions persist as to whether its tradition of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence amongst its diverse peoples can be maintained for much longer; many people are concerned about whether recent immigrants from abroad will be able to assimilate and live peaceably in the country. The coalition government is wracked by infighting and some crafty political maneuvering in anticipation of its ultimate demise. The survival of the union between England and Scotland remains an open question. The costs of involvement in foreign wars continue to weigh on public finances, and debates rage over whether it is at last time for peace, even if the original war aims have not been achieved. There is a general sense that the nation has somehow lost its way over the course of the last few decades. While these sentences could easily apply to the current state of affairs in the United Kingdom, they would have been equally apt in describing the tumultuous final years of Stuart rule in the early eighteenth century.

Mark Knights's *The Devil in Disguise* aims at offering an introduction to the later Stuart period, and especially the conflicted decades that followed in the wake of the Glorious Revolution. Unlike a conventional textbook, it does not aim to be comprehensive; but much like a textbook, its goal is to explain to newcomers why the later Stuart period of English history is important and interesting. To that end, it argues that the dawning of an "early Enlightenment" in England made the decades in

and around the Glorious Revolution significant enough for us to pay attention to them today. Knights groups the numerous issues addressed by his book into two major themes; he labels them truth and change (pp. 4-9), but they could also be understood as the problems of attaining certainty in knowledge and stability in politics. One of the many virtues of this book is the way in which it links the insights made by intellectual historians of the early Enlightenment with those of political historians of the partisan divisions of post-revolutionary England. *The Devil in Disguise* successfully resists the pressures to specialize and compartmentalize that mark so much recent historical scholarship. Like E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910), it exhorts its readers to "only connect" and "live in fragments no longer."

Knights's work also shares a Hertfordshire setting with Forster's novel. But Knights's account of later Stuart Hertfordshire hardly confirms Forster's quip that "Hertfordshire is England at its quietest."^[1] Hertford Castle and its troubled inhabitants, the Cowper family, is the focus of the book. The Cowpers were united by their Whig politics and their investment in maintaining their prominent status as a dominant gentry family in this important home county. But beyond their public common face as Whig oligarchs, the Cowpers did not seem to get on very well behind closed doors. The women in the family do not seem to have been treated very well by their husbands. The matriarch of the family, Sarah, Lady Cowper (1644–1720), remarked upon her marriage with

Sir William Cowper (1639–1706) that she “never met two more averse than we in humour, passions, and affections; our reason and sense, religion or morals agree not” (p. 117). Sarah vented her frustrations in the eleven volumes of commonplace writings and over 2,300 pages of diary entries that form a major source base for this book.[2]

Sarah’s two sons, William (1665–1723) and Spencer (1670–1728), took after their parents by also entering into troubled marriages. While both sons had married in 1688, they later became involved in scandalous accusations of adulterous liaisons. William was widely reputed to be a rakish libertine who had seduced and bigamously married one Elizabeth Culling (pp. 125-40), while Spencer was the focus of a widely reported murder trial in 1699, where he was accused of killing a young Quaker woman, Sarah Stout, in order to cover up their illicit affair (pp. 10-44). William’s reputation as a cad did not prevent him from becoming lord chancellor and taking the title of Earl Cowper from King George I, and Spencer was acquitted at his trial and went on to pursue a highly successful career in law and politics. Knights uses their stories, and the scandalous tales that circulated around them, to explore the complicated connections between new attitudes towards gender and sexuality, the use of new scientific methods of determining truth, and the rise of a public sphere in which printed texts such as newspapers, pamphlets, and novels all affected the ways in which contemporaries understood the Cowpers and their troubled lives.

One is tempted to call this a microhistory, although Knights doesn’t lay claim to contributing to the genre and one could argue that the book’s narrative is somewhat too diffuse to work in the way that most other microhistories do. But his book shares some of the characteristics of classic microhistories such as Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) or Natalie Zemon Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983). Like most microhistories, *The Devil in Disguise* works outwards from individual stories in their local context to explore broader issues of social, political, and intellectual change. Knights demonstrates that later Stuart Hertfordshire was far from quiet, and the people of the county were significantly caught up in the post-revolutionary turmoil of the nation as a whole; he also manages to show just how interconnected were the lives of these people. The Cowpers hardly sat on their own, aloof and isolated, in Hertford Castle. Their lives were deeply intertwined with their fellow Hertfordians, such as the Quaker Stouts (possibly the originators of the alcoholic beverage so named); the Tory Dimsdales, who took an active role in leading the

prosecution charges against Spencer Cowper; and even the unfortunate Jane Wenham, whose pariah status as a convicted witch amongst her fellow villagers necessitated her removal to William Cowper’s property in order to ensure her own safety.

Knights’s book also resembles many microhistories in its heavy reliance on judicial records for its evidence: indeed the book is structured around three trials.[3] It begins with an exploration of Spencer Cooper’s 1699 murder trial, and then moves on to the celebrated 1710 trial of the high church Tory clergyman, Doctor Henry Sacheverell, in which both Spencer and William Cowper played prominent roles. It concludes with a study of the trial of Jane Wenham, who was the last person convicted of witchcraft in England and who benefited from the protection of the Cowper family after her trial. Legal trials offer an abundance of material from which a historian may work, especially when the proceedings have been recorded or even printed, as was so often the case with politically controversial trials in the later Stuart period.[4] The trials of Spencer Copwer, Henry Sacheverell, and Jane Wenham were all extensively reported on and discussed in the printed public sphere, and therefore Knights is able to draw upon additional source material such as pamphlets, sermons, and engraved prints to augment his study of the debates surrounding these trials. The close connection between local society in Hertfordshire and the imaginary public sphere of later Stuart England is one of the major themes of this book.

Readers familiar with Knights’s previous work are unlikely to be surprised by the arguments presented here, as it revisits and reinforces many of the arguments of his previous book, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture*, (2005). His argument that political partisanship played a key role in the origins of the eighteenth-century English novel is given further elaboration here, particularly in the discussion of Delarivier Manley’s controversial *roman à clef*, the *New Atalantis* (1709), (pp. 39-43, 126-41). Also further developed here is his previous claim that “the early, English enlightenment displayed considerable scepticism about the nature of truth, about the possibility of unity, and about the nature of progress.”[5] The book stays true to its subtitle in consistently referring to the enduring fears of “deception, delusion and fanaticism,” however variously understood, by the people of late Stuart England, even in an age of nascent Enlightenment. This is no triumphal account of the rise of Enlightenment reason, science, and toleration: instead, it rightly emphasizes just how fragile and contested Enlightenment ideals

could be in their age of emergence, no less than they continue to be in the present day.

This is a very readable book, and despite the variety of topics covered, it succeeds in connecting them all together in a coherent narrative. It appears to have been written with a student audience in mind, and it would make an excellent addition to the syllabi or reading lists for undergraduate survey courses in early modern British history. Knights presents the many (and often contradictory) mental worlds of later Stuart England through the eyes of the often troubled, but enduring and surprisingly ubiquitous, Cowper family and their multifarious connections to the wider society around them. If one wishes to look for a context in which to place the important ideas of early Enlightenment England, and there were many of them, Knights shows that one could do much worse than to explore the ways they worked to shape the lives of the Cowpers. Readers hoping to find answers to Britain's present-day problems may not find much solace in this book, but they will find an excellent guide to the ways that contemporaries faced their own problems three hundred years ago.

Notes

[1]. E. M. Forster, *Howard's End* (1910; reprint, Lon-

don: Penguin, 2000), 198.

[2]. See also Anne Kugler, *Errant Plagiary: The Life and Writing of Lady Sarah Cowper, 1644-1720* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), reviewed by Susan E. Whyman, H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7697>.

[3]. On the tendency for microhistories to rely upon judicial records, see Filippo de Vivo, "Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale: A Response," *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (Sept. 2010): 396.

[4]. See Michael Mendle, "The 'Prints' of the Trials: The Nexus of News, Politics, Law and Information in the World of Roger Morrice," in Jason McElligott, ed., *Fear, Exclusion and Revolution: Roger Morrice and Britain in the 1680s* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 123-37.

[5]. Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9. Reviewed by Paul Seaward, H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12262>.

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