

A Response to Kathleen Biddick

David Aers

Kathleen Biddick's paper is characteristically inventive. Ranging across a wide range of current writings in a multiplicity of fields in cultural and post-colonial studies, it is full of suggestive comments on their potential relevance to medieval studies. It is a fine example of that breathless intellectual curiosity which is at the heart of so much creative, original work.

Her "counter-ethnographic" lecture has been an admirable invitation for us to renew our forms of self-reflexion. It is an invitation for all of us who earn our living, or hope to earn our living, by teaching aspects of the European past, to review our own relations to its disciplinary regimes and its persecutory mechanisms. It asks us especially to connect this review with the globalization of these persecutory formations, a globalization that cannot rightly be hived off into a specialist discipline called "post-colonial studies," since it concerns us all--as medievalists and as human beings struggling with its legacies. The stories Biddick tells are, she emphasizes, stories about us too. As she conjures up the inquisitors and murderous regimes of the past she would have us recognize ourselves, academic disciplines and institutions in them. Here her oration reminds me of one of my most cherished encounters, that between Milton and his own figure of Satan in Blake's epic *Milton*. There Milton descends again to earth to revise his old battles with renewed, deeper understanding. Blake himself waits for Milton in his cottage by the Sussex coast, standing "in Satan's bosom" where he "beheld its desolations," its "furnaces of affliction," its tortured labour, poverty and crushing of human potential. Milton is once more threatened by Satan insisting that he is indeed "God the judge of all," demanding total submission to the ways of the world and his own satanic version of order and reality, one in which Jesus and his gospel of forgiveness is a pernicious "Delusion". But now Milton encounters his adversary with transformed insight: "Satan! my Spectre!" He now grasps the dialectical unity between himself and the satanic forms of life he rightly opposed and accepts the consequences, heroically: "I come to Self Annihilation." How does this figure forth our situation?¹

Biddick has chosen materials and anecdotes to answer this question, many more in the longer versions of her lecture I had read before the one she delivered today. These *exempla* work to "denaturalize" the past. Those of us who spend our working lives striving to familiarize ourselves with aspects of medieval Europe have often produced an extremely cosy world, an often rather attractive image of the inner world we have all lost and for which most of us, at some level, and however ambivalently, have not renounced all yearnings. In their very different ways, these yearnings can be seen shaping the supposedly "historical" version of the Middle Ages found in both the work of Robertsonians (so influential through the period from the 1950s into the early 1980s) and the recent work of Eamon Duffy and his fellow-travellers, work that offers an image of plenitude before the fall that was the Reformation.² The ghost of T.S. Eliot

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has enjoyed guiding the work of many who write about the European past, even when, perhaps most especially when, they are blind to the force of his vision. Biddick's lecture encourages us to pay attention to people who constantly drop out of sight in conventional historiography, while warning us that even when we think we *are* paying attention, our very acts of attention are likely to be shaped by the devil's eye with which the inquisitorial gaze and authority were so closely bound up.

And yet it is precisely in relation to those whom she would free from the inquisitor's demonologies or the ethnographers' allegedly malign technologies of power/knowledge that I find myself wishing to ask some questions. I shall try to exemplify these by just one issue. It is one, however, that involves basic questions about historical methodologies, about relations between theory and historical writing, between ethics, politics and historiography.

Biddick maintains that the later fifteenth century inquisitorial text from which she generalizes her history of the inquisition was "founded on the burnt bodies of female witches." Indeed, at one point, she seemed to equate studies of the inquisition with studies of witchcraft. European witches, in her narrative, become Indians and medieval inquisitors become modern ethnographers and historians like Carlo Ginzburg, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Georges Duby.

But the fact (yes, fact) is that the institution of the inquisition had a long history of persecuting those it construed as heretics before the late fifteenth to seventeenth century burnings (and hangings) of those then classified as "witches." In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries it did *not* construct and burn witches in the manner that we find in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I cannot accept a thesis that moves across four hundred years of European histories (plural) in a manner which at least seems, at the moment, designed to dissolve the specific history of the very institution at the core of the thesis. I want any such thesis to address the following questions: Why were certain groups of people (mainly poorer plebeian women) constructed as the kind of "witches" who needed burning to death (as heretics had been burnt to death over the previous two centuries) at the particular historical point in which this happened and in the particular region/regions it began. Neither the inquisition nor highly generalized accounts of western misogyny and western consciousness can offer us an answer here since they both long pre-existed the historical phenomena and processes that Biddick is seeking to understand. And yet it seems that the methodology on display in her lecture actually and *a priori* precludes any substantial engagement with the question I wish to have addressed.

What am I suggesting about the methodology of this historian or counter-ethnographer ethnographer? I am suggesting that it precludes research into the specificities, singularities, specific conjunctures and contingencies of the past. It blocks out the possibility of patient microhistory since it purports to have all the answers it wants without recourse to this. It seems to be another form of grand historical narrative, albeit one replete with the kind of fascinating anecdotes which 'new historicists' have made part of their signature. And Biddick certainly does have a grand world-historical story to tell. It moves from the inquisition, to the killing of witches, to homophobia, to anti-semitism, to

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genocides in the "new" world to modern medievalists, anthropologists and ethnographers, modern writers who think they have respect for the "other" but turn out to be the old demonologists and hangmen with new technologies (the tape-recorder as devil).

But a microhistory would follow the paths of historians of the persecution of witches such as Alan Macfarlane, Keith Thomas, Christina Lerner, R. I. Moore and many others. It would thus have to take note of the significant differences between the attacks on witches in Germany in the late fifteenth century and, say, Essex in the late sixteenth century, between England and Scotland. It would have to explore, perhaps community by community, *precisely who the victims were, precisely who the accusers were* (at local level and in state or ecclesiastic apparatus) and *precisely what they were accused of*. Here some categories Biddick never mentions would, as Macfarlane's work on Essex demonstrated, have to be introduced: *social stratifications* in the local community; *social class*; *poverty*; *age of victim*. It would also have to introduce, as Lerner's brilliant work on the formation and persecution of "witches" in Scotland has shown, *specific processes of state formation*. Why state formation? Because we need to know, as exactly as possible, who was instigating and controlling the persecution, how this effected the flows of judiciary power, and how it effected relations between "center," between centralizing state apparatus and traditional forms of local jurisdictions and authorities.

I do not believe that any account of the formation and practices of persecutory ideologies, technologies and institutions will be at all adequate without addressing the questions and categories I have just mentioned. Nor, and this should perhaps be still more disturbing, would it be able to take seriously the specificity, the human particularities of those who were constructed, tormented, tortured and killed.

So, in my view, we have to abandon the large scale ambitions that Biddick so inspiringly relates. Instead, I suggest that we fuse our theoretical models (absolutely necessary if we are to do anything worth doing at all) with a commitment to discovering the singularities of events and lives, to practicing the kind of microhistory so forcefully outlined by Foucault in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."³ We should not, that means, make such mistakes as assuming

that iconoclasm in East Anglia in 1428 meant the same as iconoclasm in Salisbury in 1635 or the genocide of Indians at Harvard in 1637. Nor should we ever feel pressured to set up microhistorical work *in opposition* to psychoanalytic studies, to gender studies, to queer studies or to deconstructive forms of reading: on the contrary, we can say that paradigms drawn from contemporary theories need to be joined with careful, patient microhistorical work. Only in some such way, so I believe, will medievalists make a serious contribution, one that makes good use of their particular, distinctive research and knowledges, to the study of western Europe, to the study of those constructed as "other" and killed by its range of persecutory institutions and to the study of European powers to colonize those it encountered.

Notes

1. Milton is quoted from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. D. V. Erdman, rev. ed. (New York, 1981); see plates 39-45.
2. Eamon Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven, 1992).
3. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 139-64.