

ELEMENT EIGHT



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Personal Statement

My decision to apply to the PhD in Early Modern History stems from my interest in this specific area of the discipline and its pertinence to my future career path. I have always maintained a healthy interest in history and have found the early-modern period increasingly taking precedence in my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I elected to take several modules located in early-modern history and again followed this path throughout my postgraduate degree. I have found myself captivated by the scale and pace of the transformations wrought upon European societies across this brief period and I find the interrelation between shifts in politics, religion and culture an especially interesting facet of the period.

One aspect of this period of history I have found particularly intriguing is the nature of supernatural beliefs and practices across this time. I have found the apparent trajectory of beliefs in this regard to be somewhat paradoxical given the shift towards Enlightenment values in one quarter and yet the endurance or even emergence of belief in superstition, magic and other supernatural phenomena. The area of study that first grabbed my attention was the development of the witch-hunt craze across this period. At a time when the Enlightenment and Reformation were emphasising both rationality and a metaphysical ordering to the world present in the Bible, the emergence of belief in witches appears to contradict the epistemologies of these outlooks. I read a number of papers on the potential origins of the witch-hunt phenomenon and found myself no farther forward due to the significant body of research claiming different causes or accounts of the phenomenon.

This interest led to a broadening of my reading and I became interested also in the emergence or spread of belief in ghosts across the early-modern period. This again presented a quandary with regard to the prevalence of belief in the supernatural across societies allegedly moving away from superstition and towards rooting of belief in rational arguments and/or empirical evidence. In terms of presenting myself a suitable explanatory account, I found that I had to approach the question from a sociological perspective, examining either what functions ghost beliefs may have held, or otherwise how they came to be constructed through social norms or practices. Inevitably, I came to become interested in how the changes taking place across longstanding medieval social institutions might have transformed beliefs about the supernatural across the early-modern period.

These interests in effect motivate my choice of topic for doctoral thesis. Having completed some preliminary research ahead of developing a suitable research question, I resolved that though there has been some research into what the content of ghost beliefs was in various quarters, there is little that attempts to generate a generalised picture of ghost beliefs across Protestant European societies in a methodical manner. Similarly, whilst I wanted to be robust in developing protocols for comparing beliefs across societies, I wanted my methods also to be flexible enough to arrive at an explanatory account for the changing nature of these beliefs in light of the shifts across other social institutions. These aims motivated the research proposal that I have developed thus far.

However, my aim in pursuing a PhD is not simply to fulfil an idle interest but to enter into a career in academia. To this end, I believe that the research interests of your institution

– as well as your own relevant expertise in this area – would set me in excellent stead to develop as an academic. I am aware that the department can boast impressive Research Excellence Framework results and it would be an honour to one day contribute to this reputation through my own efforts. In the meantime, I would like to make every effort to enhance my understanding of the field and prepare myself academically to undertake the research proposed above. I hope that you find my proposal an interesting one and hopefully a suitable fit for your institution and supervision. Should this be the case, I would be delighted to embark upon the first step of my journey into academia under your expert tutelage.