

Chapter 10

Travelers' Tales: Magic and Superstition on Early Modern European and London Stages

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This examination of early modern stage magic overviews its occurrence in the earliest type of mixed-gender professional theater, the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, discusses necromancers and stage magicians, and concludes by inquiring into the significance of magical impotence superstitions for the London stage. Drawing on travel journals and medical treatises as well as more familiar sources, it confirms that 'travelers' tales' can represent an invaluable documentary resource for the theater historian even when, as with the Swiss physician Thomas Platter's account of the ritual practice of magical impotence in southwestern France, their connection to the stage is indirect and previously unrecognized.

Magic in Commedia Dell'Arte Performances

Fire, fireworks, devils, and magic have a venerable stage tradition from the time of medieval mystery plays onwards.² There is considerable evidence for their occurrence on the early modern professional stage, particularly in the performances of the itinerant Italian quack troupes who drew on the *commedia dell'arte*. *Commedia* plots drew on religious as well as secular drama and the classical heritage, and its comedies, and above all its pastorals, catered to audiences' desire for spectacle by increasingly incorporating crowd-pleasing stage magic. Its generally male occult characters, whether representing a disguised comic servant or played as independent roles, were typically a necromancer, demon, spirit, or astrologer. *Commedia dell'arte* plots are preserved not in full-length playtexts,

¹ My thanks to the Herzog August Library for Visiting Fellowships and to the Arts and Humanities Research Council and British Academy for funding my researches on theatrical descriptions of Felix Platter, Thomas Platter the Younger, and Hippolytus Guarinonius, which form the basis for the present paper. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine. Thomas Platter's bracketed non-German expressions have been left untranslated.

² Philip Butterworth, *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1998).

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but as indicative “dramaturgical machines”³ or highly compressed, written plot summaries, known as scenari. Several of the 50 scenari in Flaminio Scala’s collection, the only one published during the early modern period, feature real or supposed supernatural or magical plot elements. *Lo Specchio* features two ghosts; *Il finto negromante* a Harlequin disguised as a necromancer who inscribes circles on the stage and conjures up two fake spirits; *Flavio finto negromante* a necromancer; *Isabella astrologa* the heroine disguised as a male astrologer; *Rosalba incantatrice* four spirits and a silver vase containing the “fire of truth,” in which Arlecchino burns his hands; *Dell’Orseida II* a comic servant and maid who mistake each other for ghosts; and *L’Arbore incantato* two spirits and spectacular fire effects involving a whole range of props.⁴

Early modern scenari, designed to support professional actors and protect the trade secrets of their craft from censorship and rival performers, often summarized individual *lazzi*, or set-piece pre-rehearsed comic stage routines, in two or three sentences, or even words. Commedia dell’arte actors did not use conventional playscripts, and the concise, often cryptic nature of their scenari allows only limited insights into the exact role of magic and superstition in their performances. Less direct documentation of commedia performances, such as eyewitness accounts in letters or travel journals and visual images, is particularly important for their study. While scenari and other commedia dell’arte-related texts and images amply confirm the occurrence of magic and the supernatural on early modern professional stages, documentary records illuminating the details of how this functioned in practice are extremely rare. They include eye-witness accounts among the “travelers’ tales” of two physicians. Hippolytus Guarinonius (1571–1654) was an Italian-born Catholic who observed commedia dell’arte troupes as a medical student in Padua in the mid-1590s, before practicing medicine in the Tirolean city of Hall near Innsbruck. Thomas Platter the Younger (1574–1628) was a Lutheran who left Basle in 1595 to complete his studies in Montpellier, and then stayed on to practice in the Languedoc before undertaking the grand tour which took him back to Basle in February 1600. Guarinonius describes a commedia dell’arte performance of the 1590s featuring the comic stage servant Zanni. Seeing a ghost above him, Zanni uses a ladder to climb up to a window. Once he reaches the top, flames and a young devil come flying out of the window at him, and one rocket after another explodes onto his beard. Frightened and screaming “mordio,” he tries to jump back down the ladder, only to find another ghost behind him on the ladder, with fire, who sets alight his trousers and chases him up again, where the ghost at the top once again

³ Robert Henke’s expression, see his *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell’Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 189.

⁴ Flaminio Scala, *Il Teatro delle Fauole rappresentiue, overo la ricreatione comica, boscareccia, e tragica: divisa in cinquanta giornate* (Venice: Gio. Battista Pulciani, 1611), Days 16, 21, 28, 36, 44, 47, 49.

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forces him down. This goes on for a while, until others come to his assistance.⁵ This has remarkable parallels to a lazzo or comic stage routine performed over 70 years later, in the 1660s, by the comic star of the Comédie Française, Domenico Biancolelli, in Paris:

I climb a tree on which grows some beautiful fruit, when I go to pick it, a devil comes out of the trunk and frightens me, I want to get down, but another devil at the foot of the tree begins to climb. I climb up again and descend again several times, then the magician appears who touches me and leaves me in a ridiculous pose, then he gives me his wand.⁶

Guarinonius's description of 1610 provides the specifics of an early ladder lazzo in much greater detail than any of the brief scenarios mention.⁷ Its closeness to Biancolelli's account of the 1660s confirms that the repertory of the Italian comedians in late seventeenth-century Paris included lazzi handed down from earlier generations of Italian actors.

Thomas Platter's account of the seven-strong commedia dell'arte quack troupe of Zan Bragetta, whose performances he repeatedly watched during his stay in Avignon from October to December 1598, notes the supernatural effect of their decapitation routine:

Throughout my stay in Avignon, I often saw many unusual comedy players, mainly Italians, perform there. Notable among them was Zan Bragetta, who for several weeks, on a raised platform stage in an indoor tennis court, presented many very amusing, entertaining comedies, with two women and four men, which I also visited on several occasions. [...] Item on another occasion he hacked off the head of one of the actresses behind the curtain, which then he drew aside, and there stood the head on its own in a bowl on the bench, and both her arms hung down over the bench, so that one could see the stump at the neck very clearly. Anyone who didn't know how it was done would have accepted it as genuine, because of course there was no magic involved. They also performed (pastorals) shepherd comedies very daintily, and they could act Pantalone, as well as Zanni very skilfully, not only with words, but also with dancing, mime and acrobatics, so that everyone had enough to laugh about, and watched with great enjoyment.⁸

⁵ Hippolytus Guarinonius, *Die Grewel der Verwüstung Menschlichen Geschlechts* (Ingolstadt: Andreas Angermayr, 1610, 375).

⁶ For *Arlecchino creduto Principe*, see Delia Gambelli, *Arlecchino a Parigi*, Part II (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993, 1997), 330 and (in translation) Virginia Scott, *The Commedia dell'Arte in Paris, 1644–1697* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 143–4.

⁷ See, for example, Scala, *Il Teatro*, Day 21: "Il finto negromante." On its drunken ladder lazzi, see Natalie Crohn Schmitt, "'Il finto negromante': The Vitality of a Commedia dell'Arte Scenario by Flaminio Scala, 1611," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29.4 (2009): 299–326.

⁸ Thomas Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter d. J.: Beschreibung der Reisen durch Frankreich, Spanien, England und die Niederlande, 1595–1600*, ed. Rut Keiser (Basel & Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1968), 305.

The following section further discusses this venerable magic routine, already popular in ancient Egypt.

Necromancers and Stage Magicians

The sinister reputation of performative magic is illuminated by accounts of its off-stage deployment. As a Montpellier medical student in July 1555, in the company of his professor Honoré Du Chastel, Thomas Platter's much older half-brother, the renowned Basle physician Felix Platter, had witnessed the public execution of a peasant. This peasant had terrorized his neighbors in a manner reminiscent of three young Périgord hoaxers described in the 1570s by Montaigne. They, however, had remained hidden while imitating supernatural spirits only with their voices.⁹ Montaigne inclines towards ascribing such cases to the mental disturbances of their perpetrators rather than to evil intent or supernatural causes. Only vaguely alluding to the hoaxers' jail sentence, he repeatedly firmly situates their "harmesle devise or juggling tricke" in the theatrical sphere of stage magic. The physician Guarinonius explains that "lying fortune-tellers, cheating astrologers, palm-readers and wound-blessers, harbourers of devils and spirits, destroyers of people, cattle and land, witches and similar monstrous patients," are not generally seen by doctors, because most are of sound body when dispatched by the hangman.¹⁰ He suggests alcoholism as one possible explanation for the symptoms of demonic possession, asking of habitual abusers of distilled spirits, "How many of them become so drunk like this that they spew monstrous ghosts, or like a living Lucifer, fire and flames from their jaws?"¹¹ In publicly dressing up as a devil, the Montpellier peasant, whose execution Felix Platter witnessed in July 1555, broke a taboo whose habitual transgression during carnival time was the subject of stringent municipal regulations in many parts of Europe. As late as 1618, for example, a Tirolean regulation accused masked carnival masqueraders of terrifying children and pregnant women.¹² Felix Platter is explicit on the French peasant's fate. Having paraded in public in his devil costume, spewing fire from his nose, ears, and mouth, claiming that he was the Devil and would drag the local priesthood and population off at night if they did not give him money, "He was hanged from the gallows in front of the city hall, then immediately taken down, and his head, arms and legs hacked off. Dr Honoratus [Castellanus], with

⁹ Michel de Montaigne, "Of the lame or cripple," in *Essays Written in French by Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio (London: Edward Blount & William Barret, 1613), 580. See also Emily Butterworth, "The Work of the Devil? Theatre, the Supernatural, and Montaigne's Public Stage," *Renaissance Studies* 22.5 (2008): 711, 720–22.

¹⁰ University of Innsbruck Library, UB Cod.110, IV, ff. 446^v, 452^v.

¹¹ Guarinonius, *Grewel*, 663.

¹² Nikolaus Graß, "Der Kampf gegen Fasnachtsveranstaltungen in der Fastenzeit, nach Tiroler Quellen dargestellt," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 53 (1956/57): 227.

whom I had eaten lunch, took me to a house in which there were many ladies and gentlemen, from which I watched it."¹³

Some of those who described stage magic went to great lengths to demystify professional stage magic. Guarinonius provides an example of this approach:

Concerning itinerant entertainers, some can juggle so quickly simply with their hands that they can dupe the eyesight of the simpleminded, so that simpletons regard their juggling as miracles or even as magic. As when I was told, as if it were a great miracle, how one of them dealt playing cards onto the middle of a table, and found the King of Bells by tapping the arranged cards with a little stick. This card moved out of the pack by itself, and followed the little stick up and down the whole table, in whichever direction the entertainer turned the stick. I said to him he could make himself a similar stick by fixing an iron nail at the front, and hammering it into the centre of its tip so that it is hidden and can't be seen. Then when the entertainer lays the card on the table again, he should confront him, pull his stick out from under his coat, and command the King of Bells to come out.¹⁴

The following day the spectator did just that and, to the total amazement of all, not least the terrified magician, got two cards to follow his stick round the table before the performer gathered up his cards and fled, without divulging his secret. Guarinonius, however, eagerly does so: "The two cards had a layer of magnetic lodestone between their paper layers, which is why they followed the iron in the stick. Such entertainment cannot be counted as exercise, but only as a foolish diversion for the eyes of the inquisitive."¹⁵ Nevertheless, magic of every kind, including stage magic, was heavily tainted with demonic associations. Even such modest card tricks were targeted by demonological treatises, such as *De la Demonomanie des sorciers* (1580) by the eminent French lawyer and influential demonologist Jean Bodin.

Despite unquestioningly accepting the physical existence of demons and devils, the physician Guarinonius favors unmasking the lowly tricks of juggling magicians through rational explanation. Bodin, by contrast, condemns jugglers who "enchant people's eyes [...] by means of evil spirits" and sorcerers who use juggling routines to lull spectators into believing they are merely performing idle stage tricks.¹⁶ Deuteronomy provided a fertile source for early modern anti-theatrical condemnation of stage magic. King James VI/I's authoritative bible translates the key passage as:

¹³ Felix Platter, *Felix Platter Tagebuch (Lebensbeschreibung), 1536–1567*, ed. Valentin Lötscher (Basel & Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1976), 220.

¹⁴ Guarinonius, *Grewel*, 1255–6. The four suits, still used in some Alpine regions, were oakleaves, hearts, acorns, and fools' bells.

¹⁵ Guarinonius, *Grewel*, 1256.

¹⁶ Jean Bodin, *De la demonomanie des sorciers* (Paris: Jacques de Puys, 1580), sigs. f.47^r, f.242^v.

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There shall not be found among you *any one* that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, *or* that useth divination, *or* an observer of times, *or* an enchanter, *or* a witch. *Or* a charmer, *or* a consulter with familiar spirits, *or* a wizard, *or* a necromancer. For all that do these things *are* an abomination unto the Lord.¹⁷

Key sceptical demonological writers such as the physician Johann Wier (or Weyer) on mainland Europe or the English lawyer Reginald Scot embraced anti-theatrical interpretations of such passages, adapting them to their own ends by vigorously pursuing a rational, science-based approach that routinely likened supposedly genuine supernatural phenomena to the cheap effects of stage jugglers.¹⁸ Scot, writing in 1584, dwells in some detail on the mechanics underlying professional stage decapitation routines of precisely the type described by Platter in 1598.¹⁹ Scot's account may have directly influenced Philoclea's description to Pyrocles, in Book III of Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, of the mechanics of the fictional mock beheading to which she was subjected.²⁰ The trick, integral to some religious mystery plays, had been performed since around 2600 BCE.²¹ According to an Italian demonological treatise of 1608, the Jewish physician Zedechias was said to have entertained royalty in the year 876 AD by beheading men, exhibiting the head "in a bowl dripping with blood, and then suddenly [restoring] the men unharmed each to his own place."²² Scot's account of the trick influenced accounts in the English actor and stage magician William Vincent's treatise on "the art of jugling," first published in 1634, and in the demonological treatise of

¹⁷ James Stuart, King James VI/I, ed., Deuteronomy, in *The Holy Bible, conteyning the Old Testament, and the New: newly translated out of the Originall tongues: & with the former Translations diligently compared and revised by his Maiesties special Comandement* (London: Robert Baker, 1611), 18:10–12. In 1603, succeeding Elizabeth I, King James VI of Scotland was also crowned James I of England. All references to this edition will henceforth be denoted in text and as deriving from the KJV, or the King James Bible.

¹⁸ Reginald Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft, wherein the lewde dealings of witches and witchmongers is notable detected* (London: William Brome, 1584), 111–15; Johann Wier, *De praestigiis daemonum et incantationibus ac veneficiis* (Basel: Iohannes Oporinus, 1563); on Wier and Scot's scepticism, see also Verena Theile, "Staging the Occult: Continental European Influences on the Literature of the English Renaissance Stage" (Ph.D. dissertation, Washington State University, 2006), 68–86.

¹⁹ Scot, *Discoverie*, 349–50.

²⁰ Philip Sidney, *The Covntesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (London: William Ponsonbie, 1590), sig. 339. Pace Sara Ruth Watson's suggestion that Sidney and Scot may have witnessed the same magic stage routine performed at St Bartholomew Fair in 1582, see her "Sidney at Bartholomew Fair," *PMLA* 53.1 (1938): 125–8.

²¹ Philip Butterworth, *Magic on the Early English Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xv.

²² Francesco Mario Guazzo, *Compendium maleficarum*, trans. E. A. Ashwin (New York: Dover, 1988), 5.

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1655 with which Thomas Ady carried Scot's skeptical mantel forward into the mid seventeenth century. Vincent's account is illustrated with a new picture.²³ Ady's version, illustrated with a close copy of Scot's woodcut, features a "Jugler's" mock decapitation of his "Boy" involving a false head "so lively in shew that the very bone and marrow of the neck appeareth, insomuch that some Spectators have fainted at the sight hereof."²⁴

The significant overlap between stage magic and the marketing of medicine is particularly apparent in spectacular self-harming routines. Scot's detailed consideration of juggling (the early modern term for stage magic) illustrates the specially adapted knives and bodkins some jugglers used to promote the illusion of cutting or stabbing themselves on stage and alludes to those who make a public show of snake-charming or profess to "carrie burning coles in their bare hands, and dip their said hands in hot skalding liquor."²⁵ Elaborate magic routines of this type were pioneered by quacks, including some attached to commedia dell'arte troupes, who professed to publicly cut, burn, or poison themselves, before curing themselves with patent medicines thereafter sold to the astounded crowd. Similar associations inform occult stage scenes such as that in which Jonson has the Dame of his *Masque of Queenes* melodramatically proclaim to the witches of her coven: "Reach me [...] a rustie knife, to wound mine arme; And as it drops, I'le speake a *charme*."²⁶

Even more than quack routines, the magic embedded in full-length plays referenced the traditions of elite sorcery, practiced by educated necromancers and influenced by the pre-Christian classical literary heritage. Thomas Platter noted his impressions of more than one such. In April 1597, he was invited to dinner by Pierre d'Augier, governor of Bagnols-sur-Cèzes and Provost of Languedoc, who regaled Platter with tales of his youth, when he too had studied medicine and traveled overseas before returning to take up the high office which, in his own words, "had brought him great respect":

²³ [William Vincent], *Hocvs Pocvs Ivnior: the anatomie of legerdemain, or, the art of Iugling set forth in his proper colours* (London: R. M., 1634), sigs. E2^r-3^r. On William Vincent, whose stage name was Hocus Pocus, see N. W. Bawcutt, "William Vincent, alias Hocus Pocus: A Travelling Entertainer of the Seventeenth Century," *Theatre Notebook* 54 (2000): 130-38; and Philip Butterworth, "Brandon, Feats and Hocus Pocus: Jugglers Three," *Theatre Notebook* 57 (2003): 89-106.

²⁴ Thomas Ady, *A candle in the dark: shewing the Divine Cause of the distractions of the whole Nation of England, and of the Christian World [...]* (London: Robert Ibbitson, 1655), 39.

²⁵ See Scot, *Discoverie*, 255, and plates between 352-3. See also M A Katritzky, *Women, Medicine and Theatre, 1500-1750: Literary Mountebanks and Performing Quacks* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 96-9.

²⁶ Ben Jonson, "The Masque of Queenes," in *The workes of Benjamin Jonson* (London: W. Stansby, 1616), 955.

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But just because he professed to having unusual knowledge, and presented several important people with gold rings in which there was a ghost (*spiritus familiaris*), he was regarded as a magician or necromancer. As I was then told, he was also said to have recently presented a high-ranking noblewoman at her request with such a gold ring, in which a secret ghost was trapped. Whenever the woman had a question, this ghost could reveal the complete answer to her. She only had to pay homage to it for two hours every day, as the provost had commanded her to, otherwise she would be in danger of extreme misfortune, which is in fact what happened. When she had found out everything that was said about her and that went on around her, she eventually became so confused and melancholic that she no longer paid the ghost in the ring the homage she had pledged him. So she was possessed by him, and had to end her life miserably, as I was told. I was encouraged to find this more credible by what he did and didn't say, because he spent a good part of dinner discussing evil spirits with me, and how few ceremonies are essential in order to conjure up Satan himself.²⁷

Despite the efforts of skeptics such as Scot, whose treatise scornfully exposes the “ridiculous coniurations” required “to enclose a spirit in a christall stone,” early modern literature offers a definite sense of Satan’s physical reality.²⁸ Thomas Platter may have been underwhelmed by the clawmarks allegedly left by the devil when he got stuck in a fountain Platter was shown while visiting a church in Marseille in February 1597 (“but as for whether the poor devil drowned or managed to get away, it is no longer possible to tell”).²⁹ But his account of Barcelona inquisition suspects in January 1599 twice emphasizes the devils painted on their robes, and leaves no doubt that even if he did not believe in the physical reality of devils, others did.³⁰ As late as 1647, the English traveler James Howell, who confirms this inquisition robe as “the *Sambenito* which is a straight yellow coat without sleeves, having the pourtrait of the Devill painted up and down in black,” robustly attacks what he perceives as skeptical tendencies in a demonological manuscript lent him by Sir Edward Spencer: “we read that both *Iews* and *Romanes* with all other nations of Christendom, and our Ancestors heer in *England* enacted laws against *Witches*, sure they were not so silly as to wast their brains in making laws against Chymeras.”³¹

Thomas Platter’s account of his evening with d’Augier makes no secret of the fact that he found the loquacious old bachelor tiresome and his tall tales less than credible:

²⁷ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 212–13.

²⁸ Scot, *Discoverie*, 411–13, 430.

²⁹ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 191.

³⁰ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 351–2, 369–70, 386–7.

³¹ James Howell, *Epistolæ Ho-Eliaenæ: Familiar letters, domestic and forren [...]*, the 6th edition (London: Thomas Guy, 1688), 219, 425. The manuscript was possibly a pre-publication copy of Nathanael Homes’s *Dæmonologie and theologie* (London: Thomas Roycroft, 1650).

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He got so wrapped up in his discourse that I just wished I was back in my inn. All his speech and conversation was of supernatural arts, evil spirits or beautiful women, in exactly the same way that the Comte de Cantecroy of Besançon later regaled me with such talk. I firmly believe that they are inmates of one (*praedicamento*) asylum. At around eleven, after eating an impressive meal, he allowed me to be accompanied to my inn by a torchbearer, with the request that I should dine with him and spend time with him every day that I remained in Bagnols. But I excused myself and took my leave of him, saying that I was on the point of leaving. Nevertheless, I stayed on in Bagnols for the 17, 18, 19 and 20 April, preparing to take up my professional practice [in nearby Uzès], and not leaving my inn.³²

But although Platter's reference to the asylum indicates that he aligned himself with skeptics such as Wier and Scot, who sought medical and mental rather than supernatural explanations for such tales, it is clear that for him the concept of black magic itself was both real and serious. This is confirmed by the edge of genuine fear to his recollections of an encounter of 1600 in Besançon with the man of whom d'Augier had reminded him, François Perrenot de Granvelle, comte de Cantecroy (1550–1607). When Cantecroy “spoke repeatedly of the magic arts, which he was extremely interested in using to take the lives of several people,” the young physician responded by leaving the city “in great haste, because I found his company anything but congenial.”³³

Magical Impotence

Early modern stage witchcraft was informed by medical quackery as well as magical occultism, elite necromancy of the type engaged in by d'Augier and Cantecroy, but also popular sorcery of the type practiced by the numerous uneducated wisewomen and cunning-folk who dispensed amuletic and charm-based cures and counter-cures. Thomas Platter's digressions of April 1599 on the rural Catholic peasants of Villefranche offer insights into the activities of wisewomen and cunning-folk, which routinely attracted the label witchcraft:

In their churches, everything they hear is spoken and sung in Latin, which they don't understand. In such mountainous regions there are few sermons, as such people don't regularly attend them, because they often live very far from the churches, and become rough, godless folk easily led astray by the evil spirit, pledging themselves to him and becoming witches or sorcerers, of whom many are to be found in these mountains.³⁴

³² Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 213.

³³ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 920–22.

³⁴ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 404–5.

Platter closely observed and recorded some superstitious practices of such “rough, godless folk.” The cultural value of his descriptions has long been acknowledged by anthropologists and historians. His account of one particular marriage custom he encountered in Languedoc also repays examination by literary historians, because it brings into sharp focus an occult practice that is central to one of the most celebrated scandals of the Jacobean court and repeatedly features in early modern English drama. Platter, who encountered the practice legally referred to as *ligaturas* or *ligare ligulam* in 1598 while practicing as a newly qualified physician in Uzès, provides the French and German terms for it: “nestel knipfen (de l’aiguillete).”³⁵ He records it as a capital offence punishable by burning at the stake, practiced by female as well as male magicians and by the clergy, the latter sometimes accused of doing so in order to divert from cunning-folk and white witches some of the considerable fees they charged for reversing its effects.³⁶ Endemic to coastal Languedoc, Poitou, and Normandy and legally acknowledged even beyond France,³⁷ “l’aiguillete,” he notes, was said to render newlywed men impotent, but only with their own bride. It was so feared that few Languedoc couples dared to marry openly. Thomas Platter’s brother Felix commented on this supernatural incantation’s devastating effects in a medical treatise in which he firmly attributed male impotence to male health issues, and not to female black magic.³⁸ In March 1596, before hosting his wedding banquet in Montpellier, a fellow lodger of Thomas Platter’s, the law student Rovièr, had secretly married his bride in a small village, the couple “going to the church alone and quietly, as is customary in Languedoc, so that their codpiece points would not be knotted.”³⁹ Noting that similar arrangements were made for a private wedding in Uzès in July 1598 and realizing that in over three years in Languedoc, he himself had seen only ten weddings, Thomas Platter’s investigations into this “demonic magic, which is nothing less than the

³⁵ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 274 (modern French usage: “nouer l’aiguillete”).

³⁶ Kevin C. Robbins, “Magical Emasculation, Popular Anticlericalism, and the Limits of the Reformation in Western France circa 1590,” *Journal of Social History* 31.1 (1997): 65, 75–6.

³⁷ See Cyrus L. Day’s “Knots and Knot Lore,” *Western Folklore* 9.3 (1950): 246–8, where Day provides the medieval Hebrew (“asar”) and Swedish (“nalknytning”) terms. Joëlle Fuhrmann touches on legal issues relating to ligature in medieval Germany; see her *Theorie und Praxis in der Gesetzgebung des Spätmittelalters in Deutschland am Beispiel der Ingelheimer Schöffensprüche* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), 93–4.

³⁸ Felix Platter and Thomas Platter the Younger, *Félix et Thomas Platter a Montpellier 1552–1559–1595–1599. Notes de voyage de deux étudiants balois, publiées d’après les manuscrits originaux appartenant a la bibliothèque de l’université de Bâle* (Montpellier: Camille Coulet, 1892), 276–7; Robbins, “Magical Emasculation,” 80n.28; and Katharina Huber, *Felix Platters “Observationes”: Studien zum Frühneuzeitlichen Gesundheitswesen in Basel* (Basel: Schwabe, 2003), 235.

³⁹ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 145.

work of the Devil,” reveals the exact procedure whereby practitioners knotted a reinforced leather lace, or point, of the type used to lace up codpieces:

The whole magic consists only in this. At the same time as the Priest says the words ‘What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder’,⁴⁰ the male or female magician knots a codpiece point and says (‘Mais bien le diable’, en jettant un patac derriere les espales) ‘From the Devil’, and at the same time throws a penny behind him, saying ‘Show Devil, take Devil’. In this way the penny is lost and the magic is arranged. Following this, the groom is unable to recognize his wife until the codpiece point is unknotted again. But they are well able to use their virility with other married and unmarried women, and in this way whoring and divorce ensue [...] Many other variations are also practiced instead of codpiece point knotting, on which I prefer to remain silent. The historian Bodin writes that there was a woman who could carry out this magic in twenty-five different ways.⁴¹

Platter here refers to the well-known passage in *Demonomanie*. Indicating how thoroughly embedded the practice was in French tradition, it summarizes Bodin’s discussion of 1567 in Poitiers with his innkeeper, during which she personally revealed to him over fifty ways of using “l’aiguillete” to cause magical impotence.⁴²

The custom’s roots are ancient and transnational. A poem in Ovid’s *Amores* concerns an episode of impotence blamed on witchcraft.⁴³ Dating from the sixth century onwards, the medieval *Libri Poenitentiales* are among the earliest official records of the Christian struggle to contain and suppress traditional superstitious practices such as the amuletic use of magical knots to assign and avert illness and bad fortune. *Ligaturas* is denounced by the seventh-century Greek Archbishop of Canterbury, St Theodore of Tarsus, and outlawed by Burchard, the skeptical early eleventh-century Bishop of Worms, who identifies the female enchanters of magically impotent newlywed husbands as their rejected previous lovers and expressly condemns not only such practices, but also those who believe in them.⁴⁴ Canon law permitted the annulment of marriages permanently affected by magical impotence, and its practitioners were punished by excommunication, later raised to the death penalty. This was enforced as late as 1718, when the Parliament of Bordeaux condemned a convicted practitioner to be burned at the stake.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Mark 10:9, KJV. Bodin and John Barclay confirm that the point is knotted while the priest reads a specific passage of the marriage ceremony; see Bodin, *Demonomanie*, sig. 207, and Barclay, *Replique au sieur Coeffeteau, sur sa response à l’advertissement du roy aux princes & potentates de la Chrestienté* (London: I. Norton, 1610), 114–15.

⁴¹ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 274–5.

⁴² Bodin, *Demonomanie*, f.58r; Robbins, “Magical Emasculation,” 65.

⁴³ Lee R. Entin-Bates, “Montaigne’s Remarks on Impotence,” *Modern Language Notes* 91.4 (1976): 643.

⁴⁴ Day, “Knots,” 246; and John T. McNeill, “Folk-Paganism in the Penitentiales,” *The Journal of Religion* 13.4 (1933): 457, 461, 464.

⁴⁵ “Witchcraft,” *The North American Review* 106.218 (1868): 226.

Although sixteenth-century medical professionals such as Ambroise Paré widely accepted witchcraft as the standard explanation for magical impotence, Montaigne, in “Of the force of imagination,” recognizes it as not controlled by external occult enchantment, but by internal psychosexual problems.⁴⁶ He wrote this essay in the 1570s, and it took another 150 years for the finest minds of Paris to come round to the viewpoint that “the tying of the Codpiece-point is accounted an effect of the Fancy, and is cur’d by curing the Fancy alone.”⁴⁷ Long after that, the practice continued to be greatly feared in many regions, with late seventeenth-century Russian nuns in particular “accounted very dextrous both in tying and unraveling the Codpiece point.”⁴⁸ Literary references to the practice persisted in learned translations of poems, popular satire, and broadsheet alike for many decades after fashion had banished codpieces to the comic stage and rural backwaters.⁴⁹

Fifteenth-century witchcraft tracts providing detailed discussions of magical impotence include that infamous witch-hunting tool of the inquisition, Heinrich Kramer’s *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), and one of its most influential sources, Johannes Nider’s *Formicarius* (c. 1437–38).⁵⁰ Walter Stephens reminds us that at this time, *maleficium* was less often used to denote black magic in general than to specifically denote the witchcraft crime on which Kramer’s treatise most insistently focuses, namely magical impotence hindering male consummation of matrimony, as defined by canon law.⁵¹ Warning his readers “do not doubt that [marital impotence]

⁴⁶ Montaigne, “Of the force of imagination” and “Vpon some verses of Virgill,” in *Essayes*, 40–43, 471–503; Entin-Bates, “Montaigne’s remarks,” 640–54, 645.

⁴⁷ G. Havers, trans., *A general collection of discourses of the Virtuosi of France, upon questions of all sorts of philosophy, and other natural knowledge, made in assembly of the Beaux Esprits at Paris* (London: Thomas Dring & John Starkey, 1664), 214–18; Havers and J. Davies, trans., *Another collection of philosophical conferences of the French Virtuosi upon questions of all sorts; for the improving of natural knowledge, made in the assembly of the Beaux Esprits at Paris* (London: Thomas Dring & John Starkey, 1665), 260.

⁴⁸ Samuel Collins, *The present state of Russia in a letter to a friend at London* (London: Dorman Newman, 1671), 10–11; J. Crull, *The antient and present state of Muscovy* (London: A. Roper & A. Bosvile, 1698), 158.

⁴⁹ Cyrano de Bergerac, *Satyrical characters and handsome descriptions in letters written to severall persons of quality* (London: Henry Herringman, 1658), 1: “Winter hath tyed the Earth’s Codpiece point, & hath made the substance Impotent.” See also Well-willer [pseud.], *The women’s petition against coffee* (London: A W, 1700), sig. A^v: “the continual sipping of this pittiful Drink is enough to bewitch Men of two and twenty, and tie up the Codpiece-point without a Charm”; and the anonymous broadsheet, *A merry wedding; or, brave Arthur of Bradly* (London: W O & A M, c. 1695).

⁵⁰ Michael D. Bailey, “From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 76.4 (2001): 960–90, 977; Moira Smith, “The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor: Penis Theft in the ‘Malleus Maleficarum,’” *Journal of Folklore Research* 39.1 (2002): 85–117, 93.

⁵¹ Walter Stephens, “Witches Who Steal Penises: Impotence and Illusion in ‘Malleus Maleficarum,’” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28.3 (1998): 499, 502, 521.

can be brought about by the power of witchcraft,” Kramer explains that witches “act in the despite of married women, creating every opportunity for adultery when the husband is able to copulate with other women but not with his own wife; and similarly the wife also has to seek other lovers.”⁵² Scot includes in his 1584 list of the “miraculous actions” of witches their ability to “take awaie mans courage, and the power of generation [...] and deprive men of their priivities, and otherwise of the act and use of venerie.”⁵³ Recording a wide range of bizarre “popish and magicall cures, for them that are bewitched in their priivities,” Scot skeptically comments: “here againe we maie not forget the inquisitors note, to wit; that manie are so bewitched, that they cannot vse their own wiues, but anie other bodies they maie well enough away withall. Which witchcraft is practiced among many bad husbands, for whom it were a good excuse to saie they were bewitched.”⁵⁴

Another rare pre-seventeenth-century English reference to magical impotence is that of King James VI/I. Decrying it as “such kinde of Charme as commonlie daft wiues vses [...] by staying married folks, to have naturallie adoe with other, (by knitting so manie knottes upon a point at the time of their marriage),”⁵⁵ he persecuted it during his reign. Joan Flower and her daughters Margaret and Phillipa Flower were executed in Lincoln in March 1618 for the death by witchcraft of Lord and Lady Rutland’s infant sons Francis and Henry. Evidence that they used magical impotence occurs in a pamphlet. It notes that Margaret Flower testified that “her Mother and shee, and her Sister agreed together to bewitch the Earle and his Lady, that they might have no more children.”⁵⁶ Alleged magical impotence is also at the center of one of the highest-profile English legal cases of James’s English reign. This was not a witch trial but the nullity proceedings between Frances Howard (1590–1632) and her first husband, Robert Devereux, third Earl of Essex (1591–1646), aged 15 and 14 when they married in January 1606. The annulment freeing her to marry Robert Carr, future Earl of Somerset, strongly supported by King James VI/I, was granted in 1613 on the grounds that “the Earl of Essex, for some secret, incurable binding impediment, did never carnally know, or was or is able carnally to know the lady Frances Howard.”⁵⁷ The match

⁵² Quoted in Stephens (in translation), “Witches Who Steal Penises,” 499, 519.

⁵³ Scot, *Discoverie*, 10.

⁵⁴ Scot, *Discoverie*, 82, 79–80.

⁵⁵ James Stuart, King James VI/I, *Daemonologie, in forme of a dialogue* (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1597), 11–12. See also Abraham Cowley, *Poems* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1656), 31; Edward Leigh’s alphabetical list of “certain choice French proverbs” in *Select and choice observations* (London: John Williams, 1657), 270; and William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, *A new method, and extraordinary invention, to dress horses* (London: Tho. Milbourn, 1667), 274.

⁵⁶ “The examination of Margaret Flower,” in *The wonderful discoverie of the witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillip Flower, daughters of Ioan Flower neer Bever Castle* (London: J. Barnes, 1618), unfoliated.

⁵⁷ Marion O’Connor, introduction to *The Witch*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 1124.

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was vehemently opposed by Carr's mentor and secretary Sir Thomas Overbury. His suspicious death in September 1613, shortly before Carr and Howard married, led to yet another twist of this long-running Jacobean court scandal, a murder trial resulting in the couple's conviction. In March 1618, James Howell alluded to the circumstances of Howard's unconsummated first marriage in a letter from London to his father in Wales, reporting on this trial. Unlike less favored accessories to the crime such as Sir Gervase Elwes, the Somersets escaped capital punishment. Instead, they were pardoned and banished:

Touching the *News* of the Time: [...] the Earl of *Somerset*, hath got a Lease of Ninety Years for his Life, and so hath his *Articulate* Lady, called so for Articling against the Frigidity and Impotence of her former Lord: She was afraid that [Sir Edward] *Cooke* the Lord Chief Justice (who had used extraordinary art and industry in discovering all the circumstances of the Poisoning of *Overbury*) would have made white *Broth* of them, but that the *Prerogative* kept them from the *Pot*: yet the subservient Instruments, the lesser Flies, could not break throw.⁵⁸

Many early modern London plays confirm that a major focus for expectations of stage witchcraft and sorcery was as agents for the loss of sexual honor (for women, this primarily involved loss of virginity; for men, it generally involved loss of potency, firstly as a direct medical symptom: impotence, or secondly via a third party: cuckoldry). The theme informs the scene in which Marlowe's Faustus chooses to demonstrate the height of his powers in the black arts to the emperor by crowning two of his young courtiers with cuckolds' horns, a fate so deeply shaming that they retired from the imperial court to "live obscure, / 'till time shall alter these our brutish shapes. / Sith black disgrace hath thus eclipsed our fame, / we'll rather die with grief, than live with shame."⁵⁹ *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll* features a scene influenced by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which a menacing "Enchanter" unsuccessfully deploys the occult musical "inchantments" and "incantations" of his retinue of fairies and spirits to seduce the play's heroine, Lucilia.⁶⁰ Entreated by Syphax for love charms to seduce the chaste Sophonisba, Marston's "dreadful Erictho" tricks the Libyan king into

⁵⁸ Howell, *Familiar letters*, 3.

⁵⁹ Christopher Marlowe, *The tragicall history of D. Faustus* (London: Thomas Bushell, 1604), 4.1–5. A pair of horns is the most widespread but by no means the only early modern iconographic signifier of cuckoldry. The nest of winged phalluses, far from being a "titillating" figment of the imagination of early modern demonological writers such as Kramer, is a graphic visual indicator with venerable classical roots, of the bastard-generating reproductive strategies of the cuckoo, the bird that gives cuckoldry its name (pace Stephens ("Witches Who Steal Penises," 495–529), Smith ("The Flying Phallus," 97–102), and Lyndal Roper ("Witchcraft and the Western Imagination," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 16 [2006]: 117–41, 133).

⁶⁰ *The wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll* (London: Richard Oliue, 1600), 3.3 (sigs. E2r–v). See also Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Art to enchant': Musical Magic and its Practitioners in English Renaissance Drama," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 115.2 (1990): 198.

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her own bed.⁶¹ Mother Maudlin, in Jonson's unfinished *Sad Shepherd*, casts spells against lovers.⁶² Another substantial dramatic treatment of this theme occurs in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*, written around the year 1616, by which time the circumstances of Frances Howard's annulment were common knowledge.

The love triangle at the heart of one of the three sub-plots of *The Witch* in some respects resembles one in Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* of 1611.⁶³ Middleton's play is set far away from London, at the court of Ravenna. Also unlike Tourneur, he introduces supernatural characters and spells that provide overtly magical causes for the newlywed husband Antonio's impotence. These supernatural additions are not merely derived from Scot, but also unmistakably informed by the historical circumstances of Frances Howard's marriages and their impact on previous Jacobean drama.⁶⁴ At around the time he was writing this play, Middleton was adapting Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for The Kings' Men, and Shakespeare and Jonson's witch scenes were major influences on his. Middleton's garrulous chief witch Hecate rules over a flourishing coven that includes the witches Stadlin and Hoppo (names borrowed by Scot from earlier publications),⁶⁵ her own son the clown Firestone, and the spirit Malkin. Hecate's speech as she gives the lovestruck Sebastian charms clarifies their intended nature. They will render magically impotent his rival Antonio, married to the object of his affections, Isabella:

Hecate: Are these the skins
Of serpents? These of snakes? [...]
So sure into what house these are conveyed,
Knit with these charmèd and retentive knots,
Neither the man begets nor woman breeds,
No, nor performs the least desires of wedlock
Being then a mutual duty.⁶⁶

⁶¹ John Marston, *The wonder of women or The tragedie of Sophonisba* (London: Iohn Windes, 1606), 5.1 (sig. F2^r).

⁶² Ben Jonson, *The sad shepherd: or a tale of Robin Hood, a fragment* (London: J. Nichols, 1783), 26.

⁶³ O'Connor, Introduction to *The Witch*, 1125.

⁶⁴ Pace Robert Lima, *Stages of Evil: Occultism in Western Theater and Drama* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 208.

⁶⁵ Scot, *Discoverie*, 222. The *Malleus Maleficarum* took the names from Nider's *Formicarius* of c. 1437, which features the "grandis maleficus" Staedlin and his disciple Hoppo. See [Heinrich Kramer &] Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the "Malleus Maleficarum"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 264, 321, 381–2; see also Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft," 982.

⁶⁶ Thomas Middleton, *The Witch*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, 1137.

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Hecate first appears in Greek literature as the benign conventionally-bodied female goddess central to Hesiod's *Theogony*.⁶⁷ By the time she features in Euripides' *Medea*, Hecate has evolved into the terrifying monstrously conjoined triple-bodied underworld goddess who, on the early modern English stage, powerfully reasserts her late-classical associations with witchcraft and black magic and insinuates her pagan evocation of Christianity's Holy Trinity. This Hecate is called upon by the raving Lear, controls Macbeth's unholy trinity of witches,⁶⁸ and is invoked by the Dame or leader of the coven of female witches in the anti-masque of Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queenes*, performed at King James VI/I's London court in 1609:

Dame: [...] You, that haue seene me ride, when Hecate
Durst not take chariot; [...]

When the pale *moone*, at the first voice downe fell
Poison'd, and durst not stay the second *spell*.
You, that haue oft, beene conscious of these sights;
And thou^c *three-formed starre*, that, on these nights
Art onely powerfull, to whose triple name
Thus we incline, *once, twice, and thrise the same*;
If now with *rites* prophane, and foule inough,
We doe inuoke thee; darken all this rooffe.⁶⁹

This Dame directly refers to the sinister black magic of “tying the knot” during the anti-masque, when she enters proclaiming:

Dame: [...] You^a *Fiends* and *Furies* (if yet any be
Worse then our selues) you, that haue quak'd to see
These^b knots vntied; and shrunke, when we haue charm'd.
You, that (to arme vs) haue your selues disarm'd,
And to our powers, resign'd your whips and brands,
When we went forth, the scourge of men and lands.⁷⁰

The second note to this passage informs the reader, rather vaguely, that “the untying of their knots is, when they are going to do some fatall businesse.”

The 11 female courtiers who danced the silent roles of the masque's 12 queens alongside Queen Anna of Denmark included Frances Howard, then still Countess of Essex.⁷¹ Four years later, her London court wedding to the future Earl of Somerset was as strongly supported by James VI/I as it was opposed by

⁶⁷ See Patricia A. Marquardt, “A Portrait of Hecate,” *The American Journal of Philology* 102.3 (1981): 243–60.

⁶⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); see especially *King Lear* 1.1.112 and *Macbeth* 2.1.52, 2.5.1–35, 3.2.41, 4.1.39–43, 5.2.14.

⁶⁹ Jonson, “The Masque of Queenes,” 953.

⁷⁰ Jonson, “The Masque of Queenes,” 952.

⁷¹ Jonson, “The Masque of Queenes,” 964.

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Queen Anna. The celebrations included a masque by Thomas Campion, performed at Whitehall on the evening of the wedding itself, December 26, 1613. Queen Anna made a brief but pivotal contribution, not as a costumed masquer, but in her own persona as queen consort to the ruling monarch. Many aspects of the disturbing nature of her performative contribution to this masque are sensitively identified and discussed by Clare McManus who does not, however, explicate its audacious and unmistakably direct intertextual references to the occult impotence charm alluded to in Jonson's masque of 1613, and the central significance of this allusion in the marital history of the bride, Frances Howard.⁷² As Anna plucked a bough from a golden tree brought to her seat of honor in the royal dais, a crowned masquer representing Eternity, directly addressing her Queen, sang:

*Bring away this Sacred Tree,
The Tree of Grace, and Bountie,
Set it in Bel-Annas eye,
For she, she, only she
Can all Knotted spels vnty.
Pull'd from the Stocke, let her blest Hands conuay
To any suppliant Hand, a Bough,
And let that Hand aduance it now
Against a Charme, that Charme shall fade away.⁷³*

Then, while Anna plucked a bough from this tree, the following song was sung:

*Goe happy man like th' Euening Starre,
Whose beames to Bride-groomes well-come are.
May neither Hagge, nor Feind withstand
The pow're of thy Victorious Hand.
The Vncharm'd Knights surrender now,
By vertue of thy raised Bough.
Away Enchantements, Vanish quite,
No more delay our longing sight [...]⁷⁴*

Those versed in the practice of magical impotence knew that its charms were best untied by those who made them and would have interpreted Anna's involvement with this masque as an aggressive indication that she might possess powers not just to banish, but also to summon witchcraft, and specifically the occult forces of magical impotence that allegedly destroyed Frances Howard's first marriage and, by implication, increasingly overshadowed her own.

⁷² Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage, Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court (1590–1619)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 166–79.

⁷³ Thomas Campion, *The description of a maske* (London: Laurence La'sle, 1614), sigs. B1^v–B2^r.

⁷⁴ Campion, *Maske*, sig. B2^r.

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Magical impotence is also central to *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634). By the time its co-author Thomas Heywood joined the debate, Queen Anna was long dead and James VI/I had only another year to live. Heywood's nonfictional discourse on the practice, in a historical treatise of 1624 on women, relies heavily on Bodin's notorious treatment of the subject:

But of all these diuellish and detestable practises, there is none (saith *Bodinus*) more Heathenish, irreligious, and dangerous, than that so commonly in vse now adayes, and by Witches continually practised, to the iniurie and wrong of new married women; it is commonly called *Ligare ligulam*, or to tye knots vpon a point; [...] *Bodinus* reports, That he heard [...] That at the marriage of a young couple, iust as they were to receiue the benediction from the Priest, a Boy was seene by him tying one of these Magicke knots in the Temple; whom thinking to haue deprehended, the Boy fled, and was not taken. *Bodinus* further addes, That in the yeere 1567. he then being Procurator in Patauia, the gentlewoman in whose house he soiourned (being it seemes a pregnant scholler in this Art) related vnto him in the presence of one *Iacobus Baunasius*, That there were fiftie seuerall wayes of tying this knot, to hinder copulation, either to bind the Husband, or the Wife onely, that one hating the others infirmitie, might the freelyer pollute themselues with Adulteries. Shee said moreouer, the man was often so charmed, the woman seldome and difficultly: [...] Shee likewise told him sundrie speeches belonging to these Witcheries, the words whereof were neither Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, French, Spanish, Italian, nor indeed deriuing their Etimologie from any knowne Language whatsoever.⁷⁵

This lengthy passage is of previously unrecognized relevance to the plot of *Lancashire Witches*, and to the question of Heywood's shared authorship with Richard Brome. The play focuses on the wedding of a simple country couple, Lawrence and Parnell. Before the ceremony, Lawrence is presented with a knotted codpiece point by a jealous former lover, Mal Spencer. This renders him impotent with his new wife. Confirming this as a foreign, specifically French custom, a letter of August 16, 1634, from Nathaniel Tomkyns to Sir Robert Phelips comments on the play's magical practices:

Here hath bin lately a newe comedie at the globe called *The Witches of Lancasheer*, [...] The subject was of the sl[e]ights and passages done or supposed to be done by the witches [...] the representing of wrong and putatiue fathers in the shape of meane persons to gent[le]men by way of derision; the tying of a knott at a mariage (after the French manner) to cassate masculine abilitie [...] full of ribaldrie and of things improbable and impossible, yet in respect of the newnesse of ye subiect (the witches being still visible and in prison here) and in

⁷⁵ Thomas Heywood, "Of Witches," in *Gynaikeion, or nine bookes of various history concerning women* (London: Adam Islip, 1624), 402–3. The reference is to Bodin, *Demonomanie*, Book 2, Chapter 1 (sigs. 51^v–59^v).

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regard it consisteth from the beginning to the ende of odd passages and fopperies to provoke laughter, and is mixed with diuers songs and dances, it passeth for a merrie and excellent new play.⁷⁶

In order to protect themselves from contagion from powerful spells such as “the tying of the knot,” local communities sometimes practiced another superstitious ritual featured in Heywood and Brome’s play, known on mainland Europe as the charivari and in the British Isles as the riding or skimmington. Again, Thomas Platter informs us on both related traditions, although unlike his description of the French charivari, his brief acknowledgement of the skimmington, occurring in a general section on England within Platter’s account of his 1599 visit to London, draws only on secondary sources. The skimmington was a ritual inversion of solemn ceremonial,⁷⁷ intended to shame married couples with a dominant wife and publicly humiliate hen-pecked or cuckolded husbands: “[English] women often beat their husbands, and whenever this becomes known, their very closest neighbour is placed on a cart and, in order to make fun of the beaten man, they parade him around the whole town while proclaiming that this is his punishment for not having come to the aid of his neighbour while his wife was beating him.”⁷⁸

The Languedoc charivari often targeted newlywed couples in which the wife was older than the husband. Like the skimmington, it was habitually accompanied by rough music, mocking laughter, religious parody, and heavy-handed allusions to cuckoldry and effeminism through the wearing of horns and transvestite clothing, and its supernatural dimension is even more explicit.⁷⁹ The performative groups at the heart of charivari were rowdy, deliberately disharmonious bands of young unmarried people, whose supernatural demonic roots are traced back to the aerial Wild Horde or Herlichini. This legendary hellish band of damned souls provides a possible source for the Witches’ Sabbath, and Hellekin, its devilish leader, inspired the most celebrated early modern stage fool, the commedia dell’arte’s stock comic servant, Harlequin.⁸⁰ According to Platter’s lively impression of the practice in Uzès in 1598, charivari groups would disguise themselves in devilish masks and

⁷⁶ See James Stokes and Robert J. Alexander, *Records of Early English Drama: Somerset, including Bath*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), vol. 1, 416.

⁷⁷ Stuart Clark, “Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft,” *Past & Present* 87 (1980): 98–127, 103–4.

⁷⁸ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 814.

⁷⁹ Martin Ingram, “Ridings, Rough Music and the ‘Reform of Popular Culture’ in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present* 105 (1984): 99.

⁸⁰ Wolfgang Behringer suggests that rather than being a figment of inquisitorial imagination the idea of the witches’ sabbath was based on legendary night phantoms; see his *Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoekhlin and the Phantoms of the Night* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998). On Harlequin and Hellekin see Otto Driesen, *Der Ursprung des Harlekin* (Berlin: Duncker, 1904); and M A Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell’Arte 1560–1620, with special reference to the visual records* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 102.

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meet up to season the new couple's immediate neighbourhood with intolerable smells and unsocial noises, through raucous singing, shouting and "playing" of kitchen implements and other mock or loud instruments. They would continue to perform in this way outside the newlyweds' home every night for two or three hours from around midnight, disbanding only once the shamed couple came up with an acceptable bribe to buy them off.⁸¹ According to Platter, no attempt at regulation, not even those following clashes at charivaris that had led to serious injury and in Uzès (where he was then resident) to at least one murder in the recent past, had managed to stop this ancient and widespread custom from continuing unabated. William Prynne's anti-theatrical treatise of 1633 traces it back to at least 1404, the date of a canon law warning clergy to "be not present at, nor yet play in the play that is called Charevari, in which they use vizards [masks] in the shape of divels, and horrible things are there committed."⁸²

A charivari of this type features in Beaumont and Fletcher's continuation of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. It is led by a band of formidable women who "fling main Potlids / like massie rocks, dart ladles, tossing Irons / and tongs like Thunderbolts."⁸³ A less rowdy English skimmington in a comic opera of 1729 demonstrates that such processions were considered stageworthy well into the eighteenth century. It features a group of women celebrating their neighbor's victory in a domestic argument over her husband, by processing through the village singing:

Good Wives, pray learn
Your Husbands Rage to quell:
And follow this Example,
Whenever they rebel.
This man-like buxom Dame,
The Breeches long has worn;
Henceforth no more be tame,
But valiant in your Turn.⁸⁴

In *Lancashire Witches*, Parnell's derision of Lawrence's sexual prowess on and subsequent to their wedding night is instrumental in having him publicly shamed in a skimmington. Hearing the commotion, Doughty asks "What's the matter now, is Hell broke loose," and then more astutely pinpoints the cause of Lawrence's problems: "Witchery, witcherie, more witcherie still flat and plaine witchery. Now do I thinke upon the codpiece point the young jade gave him at the wedding: shee

⁸¹ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 275–6.

⁸² William Prynne, *Histro-mastix: the players scourge, or, actors tragædie* (London: Michael Sparke, 1633), 600.

⁸³ John Beaumont and John Fletcher, "The woman's prize or the tamer tamed," in *Comedies and tragedies* (London: Humphrey Robinson & Humphrey Mosley, 1647), 2.5 (106).

⁸⁴ [Essex Hawker], *The country-wedding and skimmington: a tragi-comi-pastoral-farcical opera* (London: W. Trott, 1729), 21–2.

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is a witch, and this was a charme, if there be any in the World.” His neighbor Arthur Seely agrees: “A ligatory point.” Eventually, after much grief, the newlyweds identify the codpiece point given to Lawrence by Mal as “a charme” and they solve their problem by burning it. Their destruction of the bewitched object, which by Parnell’s account “spitter’d and spatter’d in the fire like an it were (love blesse us) a laive thing in the faire; and it hopet and skippet, and rigged, and frisket in the faire, and crept about laike a worm,” restores Lawrence’s potency and marital harmony.⁸⁵

As late as 1634, Heywood and Brome could still get away with a plot dependent on a rustic bridegroom with a use for codpiece points, but they are absent from Shadwell’s radically updated version of the play, *Lancashire-witches*. Copious learned notes after every act fulfil his promise to the reader to supply “notes, wherein I have presented you a great part of the Doctrine of Withcraft, believe it who will,” and, one suspects, act as an insurance against ravages of censorship from the Master of the Revels, further to those which Shadwell complains of already suffering.⁸⁶ These notes draw heavily on classical sources, Jonson’s *Sad Shepherd* and the ubiquitous Scot, as well as the authors cited by the play’s dim lawyer, Sir Jeffrey Shacklehead, in a misguided attempt to establish his expertise in the field: “Bodin, Remigius, Delrio, Nider, Institor, Sprenger, Godelman, and More, and Malleus Maleficarum, a great Author, that writes sweetly about witches, very sweetly.” And it is Sir Jeffrey who later, while accusing a neighbor of witchcraft, confesses to magical impotence: “I am sure she is a witch, and between you and I, last night when I would have been kind to my wife, she bewitched me, I found it so.”⁸⁷ But neither Shadwell’s playtext nor his notes provide any hint of ligature, and by 1682, it is unclear whether this superstitious European practice and the brief notoriety it won on the London stage were even still in living English memory.

Creative early modern London playwrights drew on an astonishingly wide range of printed and other sources to embrace the opportunities that occult characters offered for introducing stage magic, music, spectacle, novelty, and exotic excitement into their performances. Their researches took account of classical and contemporary dramatic and witchcraft treatises, trial records, pamphlets and popular print, court gossip, and, as convincingly explored by Verena Theile, for whom “continental European interpretations and treatments of the supernatural had a considerable influence on the literature composed for the London theaters,” European demonological literature.⁸⁸ There is no simple dichotomy between English and European witchcraft concepts or superstitious practices.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, *The Late Lancashire Witches* (London: Benjamin Fisher, 1634), Acts 4 and 5 (sigs. H3^r, L^r).

⁸⁶ Thomas Shadwell, “To the reader,” in *The Lancashire-witches and Tegue o Divelly the Irish Priest: a comedy* (London: John Starkey, 1682).

⁸⁷ Shadwell, *Lancashire-witches*, Acts 1 and 3 (9, 37, 44–6).

⁸⁸ Theile, *Staging the Occult*, 3.

⁸⁹ Jacqueline Simpson, “Witches and Witchbusters,” *Folklore* 107 (1996): 9.

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Cultural exchange was constantly facilitated in England at every level, from the highest London court circles, to the untraveled rural spectators of the itinerant quack troupes who took their stage magic across regional and national borders. The accounts of educated travelers have the potential to enhance our understanding of these transnational borrowings. Thomas Platter is rightly recognized for his brief notice of an early performance of *Julius Caesar* at the Globe.⁹⁰ My aim in focusing on his substantial little-known record of ligature in Languedoc is to highlight the potential relevance of non-theatrical tales to our understanding of transnational borrowings on the early modern London stage.

⁹⁰ Platter the Younger, *Thomas Platter*, 791.

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