"That Inimitable Art": Magic in Early Modern English Culture

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“THAT INIMITABLE ART”:
MAGIC IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH CULTURE

By

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ABSTRACT

“That Inimitable Art”: Magic in Early Modern English Culture examines representations of magical practitioners and their beliefs and practices as they appear in a variety of canonical and non-canonical early modern cultural productions. Drawing on the practice theory of De Certeau and Bourdieu, as well as on Keith Thomas’s important work on early modern magical practices, I elucidate literary and historical moments in which magical practices appear as practices, consider magical discourse in relation to other early modern discourses, and explore ways in which magical identities were constructed (by others), performed (by the subject and by the community), and even actively sought, appropriated, and shaped (by the subject).

In chapter one, I look at intersections between discourses of poverty and witchcraft, by way of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Nashe’s Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil, and Middleton’s The Black Book. I argue that Middleton’s pamphlet highlights the economic foundations of early modern cultural attitudes about witches and rogues and revises the rhetoric of witch and rogue pamphlets, showing the subjects of each in a more sympathetic light. In chapter two, I investigate representations of women workers of magic in Fletcher and Massinger’s The Prophetess, Edmond Bower’s Doctor Lamb Revived, or witchcraft condemn’d in Anne Bodenham, and Jonson’s The Alchemist. I assert that in both Fletcher and Massinger’s play and in Bower’s pamphlet, women practitioners of magic display features typically associated with the male magus, but whereas the magus is associated with privilege and leisure, these women are involved in active labor—they use their magic to earn a living.

In chapter three, I suggest that we broaden our understanding of the emergent public sphere in early modern culture to include “possession events,” or moments in which communities gathered to witness the magical practice of possession, whether divine or demonic. It was amid such events that women prophets like Anna Trapnel emerged as public figures. This chapter considers Trapnel’s and John Milton’s experiences and representations of divine possession, their self-fashioning and emergence as public prophets, and their interactions and engagements with magical discourse and
practices, and reveals ways in which gender was simultaneously limiting and enabling for each as they negotiated their public and prophetic identities.

Chapter four turns from divine to demonic possession as I discuss plays such as Jonson’s *Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass*, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s *The Witch of Edmonton* in light of contemporary beliefs about possession. I demonstrate that stage representations of possession are ambiguous and do not necessarily disable belief, even if they satirize it. While chapter four emphasizes the possibility of belief, chapter five focuses on skepticism as it is expressed in Thomas Middleton’s mock-almanacs and mock-prognostications, as well as in his invocation of the genre in dramatic works like *No Wit / Help Like a Woman’s*. I argue that Middleton’s several contributions to the popular genre reveal the author playing with its conventions and expressing a distinctive skeptical impulse. I thus close this study by looking at this other strand of magical belief—that is, anti-magical belief—and consider its relationship with the beliefs explored in the previous chapters.

Together, these chapters turn our attention to important but understudied early modern texts; they emphasize the overlap among religion, magic, and science; and they complicate the Enlightenment narrative that tells the tale of benighted Renaissance culture giving way to eighteenth-century rationality. If the seventeenth century eventually saw a decline in magic, it also saw the coexistence and confluence of magic and skepticism, religious belief and reason, superstition and science. This study acknowledges such convergences and illuminates the persistent and complex role of magic in the production of early modern culture.
INTRODUCTION

“TO PRACTICE MAGIC AND CONCEALÈD ARTS”:
MAGICAL FIGURES, PRACTICES, AND BELIEFS

This is a project about practitioners of magic and their beliefs and practices. By “practitioners of magic,” I mean a variety of figures, including witches, cunning folk, jugglers, and magicians of the Neoplatonic variety. But practitioners of magic also might include possessed persons and inspired prophets, who share some practices and were sometimes perceived in a similar manner as the former kinds of practitioners of magic. Looking to texts both canonical and non-canonical, “high” literary and “low” popular, including Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s The Witch of Edmonton, Jonson’s The Alchemist, Volpone, and The Devil is an Ass, and Fletcher and Massinger’s The Prophetess; prose pamphlets including Middleton’s The Black Book and The Owl’s Almanac, various rogue pamphlets and “cony-catching” pamphlets, witchcraft pamphlets, and longer prophetic tracts like Anna Trapnel’s The Cry of a Stone and her Report and Plea; Milton’s poetry and prose; and early modern polemical treatises including Reginald Scot’s Discoverie of Witchcraft, I elucidate literary and historical moments in which magical practices or identities were actively sought and performed, and illustrate that magic, for some, was an enabling practice. Diverging from studies that have isolated certain magical practitioners or practices at the expense of a more holistic view of magic in the early modern milieu,¹ this project considers a range of crucial representations of magical practices as practices, examines magical discourse in relation to other early modern discourses, and explores ways in which magical identities were constructed (by others), performed (by the subject and by the community), and even actively sought, appropriated, and shaped (by the subject).

¹ This is not to say that magical practitioners or practices cannot be studied in isolation, and certainly, some very good studies, including Philip Butterworth’s recent Magic on the Early English Stage, Diane Purkiss’s The Witch in History, or Anne Geneva’s study of William Lilly, Astrology and the Seventeenth-century Mind, focus on very specific subjects to great effect. For my purposes, however, a broader scope is required.
I am interested, throughout this project, in the relationship between religion and magic. In early modern England, magic and religion were interrelated; the dynamic alternatingly symbiotic, parasitic, and antagonistic, as Keith Thomas points out. Deborah Shuger defines “habits of thought” as “a culture’s interpretive categories and their internal relations, which underlie specific beliefs, ideas, and values,” and where she argues that “Renaissance habits of thought were by and large religious” (9), we might extend the latter claim and say that they were also magical. As Thomas has shown, with the Reformation, magical beliefs and practices were overtly suppressed, and magical thinking, the “habits of thoughts” underlying those beliefs and practices, was repressed, driven into the subconscious. Yet, despite Protestantism’s rejection of Catholic magical practices, and despite the best efforts of Protestant and Puritan divines and intellectuals, clearly magic in the form of both underlying ideology and explicit belief was still pervasive. Witchcraft trials reached their peak in Elizabeth’s reign and spiked again during the Interregnum; Renaissance humanists studied Neoplatonic magic; partly due to counter-Reformation efforts, there was a spate of possessions and exorcisms around the turn of the century, which provoked a controversy that played out in print; inspired prophecy was a popular mode of expression during the Civil War and Interregnum. Prior to the closing of the theaters in 1642, devils, witches, and other magical figures were regularly featured on the stage; and throughout our time period, magic of all kinds—jugglery, witchcraft, Neoplatonic magic, inspiration demonic and divine—appeared in print. If magical “habits of thought” were driven into the unconscious, magical beliefs and practices, though contested and debated, remained highly visible.

Like religious beliefs, then, magical beliefs inflected other discourse, just as other discourses made their imprint on the discourse of magic. The direction of influence is not easy to identify, but in many ways, the direction is not important. In addition, as magical discourses developed and changed, for example, as possession pamphlets gave way to witch pamphlets, or as the role of the witch’s familiar in earlier pamphlets shifted to the

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2 Not just as characters—the notorious appearance of an extra devil in the Exeter performance of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus in 1592 illustrates well the credulity of both actors and audience, and it certainly invites us to question associations between stage magic and skepticism, a subject I consider at length at the end of the chapter two and more fully in chapter five.
much more significant role played by the devil in later ones, we see how trends, readers’
expectations, styles and generic formulas, as well as state ideology or “official” church
doctrine all play a role in the shaping of the discourse, as did other popular discourses.
Thus, the demonized magical identity of the witch was constructed in the same way that
the demonized identity of the “sturdy beggar” was. Both constructs were similarly thrust
upon feared early modern subjects. Indeed, the demonization of the urban poor borrowed
from the discourse on witches and, perhaps, as both discourses developed, vice versa.
Similarly, the demonization of “old wives tales” was not simply a dismissal of “popular
culture;” it was also an articulation of the denigration of women’s domestic practices and
knowledge. Early modern skeptical beliefs were articulated by way of early modern
Protestantism, but they were often articulated specifically in relation to, and as a rejection
of, magical beliefs and practices. Representations of practitioners of magic and magical
beliefs and practices were reflected in or refracted through other Renaissance discourses.
In chapter one, I consider the relationship between the discourse of poverty and the
gendered discourse of witchcraft. Chapter two similarly is concerned with the discourse
on poverty, in particular, with early modern notions of labor and idleness, and considers
the relationship between magic, work, and gender. These are the concerns of chapters
one and two. Chapter three explores magic in the forms of religious enthusiasm and
divine possession, and the emergence and gendering of the public and private realms. In
chapter four, I turn to the complex relationship between skepticism, demonic possession,
and the early modern stage. Finally, the last chapter examines skeptical treatments of
magic that emerged at a time when, as Katharine Maus points out, skepticism “is hardly
self-evident; nor could [skeptics] have then seemed, as they do in retrospect, prophets of
an epistemic shift” (327).

Cutting across these chapters are three primary concerns. First, I consistently ask
to what extent forms of magic were enabling practices for marginalized or
disenfranchised early modern subjects. My second concern, not entirely distinct from the
first, is with gender. Within the broad discursive category of magic, specific magical
identities, beliefs, and practices were decidedly gendered, and those elements identified
with women ostensibly foreclosed the possibility of seeking agency through magic. My
aim is to stake out those places where women did in fact gain some agency through
magical practices and beliefs; in doing so, I consider ways in which women engaged in magical self-fashioning, rejecting or refiguring demonized, feminized magical identities and sometimes appropriating, but also radically reshaping, masculine roles. The third primary issue that cuts across the entire project is one that no study of magic can evade: that is, the collision between skepticism and belief and the expressions and effects of this collision in early modern culture.

Magic is an unwieldy category, as early moderns themselves were aware. Writers sought to define and distinguish various magical practices and identities, though if we believe this passage from Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie* (1584), misapplication of signifiers was a frequent problem:

> Sometimes such are called conjurors, as being but rogues, and lewd people, would use the name of Jesus to worke miracles, whereby, though they being faithless could worke nothing; yet is their practise condemned by the name of conjuration. Sometimes jugglers are called witches. Sometimes also they are called sorcerers, that impugne the gospell of Christ, and seduce others with violent persuasions. Sometimes a murtherer with poison is called a witch. Sometimes they are so termed by the verie signification of their names; as Elimas, which signifieth a sorcerer. Sometimes because they studie curious and vaine arts. Sometimes it is taken for woonding or greeving of the hart. Yea the verie word Magus, which is Latin for a magician, is translated witch; and yet it was hertofore alwaies taken in the good part. And at this daie it is indifferent to saie in the English toong; She is a witch; or, She is a wise woman. (107-8)

The anaphoric repetition of “sometimes” assists Scot rhetorically here; we are invited to think about the application of the term “witch” *each* time it is used, and to wonder, has “witch” been used appropriately or inappropriately here? Is this subject a juggler, or a performer of illusions and staged magic tricks; or is she a cunning person, a local magical practitioner whose services included locating lost or stolen goods, prognosticating and divining, offering love charms and protective charms, and counter-acting malefic magic? Is this man a magician, or someone who studies humanist philosophy and engages in
Neoplatonic magical practices out of curiosity, or is he a *witch* who, because of discontentment, covetousness, or lust for revenge, enacts *maleficia* and brings harm to his neighbors? These questions and their definitions permit us to more easily identify the magical practitioners within early modern culture, and they save us from associating characters like Anne Bodenham with the mistaken identities assigned to them by their chroniclers.

I. Models and methodology

Like all modern studies of magic, this one is indebted to Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Thomas not only provides a model for thinking about how witchcraft operated in the early modern community, but also, and partly through that model, he maintains a keen focus on the socio-economic context in which witchcraft accusations took place. The first two chapters of this study reconsider Keith Thomas’s “charity denied” model of witchcraft. This model implies the following general course of events: the “witch,” an elderly beggar who relies on the community for assistance and charity, wears on the patience of her neighbors. Those neighbors deny her the bread or milk or firewood she asks for. The witch, in anger and desperation, utters a curse under her breath as she walks away, which the neighbors perhaps overhear; the neighbors’ children become ill, their crops die, or their livestock are lamed. They understand these misfortunes as *maleficia* brought about by the witch’s curse. They accuse her of witchcraft. Thus, the identity of the witch is seen as a construct foisted upon her by those very individuals who denied her charity. The “witch” is the victim, and the offending party had wronged her, had brought her curses on themselves. “Charity denied” thus implies a vaguely psychoanalytic element in the witchcraft accusation scenario. For Thomas, the model isolates socio-economic foundations for witchcraft accusations and also enables a vision of witchcraft as a category that promoted social cohesion and community values—give to the poor in your community, and you won’t suffer the effects

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3 I italicize the terms preceding their definitions in this paragraph for ease of identification. Though some early modern people did use the term “witch” to refer to a “cunning woman” or “wise woman,” it would be confusing for any modern scholar to do so. I thus adhere to the distinctions and nomenclature briefly set out here.
of the witch’s curse.\textsuperscript{4} The witch as beggar or as impoverished member of the community has important precedents in assize records, witch pamphlets, and dramatic representations; Elizabeth Sawyer of both Henry Goodcole’s pamphlet and Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s play \textit{The Witch of Edmonton} is probably the most widely recognized theatrical representation.

Though Thomas does efface the importance of gender as well as other less immediately visible factors in witchcraft accusations, and though he too readily takes at their words the authors of various witchcraft pamphlets, a genre which Marion Gibson has incisively shown to be a formulaic and literary one, Thomas’s emphasis on the socio-economic “base” as the underlying cause is significant for several reasons. It enables an understanding of witchcraft that sees it not as an expression of the superstition of “merrie olde Englande,” nor as an expression of collective misogyny and the persecution of women. Instead, the “charity denied” model invites us to view early modern witches as socio-economic victims and to understand these figures in the same way that we would understand the increasing, and increasingly visible, population of the early modern poor. If we see “witches” and “sturdy beggars” as two groups that were equally constructed by and subsequently marginalized by early modern England, then to conceive of Thomas Middleton’s Pierce Penniless as a type of witch, as I do in chapter one, is less of a stretch than it may initially appear to be.

The “charity denied” model warrants problematization as well, and it has been duly qualified, clarified, and otherwise complicated by a number of historians. Though there are many important ways in which we might complicate Thomas, for me, two stand out most: first, it is important to consider the ways communities beheld and dealt with their poor in terms of the early modern discourse on poverty. Thomas refers to the decline of Christian charity, and it is true that many early modern writers lamented the disappearance of that cardinal virtue. But to the extent that this rhetoric served to underscore the disparate ideological aims of numerous polemics, early modern adjurations to charity do not, in themselves, tell us very much about how early modern

\textsuperscript{4} Jonathan Barry points out that Thomas “[notes] many other types of situation” in which witches were accused, but he does privilege the “charity refused” model and explores it at greater length in comparison to other situations that are only briefly mentioned (Barry 8-9).
people actually felt about charitable giving. In addition, the secularization of poor relief
by way of the poor laws of 1599 and 1601, along with the Statute of Artificers (1563), as
well as the Act for the Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds, and Sturdy Beggars (1597),
must be considered when examining ways in which early modern subjects approached the
poor. A second and related way that the “charity denied” model may be problematized is
through acknowledging its effacement of the early modern notion of the witch not just as
a member of the idle poor, or a non-worker, but, indeed, as an anti-worker, as one who
destroyed others’ work or means of earning a living through maleficent magic. Witches
were not disliked only because they were beggars who began to wear on the patience of
their neighbors, as Scot relates it in his Discoverie; they might have been bad neighbors
who took without asking and whose power as agents of evil-doing was feared and
thought to disrupt the productive labor of others, or they might earn their own living by
extorting payments and goods from laboring neighbors in return for not directing any
maleficia towards them.⁵

The “charity denied” model reads the witch as a victim; but what if we wish to
regard practitioners of magic not as victims but as active agents, negotiating their
positions in their communities, making use of the space in which they may work? Michel
de Certeau’s theory of practice stands as another model by which we might understand
magical practices and practitioners of magic, one that facilitates a vision of these figures
and their practices as subverting, negotiating, and radically changing the authority that
would dominate, demonize, or otherwise dismiss them. De Certeau’s definition of a
“tactic” is useful here; it is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper
locus. No delimitation of exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for
autonomy. The space of the tactic is the space of the other” (Practice 37). Where
strategies come from a distinct and isolated space, a space of power, tactics, on the other
hand, lack their own space. Tactics, or those who deploy them, are thus constantly on the
move; they lack

⁵ Diane Purkiss conceives of the witch, similarly, as “anti-housewife” in that she “usurps [the housewife’s]
authority over the household in order to misuse it, to invert it” (Witch 97). Clive Holmes gives the example
of the witches of Knaresborough Forest extorting money from their neighbors in return for withholding
their maleficent magic (“Popular Culture” 97).
the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a … visible, and objectifiable space. [A tactic] operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them… It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. (37)

Tactics, then, are “weapons of the weak,” to borrow James C. Scott’s term.

Within everyday practices and negotiations, de Certeau sees tactics at work (and at play). In its persistent vision of the marginalized or dominated as subjects in whose negotiations with the world around them and in whose making use of the products and space and social exchanges around them may be seen agency, cunning, and a protean sort of power, de Certeau’s theory may be advantageously applied to early modern culture and specifically to our subjects, magical practitioners, and their practices. To be sure, the tactics of magical practitioners extend beyond their explicit acts of cunning, their sleights of hand, their magical transformative powers; rather, I am thinking of the practices of women like Anna Trapnel and Anne Bodenham, practices that included negotiating and walking around in public space, public speaking, reading and interpreting texts and social scenarios in subversive or unexpected ways, figuring and endlessly negotiating and refiguring their own magical identities such that they would seem at once powerful and non-threatening to their peers, making use of elements of the very authority, or its representatives, that would dominate them—the bible, patriarchal church leadership, characteristics of the powerful male magus, signs of learned culture, the tools of knowledge. As we shall see, Bodenham and Trapnel are exceptional figures in that both actively resisted and even attacked forms of dominant authority while also deliberately borrowing elements of their magical identities from that authority. It is not, however, necessary to suppose that all magical practitioners or all subjects who deploy tactics and, through bricolage, maintain some manner of agency, some sense of self, in their daily lives are deliberate or even witting participants in such negotiations of power. Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of practice as a “modus operandi of which [the subject] is not the producer and has no conscious mastery” (79) enables us to think even of seemingly
disempowering magical events like possession as enabling practices without ascribing to the possessed subject an underlying plot or strategy (and this is also true of any practices through which power is negotiated; in some sense, it must always be unwitting, subconscious—a manifestation of a latent power within).

Practice theory also serves as a useful complement to the discourse model, just as magic is a foil to religion. In fact, the two—practice and discourse, magic and religion—coexist. If discourse defines an episteme, while simultaneously existing as an articulation of that episteme, practice determines how people interpret and put to use that discourse; how they receive, manipulate, and wield the forms of knowledge circulating in that episteme. If not all practices emerge and take the shape of discursive knowledge or discursive practices, it is nevertheless important to consider how such practices silently persist and how they inflect people’s interactions with discourses. Such practices “could be considered as an immense reserve constituting either the beginnings or traces of different developments” (de Certeau Practice 48, italics in text). Magical beliefs and practices are complicated material because they circulated both within early modern discourse and as tactics (engaged with, sometimes within, sometimes outside of discourse). But the division may be located in the difference between defining, describing, and classifying (discourse), and doing, articulating (as in a spell or curse), and believing (practice). Both discourse and practice (and their subjects/purveyors) might take elements of magical beliefs, magical thinking, or magical practice and manipulate them for their own ends. But only one had the power to decide whether or not magic would survive as a form of knowledge, as an integral part of the episteme. In early modern England, the discursive break from magic had not yet taken place. Foucault writes,

To us, it seems that sixteenth-century learning was made up of an unstable mixture of rational knowledge, notions derived from magical practices, and a whole cultural heritage whose power and authority had been vastly increased by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman authors. Perceived thus, the learning of that period appears structurally weak: a common ground where fidelity to the Ancients, a taste for the supernatural, and an already awakened awareness of that sovereign rationality in which we
recognize ourselves, confronted one another in equal freedom... In fact, it is not from an insufficiency of structure that sixteenth-century knowledge suffers. On the contrary, we... [see] how very meticulous the configurations are that define its space. It is this very rigour that makes the relation of magic to erudition inevitable—they are not selected contents but required forms. The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. (Foucault Order 32)

If magic was a fragment of the looking glass through which early moderns knew the world and themselves, then the recovery of magic is essential for our understanding of early modern culture. But the work of discourse in early modern England—of defining, describing, and classifying magic—had already begun to isolate magic out of visibility. Certainly, some practices were defined precisely to be demonized—folk practices and beliefs, the practices of women in the domestic sphere—while others, like astrology, were valorized, so that during the epistemic shift that marked the “Enlightenment,” it was not so difficult to exchange “magic” for “science.” My interest is in recovering those people, beliefs, and practices, around whom much anxiety circulated but who were made increasingly invisible. They bear the traces of the different developments; they stand as reminders that so-called “Enlightenment” was never a certainty and that it consolidated power through and at the expense of other forms of knowledge, other ways of thinking.

II. Witchcraft, magic, work, and poverty

In early modern culture, women practitioners of magic were recognized and feared as powerful figures; thus, one of the aims of both the demonological discourse (of believers) and the skeptical discourse on magic was to problematize or denigrate the ascription of power to women. These discourses demonized and denigrated women, while also feminizing and belittling popular magical beliefs, and I discuss these ideological moves at greater length in chapter two. It is important to recognize, however, that the discursive dismissal of women’s magical power stems from a recognition of their cultural power. Mary Ellen Lamb’s recent work on popular culture presents a strong argument for the cultural power of “old wives’ tales” and other forms of popular culture.
from which men, entering into male society and learned culture, had to divorce themselves, but by which, simultaneously, some of their earliest life experiences and certainly their formative years were shaped (45-62). Women’s power as story-tellers and purveyors of culture in the home is one reason why women as practitioners of magic were denigrated.

Specific early modern witchcraft beliefs also attest to the power of the witch. In his informative discussion of witchcraft and English popular culture, Clive Holmes emphasizes, “Of elements of English popular beliefs, three emerge with some clarity. The ability to manipulate malignant power inheres chiefly in women. Power descends through matrilineal ties of kinship. Finally, the witch’s power is in part a function of her ability to coopt the forces of the animal world” (94). The idea that women could more easily prevail upon, or be prevailed upon by, the dark side was an ancient belief, and one not easily dispelled. While magic was a learned art, witchcraft was, to some degree, an inherent predisposition. Humanist magi would study, practice their arts, and discipline and edify their bodies and minds so that they might achieve the purity of heart and mind required for the successful invocation of spirits. Witchcraft, on the other hand, passed through bloodlines. Specific practices might be taught in the domestic space, but the actual powers of the witch were thought to inhere in the body. This explains notions such as the “evil eye,” or the idea that “there proceed out of the eye with the beams, noisome and malignant spirits, which infect the ayre, and doe poison or kill, not only them with whome they are daily conversant, but others also whose companie they frequent, of what age, strength, and complexion so ever they be” (Perkins 140). The hereditary nature of witchcraft may also explain why detection practices that focused on bodily response rather than oral confession may have had currency.¹ Clive Holmes mentions the practice of scratching the witch, but other practices like the piercing of the witch’s mark or even swimming, in which the water would reject the body of the unhallowed being, may reflect the same ideological foundation (Holmes 96). A more “scientific” view of

¹ Perkins, whose Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft is actually more radical that one might expect, expresses skepticism towards the idea that witchcraft inheres in the body, believing instead that children and servants learn from older women in the domestic space. He also rejects swimming and pricking as appropriate methods of discovery, calling them “practises of witchcraft” themselves (206).
witches’ powers was that they derived from excess of melancholy, and this, too, was another reason why women were more likely to be witches than were men. Scot, here, explains and dismisses the idea:

[Women are said to] have such an unbrideled force of furie and concupiscence naturallie, that by no means it is possible for them to temper or moderate the same. So as upon everie trifling occasion, they (like brute beasts) fix their furious eies upon the partie whom they bewitch. Hereby it come to passe, that whereas women having a mervellous fickle nature, what greefe so ever happeneth unto them, immediatelie all peceablenes of mind departeth; and they are so troubled with evill humours, that out go their venomous exhalations, ingendred thorough their ilfavoured diet, and increased by meanes of their pernicious excrements, which they expel. Women are also (saith [Vairus]) monethlie filled full of superfluous humors, and with them the melancholike bloud boileth; whereof spring vapors, and are carried up, and conveied through the nosethrels and mouth, &c.; to the bewitching of whatsoever it meeteth. For they belch up a certeine breath, wherewith they bewitch whomsoever they list... all this [Vairus] telleth as soberlie, as though it were true. And if it were true, honest women maie be witches, in despight of all inquisitors: neither can anie avoid being a witch, except shee locke hir selfe up in a chamber. (236-7)

I quote at length because the belief Scot dismisses was a typical one. The association between the woman’s body and witchcraft, and the ideas that witchcraft was a force that could be transmitted through kinship relationships and that malefic witch practices were effected in part by the physical body, comprise important aspects of English witchcraft beliefs.

Witchcraft beliefs would seem to lie at a far distance from belief in Neoplatonic magic. Studies of the two are often distinct, and the gendered, educational, and geographical differences (at least) between “witches” and “magicians” make the isolation or separation of the one from the other apparently straightforward. Yet, the binary opposition, and the separation of the practices and practitioners of magic from those of
witchcraft are problematic in a few ways. Sydney Anglo’s thoughts on the matter are salutary:

Scholarship has tended to separate the witch from the magician, and to treat, as discrete, low magic and higher magic. But witchcraft beliefs arose from the blurring of such distinctions and from a cosmic vision which saw witch and magus operating within a single system. At its lowest level magic could be expected to operate through love potions, charms, secret cures and harms, as employed by ‘cunning folk’ and ‘wise women’; but a problem arose when any attempt was made to explain how such cures and harms actually functioned, for such explanations could only be propounded by professional thinkers who provided a system of occult relationships which subsumed the witch. (4)

The distinctions of modern scholarship originate in the distinctions made by early modern demonologists, but the rise in witchcraft accusations and the valorization of Renaissance humanist magic happened nearly simultaneously, starting on the continent, and eventually taking place in England as well. Peter Burke writes:

in Italy the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not only the time of the revival of magic but also the time of the rise of the ‘witch-craze,’ in the sense of the persecution of witches. Between 1460 and 1525, at least ten Italians published books denouncing witches. Witches were taken very seriously by a number of Renaissance popes, patrons of humanism and the arts; Eugenius IV, Nicholas V, Innocent VIII, Julius II, and Leo X all issued decrees against witches, of which the most notorious is Innocent’s bull of 1484, Summis desiderantes affectibus, associated with the witch-hunters’ manual the Malleus Maleficarum. (33)

The coincidence of witchcraft trials and humanists’ fascination with erudite magic was observable in England, during Elizabeth’s reign, when witchcraft trials were at their zenith. Witch pamphlets circulated in London at the same time that learned men like John Dee were studying the Neoplatonists. Reginald Scot’s Discoverie of Witchcraft preceded the popularity of accounts of the English magus Roger Bacon, who became a romantic hero in a prose romance and in Robert Greene’s play. James VI had his scare
with the North Berwick witches in 1591, after he had visited the Continent to collect his bride, where presumably he came into contact with both popular witchcraft beliefs and humanist magical beliefs. Certainly, James was familiar with the work of numerous continental demonologists, and his own *Daemonologie* is particularly indebted to Jean Bodin’s *De la demonomanie des sorciers*. The latter, while condemning people like Agrippa, ponders the question of whether or not humans can communicate with good spirits. Bodin’s work, while ostensibly critical of the Neoplatonic humanist magical tradition, was also demonstrably influenced by it. The Faust myth probably began circulating through England in 1588, with Marlowe’s stage production depicting the over-reaching and foibles of Faustus the would-be magus in 1589 (Jones 10-11). In fact, *Doctor Faustus* reveals an intersection of magic and witchcraft beliefs. Magicians, it was commonly believed, differed from witches in that they commanded demons; witches, on the other hand, were commanded by them. Protestant demonologists felt that the distinction was false, however; James, for example, presents both the argument and the counter-argument in the dialogue between Epistemon and Philomathes:

PHI. What difference is there betwixt this arte [*Magie or Necromancie*], and Witch-craft.

EPI. Surelie, the difference vulgare put betwixt them, is verrie merrie, and in a manner true; for they say, that the Witches ar servants onelie, and slaves to the Devil; but the Necromaniers are his maisters and commanders.

PHI. How can that be true, [that] any men being specially addicted to his service, can be his commanders?

EPI. Yea, they may be: but it is onelie *secundum quid*: For it is not by anie power that they can have over him, but *ex pacto* allanerlie: whereby he oblices himself in some trifles to them, that he may on the other part obteine the fruition of their body & soule, which is the onelie thing he huntes for. (*Daemonologie* 9)

Faustus enters into a demonic compact with Mephistopheles thinking he still has the upper-hand—that he is a magus who commands the devil. But the play shows us repeatedly that the opposite is the case: at Lucifer’s appearance, Faustus cowers and
submits. On the other hand, when the comic clowns Wagner and Robin conjure
Mephistopheles, the latter is forced to appear. Who is the magician and who is the witch?
Marlowe interrogates learned thinking about magic and the devil, leaving us to wonder,
as many scholars have, could Faustus have saved his soul? Was the contract a binding
agreement? Who commanded whom?

The binary opposition between witches and magicians was further problematized
by zealous Protestants, like theologian William Perkins, who elided the differences
between the magician and the witch, reduced all magical practice to witchcraft, stated
that witches might be male or female, and consistently altered pronouns (“he” and “she”)
when referring to practitioners of magic. Perkins’s equitable approach to gender
difference is unusual, however, and even he points out that, while people of both sexes
might be witches, women, being the “weaker sex,” are more inclined to practice
witchcraft than are men (168-69). The sharp distinctions between witches and magicians
were also complicated by the popularity and prevalence of another sort of practitioner of
magic, the cunning folk. Both men and women practiced as cunning folk; they may have
been uneducated, but in order to bring business or to increase respectability, they freely
borrowed identifying characteristics of the magician, including signs of learning like old
(or ancient-looking) books and scrying glasses (Davies 69-71; Thomas 269). Cunning
folk were identified with magicians, witches, and also jugglers. They were composite
figures.

In chapter one, I look at intersections between discourses of poverty and
witchcraft, by way of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Nashe’s Pierce Penniless His
Supplication to the Devil, and Middleton’s The Black Book. Middleton’s down-and-out
Pierce Penniless is a representation of a witch, and Middleton re-presents the “charity-
withheld” model in an alternative setting—that of urban London, rather than a rural

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7 Scot ridicules the notion that a corporal being could enter into a binding compact with a spiritual one:
“What firme bargaine can be made betwixt a carnall bodie and a spirituall?” (58). Perkins asks why anyone
would willingly do so, since the devil obviously does not keep his end of the agreement, but he does
believe that a compact exists: “It is a point of [the devil’s] policie, not to be readie at every mans command
to doe for him what he would, except he be sure of his rewards, and no other meanes will serve his turne
for taking assurance hereof, but this covenant” (45).
village. In doing so, he creates a stage-devil (in a prose pamphlet) who is an ironic figure of charity and depicts early modern London as Lucifer’s playground. Middleton’s Pierce is a rogue turned witch, and his supplication to Lucifer is successful. In this chapter, I argue that Middleton’s pamphlet highlights the economic foundations of early modern cultural attitudes about witches and rogues and revises the rhetoric of witch and rogue pamphlets, showing the subjects of each in a more sympathetic light.

Chapter two, while engaging different texts and historical subjects, addresses similar issues and concerns. The discourse on poverty, and especially its obsession with labor and idleness, remains in focus here, as I investigate representations of women workers of magic in Fletcher and Massinger’s *The Prophetess*, Edmond Bower’s *Doctor Lamb Revived, or witchcraft condemn’d in Anne Bodenham*, and Jonson’s *The Alchemist*. I suggest that in both Fletcher and Massinger’s play and in Bower’s pamphlet, women practitioners of magic are figured both as magi, having appropriated the typically male role, and as workers, whereas the typical magus is a figure of leisure, not labor. These two texts emphasize the women characters’ magical practices within a feminocentric domestic space, in which younger female “apprentices” might learn from older women “masters” of the magical trade. Jonson’s *The Alchemist* presents a woman worker of magic, Doll Common, not as a magician, but as a juggler, as a worker whose living depends on the successful performance of magical acts, fraudulent though they may be. In this chapter, I highlight the gendered distinctions between witches and magicians, and I explore the ways each of these works interrogates such distinctions. As these texts portray, wittingly or unwittingly, their women practitioners of magic as workers, they invite us to question the notion of the witch as anti-worker. This chapter points to the final chapter in its consideration of skeptical treatments of magical practices; ironically, even as skeptics derided magical practices as jugglery, or pure theater, they simultaneously encouraged the figuration of the performer of magic acts as a worker.

III. Possession and inspiration, public and private

The practice and understanding of possession in early modern England changed over time, and its changes are perhaps more readily visible than changes to witchcraft beliefs and practices. Yet, though possession changed, its signs remained the same. In
the years following James’s accession, the “witch vogue” swept the London theaters, but, before that, the “possession vogue” was played out in print. In the late sixteenth century, harrowing accounts of possession circulated in pamphlet form. These accounts were, however, formulaic, and the behavior of the possessed surprisingly predictable.\footnote{See Almond’s anthology of possession cases; this anthology includes the most notorious cases, as well as an introduction contextualizing the material. See Gibson, \textit{Possession, Puritanism, and Print}, for an astute analysis of both context and the evolving formal features of possession pamphlets.} Two famous dispossessors, John Darrel and George More, incurred the wrath of the state, and Richard Bancroft directed his chaplain Samuel Harsnett to discredit the dispossessors, Darrell in particular, in printed polemic. \textit{A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures} satirizes and demonizes both possessed and the dispossessors, and it achieved its ends. Darrell was discredited, both Darrell and More were tried and imprisoned, and possession accounts went out of fashion.

Possession did not “die” with the possession controversy, however; accounts of new possessions emerged from time to time. The controversial accounts from the late sixteenth century were apparently popular enough for Ben Jonson to feel confident that his audience would recognize the names and signs of the possessed when he referred to them in \textit{Volpone} and \textit{The Devil is an Ass}, the latter appearing approximately two decades after the controversy, in 1616. But possession also changed forms: in the witchcraft pamphlets that emerged after the possession controversy, possession makes regular appearances, but it is in the form of “bewitchment,” by which the devil is set on the victim by a human agent. Bewitchment was not new—the concept and actual cases of it certainly existed before the possession controversy—but it does seem to have filled the role in witch pamphlets that possession itself used to fill in possession pamphlets.

Marion Gibson’s insightful reading of witchcraft accounts concludes that the witchcraft pamphlets were indebted to possession pamphlets, not only for some of their subject matter, but also for their form of story-telling. Witchcraft pamphlets in the seventeenth century were narratives; writers shifted focus from the witch to the victims of her \textit{maleficia}, the author eliciting sympathy from his readership (Gibson \textit{Reading} 186-90). It is tempting to suggest that both the possession narrative and the witchcraft narrative influenced the spiritual autobiography and conversion narrative, with the latters’ accounts
of temptation and sometimes possession by the devil, ultimately leading to grace and affirmation of the subject’s status as one of the godly. In any case, in juxtaposing these three kinds of textual artifacts, and within them, three kinds of inspiration, we at least see early modern subjects’ continuing fascination with the body’s permeability, with its capacity to be inhabited by outside forces, and with the enabling possibilities of possession, bewitchment, and divine inspiration.

These three kinds of possession—demonic, divine, and demonic owing to a human agent—were also practices. These signs of the ultimate vulnerability, of the body being inhabited by something else, might be deployed in order to violate taboos and interdictions, to gain leverage, to obtain and express agency. The possessed, bewitched, and inspired might get out of working for days or weeks; they might gain attention from busy parents; or they might be able to articulate utterances that were beyond the normal realm of possibility or permissibility. “Those possessed, oppressed, and divinely caught up could all say with one voice, ‘I think where I am not,’ and ‘I speak from other than where I am,’” Diane Purkiss writes (“Invasion” 241). Through divine inspiration, Anna Trapnel could utter dangerously political prophecies. Because she was bewitched, Anne Styles was able to dispel or divert suspicion that she was involved in a murder conspiracy. This is not to suggest that we always interpret possession, inspiration, or bewitchment as strategic practice. There is a danger with all magical practices of reading them as something else—as hysteria, madness, illness, religious zeal, lust for revenge, defiance, the return of the repressed, sheer fraudulence, and so forth. Purkiss criticizes the “hollowness at the centre of historical discourse on the supernatural, which displaces the very subject it promises to address. The supernatural must be transformed into something else so that it can be discussed” (Witch 78). Especially in the cases of possession, inspiration, and bewitchment, which are defined in part by surrender of the self, we must tread with caution in applying terms like “strategic” or “enabling.” It would be wrong to regard possessed subjects as sly plotters who enact a well thought-out plan. Possessions (divine and demonic) were facilitated by specific sets of circumstances, from the general circumstances of the national political and religious climate, to the particular circumstances of home and family life. At the same time, possession may be understood as a strategic enabling practice without identifying the
possessed as a knowing strategist. If we understand the practice of possession in terms of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, then we can acknowledge possession as a tactical performance, as a speech act, and as a highly mediated set of behaviors and responses. The practice of possession carries strategic weight and meaning that may not be related in any causal sense to the possessed him or herself. Bourdieu writes, “It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know” (79).

The practice of possession mobilizes the known and tacitly agreed upon signs of possession and enables transformation. Bodies become loci for cosmic battles between good and evil; they are transformed into powerful instruments for God or for the devil. The trials of the body and the temptations of the mind ultimately end in an affirmation of the possessed subject’s own religious faith and of the efficacy of the community’s prayers and fasting (in the case of Puritans) or of the priest’s or cunning person’s power to exorcise demons. Temptation and even possession by the devil were regular staples of the Puritan conversion narrative. But if the possessed subject and even his or her surrounding familial or religious community is certain about the nature of the possession—demonic or divine—there was always room for doubt among detractors and people of different religious persuasions. Whereas in London, Anna Trapnel was one of the “saints,” the people of Truro were less certain, and thought they would settle the matter by calling on the “witch-tryer-woman” with her “great pin which she used to thrust into witches to try them” (Report 22). Quakers were excoriated as witches and as bewitched, and Quaker leaders were thought to bewitch others into joining the family. Quakers were persecuted by some of the same means by which witches were “tested”—through pricking and swimming (Elmer 145). Whereas these divinely inspired saints were mistaken for demonic agents, Margaret Muschamp, who was bewitched, initially showed signs of divine inspiration, and later in her ordeal, she communicated with angels.

Just as jugglers or cunning folk might be taken for witches, so the danger of mistaken identity abounds in representations of possession, bewitchment, and inspiration, and this was primarily because the possessed of all sorts have in common their signs of possession—inema, lack of sensation, inability to speak, hear, or see, will to self-harm or
suicide, and other more spectacular signs including vomiting of objects, moving lumps in places around the body, voices emerging from the stomach, and so forth. But the possessed, bewitched, and some of the inspired also shared something else: their ability to play with and transform the realms of the public and private. Several scholars have taken note of the way that women prophets of the Interregnum transformed their private chambers into public spaces of political prophecy. Prophetesses experienced private communications with God, but made the messages public through speech and print. Demoniacs were put on display; the “theater of the possessed” allowed people to hear the devil speak, to see the priest, cunning person, or dispossessor act, to see the bodily torments of the possessed. Michel de Certeau’s Possession at Loudun highlights the theatricality of possession and elucidates the tacit mutual understanding among all involved; the audience, possessed, and dispossessor tacitly participate in shaping the expected course of events. The public nature of possession, the necessity of displaying before a public the signs of possession, the crucial role of that public in identifying those signs and bearing witness—these things made the practice of possession a community event, rather than a private act.

While divinely inspired prophets were primarily public figures, other types of prophets and prophecy might not be. In biblical prophecy, of the kind explicated by William Perkins in his Art of Prophesying, the term “to prophesy” would be synonymous with “to interpret,” rather than “to divine” or “to predict.” Ancient prophecy, in which apocryphal prophetic utterances of the past were applied to the present was also popular.9 In the figure of Merlin, the identities of magus and prophet were conflated and combined, and, indeed, classical prophecy descended from the same philosophical traditions as humanist magic. Milton’s aspiration to the status of vatic poet-prophet is interestingly not too far off from a dream of becoming a magus.10 Among types of prophets, I find

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9 On ancient prophecy in early modern England, see Tim Thornton (14-52 and passim) and Keith Thomas (461-516).

10 Jacqueline DiSalvo similarly suggests that for Milton, poetic inspiration is sometimes anxiously linked to madness, ecstasy, and night-flying (this anxiety visible in the witch imagery associated with Eve in Paradise Lost) (130 and passim).
Diane Watt’s distinctions useful: a prophet may be one through whom God speaks or who speaks for God; a prophet may predict the future. A prophet is primarily a public figure whose prophecies are public utterances (whether before a public of persons or through the public sphere of letters). A mystic may be a person who communicates directly with God, “and whose revelations are concerned with the way of perfection” (3). A visionary may be a prophet and a mystic: “it refers to one who has revelations of a transcendent reality, not necessarily of a visual nature” (3). The female prophetic tradition, with which I am mainly concerned, is heterogeneous, but my focus is on female prophets in the first sense: prophets who speak for God in the public sphere.

In the third chapter of this study, I read the life and works of the Fifth Monarchist prophet Anna Trapnel and of John Milton; I take these figures as unique writers, prophets, and political activists, and as representatives of their time who may serve for “case studies.” Trapnel’s and Milton’s works may profitably juxtaposed in order to demonstrate the different ways each fashions a prophetic identity and enters the public sphere. Locating public sphere formation around what I call possession events, I think about how Milton and Trapnel interact with contemporaneous magical beliefs differently; for Trapnel, negotiating magical beliefs seems to have been unavoidable for a number of reasons. Milton, on the other hand, deploys magical signs in his poetic works in ways that suggest attitudes of anxiety and derision. While Trapnel’s status as prophet is publicly witnessed, attested to, and contested, by publics of fellow radicals, readers, and skeptics; Milton, having striven towards his prophetic identity for years, emerges a poet-prophet who has an ambivalent relationship with his public. Through this discussion of Milton and Trapnel, I suggest that the role played by magic in the formation of publics and counter-publics in early modern England has been overlooked. Interregnum publics and counter-publics have primarily been read in terms of religion and politics, and so with the practices, including prophecy and divine possession, of radical sectarians. Beneath the religious and political upheaval of the mid-seventeenth century lies a field of evidence inviting us to see public sphere formation not just through the lens of religion or politics, but also through the lens of magical beliefs and practices. Divine possession and prophecy are the practices in question, here, as these modes of expression had become more popular among the radical religious sects.
Though chronologically the material I discuss in chapter four appears well before the Interregnum, this part of the study falls after chapter three because it serves as a bridge between the first three chapters of this study, the topics and discussions of which share, among other things, a thread of belief; and the final chapter, whose subject is skepticism. Chapter four examines the collision between skepticism and belief by focusing on representations of possession in early modern drama. Looking particularly at the claims made by Stephen Greenblatt in his pair of articles on representations of possession, I argue, contra Greenblatt, that dramatic representations of possession did not “empty out” possession practices of meaning. I reconsider plays such as Jonson’s Volpone and The Devil is an Ass, along with Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night and Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s The Witch of Edmonton, in light of preceding cases of possession, publication of possession pamphlets and the possession pamphlet as a genre, and the Darrell / Harsnett controversy. Ultimately, I suggest that stage representations are ambiguous and do not necessarily disable belief, even if they satirize it. Stage representations like Jonson’s, after all, are not disallowing the possibility of possession; they mock fake possession. Together, this chapter and the preceding one invite us to re-imagine the relationship between skepticism, stage representations of demonic possession, and the rise in cases of divine possession during the Civil War and Interregnum. From the late-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, accounts and representations of possession, whether in print or on stage, suggest not a failure of belief, but a shift in its expression.

There is no denying the fact, however, that there was a wave of skepticism towards magical beliefs and practices in early modern culture. The final chapter considers skepticism, also as it was expressed through print culture, this time, in a surprisingly understudied genre: the mock-prognostication or mock-almanac. In particular, I focus on Thomas Middleton’s mock-almanacs and mock-prognostications, as well as his invocation of the genre in dramatic works like No Wit / Help Like a Woman’s. Middleton played with formal and generic conventions in texts like Plato’s Cap and The Owl’s Almanac, borrowing from and poking fun at both the almanac proper and its
burlesque cousin. Skeptical characteristics, including an emphatic materialism, pervade
Middleton’s mock-prognostications, as they do his satirical prose works more generally.
Middleton maintained an interest in the genre over the course of his career, from The
Penniless Parliament of Threadbare Poets in 1601 to The Owl’s Almanac in 1618. The
generic conventions of the mock-prognostication were already well-suited to the
expression of skepticism and materialism; here, I argue that Middleton’s several
contributions to the popular genre reveal the author playing with its conventions and
expressing a distinctive skeptical impulse. I thus close this study by looking at this other
strand of magical belief—that is, anti-magical belief—and consider its relationship with
the other magical beliefs considered in the previous chapters.
CHAPTER ONE
“NOW IS HELL LANDED HERE UPON THE EARTH”:
RENAISSANCE POVERTY AND WITCHCRAFT IN MIDDLETON’S
THE BLACK BOOK

In 1604, two editions of Thomas Middleton’s prose pamphlet *The Black Book* appeared.11 Ostensibly a sequel to Thomas Nashe’s *Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil* (1592), *The Black Book* presents Lucifer’s response to Pierce Penniless’s “penetrable petition” (456). Lucifer “ascends this dusty theatre of the world” (41), acting as “prologue to his own play” (38), appropriately, on the stage of the Globe theater. His one-day tour of London’s underworld involves many costume changes in between his visits to brothel-houses, ordinaries, and even the Royal Exchange. Lucifer ends his stay by bequeathing legacies to his London friends, including “for his redress, / A standing pension to Pierce Penniless” (108-9).

Published during the plague-stricken beginning of James’s reign, *The Black Book* followed on the coat-tails of Middleton and Dekker’s *Newes from Gravesend* and *The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinary*, Middleton’s *Plato’s Cap* and *Father Hubburd’s Tales*,12 and Dekker’s *The Wonderful Year*—all published while the theaters were closed in 1603 and 1604. In some ways, then, *The Black Book* might properly be labeled a “plague pamphlet.” Though its subject matter is not the plague, it certainly has in common with plague pamphlets its sympathetic treatment of the suffering lower classes.

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11 A version of this chapter appears in *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Reformé* 31.1 (Winter 2008): 69-94. *The Black Book* has been the subject of only a handful of scholarly explorations; see Celia Daileader (132-4); Eric Rasmussen; Neil Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque*; G. B. Shand; and Gary Taylor, “The Renaissance and the End of Editing.”

12 *Father Hubburd’s Tales, or the Ant and the Nightingale* was published once before the first publication date of *The Black Book* and once again, in an expanded and revised edition, after; Middleton would seem to have been working on these two pamphlets simultaneously at some point. In addition to similarity in narrative style, the two pamphlets express concern for the economic hardships that afflicted Thomas Nashe. See Adrian Weiss’s textual introduction to *Father Hubburd’s Tales* (*Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture* 484).
of London. The form of *The Black Book* connects it not only with other “plague pamphlets,” however, but also to the tradition of rogue literature and cony-catching pamphlets, following the example of Robert Greene (and followed, two years later, by Dekker). Its form, too, is appropriate for a response to Nashe’s satirical prose *Supplication*.

Despite its comfortable seat within the context of prose works and the pamphlet form, *The Black Book* also aspires to drama. Would this have been a “devil” play, had the theaters been open? It is impossible to say, though the aforementioned links to prose pamphlets might argue no. And yet, *The Black Book* is so infused with theatricality that with ease Middleton’s reader envisions Lucifer rising through the trapdoor on the Globe stage. Indeed, like Middleton’s sartorially adept fiend, *The Black Book* itself dons many generic and formal costumes: plague pamphlet, prose satire, rogue pamphlet, witch play, devil play, and black book. As Gary Taylor points out, “black-letter type, and the xylographic title page, produce a conspicuously literally ‘black book’” (“Renaissance” 137), and the remarkable epilogue, spoken by *The Black Book* itself, refers the reader not only to the content she has just pored over but to the black cover as well as the type: “Am I black enough, think you, dressed up in a lasting suit of ink? Do I deserve my dark and pitchy title?” (824-6).

As Middleton plays with genre and form, he also effortlessly combines and participates in seemingly disparate discourses. The work’s conspicuous relationship with drama, especially witch and devil plays, marks it as kin to *Doctor Faustus* and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (for which Middleton, in 1602, had composed a prologue and epilogue), as well as the *English Faust Book* from which the former works themselves descended. Lucifer, we imagine, would have been delighted to change places with Mephistopheles. At the same time, and contrary to what one expects from man’s adversary, the purpose of Lucifer’s visit to London is to rescue Pierce Penniless from dire poverty; this connects the piece to the early modern discourse surrounding beggars,
rogues, and the urban poor. Reading *The Black Book* as an intervention in these two different, but intersecting discourses—the one surrounding witchcraft and the devil; the other, rogues and the urban poor—I assert that Middleton’s pamphlet illuminates the economic foundations and implications of early modern cultural attitudes about devils, witches, beggars, and rogues. While situating Middleton’s critique of emergent capitalism among some of its textual influences, including the Faust myth, Thomas Nashe’s *Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil* (1592), and rogue pamphlets like Robert Greene’s *The Black Booke’s Messenger* (1592), I also consider the cultural circumstances within and against which Middleton writes. As *Doctor Faustus* and *Pierce Penniless* efface magic as an enabling practice for the poor and instead figure magic as another form of cultural capital for the rich, rogue literature demonizes the poor, depicts its subjects as recalcitrant “sturdy beggars,” and simultaneously confirms that these poor form a tight-knit community in which they get on fine and have no need for help or charity. *The Black Book*, alternatively, gives us a Lucifer who rises, not to respond to the calls of the Faustian over-reachers in the audience, nor to become a “familiar” to a rural “witch” who seeks both sustenance and revenge; instead, Lucifer has been “moved” (93) to pay a visit to London by the resurrected Pierce Penniless’s supplication.

In this chapter, I apply Keith Thomas “charity denied” model of witchcraft and consider how Middleton’s pamphlet serves to illustrate this model, though in an unlikely setting, with an unlikely “witch” character. *The Black Book* may be read as a response to those who were ostracized by their communities, who lived in dire poverty, and who called on the devil for help out of sheer desperation. Middleton’s Lucifer as Charity may be understood as a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy, an answer to the question invoked in historical accounts of witchcraft: what if Lucifer responded to petitions for help? In addition, the milieu in which *The Black Book* takes place, that of early modern London, demands that we read the pamphlet in terms of the emergence of the urban poor who were, in some ways, the city’s counterpart to the rural village’s witches: similarly demonized and marginalized. Middleton’s pamphlet points an accusing finger at the literature that is complicit in masking the socio-economic causes of poverty and, more generally, at the social and economic changes that make the arch-enemy of mankind appear to be the last bastion of charity.
I. Rogues and Witches: Defining Terms

Within early modern rogue and witch discourses, numerous signifiers were placed into circulation: “masterless men,” “sturdy beggars,” “rogues,” and “vagabonds” named the subjects of rogue literature, while “witch,” “cunning” man or woman, “magician,” and “necromancer” were but a few terms that appeared in demonological tracts. It is, then, important to define the terms I shall use before continuing my discussion. One of the tasks of early modern rogue literature was precisely to define and distinguish among the several types of rogues; yet, studies of early modern rogue literature sometimes conflate or obscure important distinctions between city and country, self-consciously literary text and informational pamphlet, and the impotent poor and cunning cony-catchers.\(^\text{15}\) To be fair, like much else in the English Renaissance, distinctions within these pairs often broke down. Yet early modern writers are clearly concerned to differentiate between the impotent or deserving poor and “sturdy beggars”—the able-bodied but recalcitrant poor. Vagabonds, or those whom Patricia Fumerton calls “unsettled,” were mobile poor, who traveled outside of their home parishes in search of alms or work. Cony-catchers were urban tricksters who preyed upon the naïve country gentlemen who came to the city at term-time.\(^\text{16}\) The latter especially defied categorization by class (Pugliatti 127). Broadly, the term “rogue” is suitable as it can contain all of these. As I focus mainly on the urban criminalized poor, I employ the term “rogue” in order to encompass both cony-catchers, and those, like Middleton’s Pierce Penniless, who lacked the cunning to survive in the city. For me, “rogue” bears the weight of negative connotations, of demonized and criminalized poor. It might imply cunning, but it does not suggest it with the same force as “cony-catcher.” It also hints at one who inhabits an underworld, who flies under the radar.

\(^\text{15}\) Paola Pugliatti rightly emphasizes the need to distinguish between rogue and cony-catching literature; she cautions against falling into the trap laid by anthologies and scholarly studies, which regard literature from “the Elizabethan underworld” “as a homogeneous corpus of texts” (125).
\(^\text{16}\) For dramatic representations of “cony-catching” see for example Middleton’s *Michaelmas Term* and Jonson’s *The Alchemist*. The genre of city comedy in general shares with cony-catching pamphlets its representations of the city and its denizens as “cony-catchers;” urban London is depicted as a kind of “sin city” where the quick-witted and vicious thrive, but where fun is to be had nevertheless.
Yet such fanciful imaginings of an “underworld,” or an underground network were, in part, what permitted early modern Londoners to look the other way in the face of urban poverty.\textsuperscript{17} That some “rogues” were self-sufficient may have been true; that they all worked together, as a merry band of thieves, is a quaint (but harmful) fiction, one which Thomas Middleton helps to dispel. Like the subjects of chapters two and three, Pierce Penniless occupies a liminal space—he is out of work, yet not lame; suffering in privation, yet living in a brothel; praying for mercy, but to Lucifer rather than Christ. His membership in the London “underworld” has gone inactive. Zygmunt Bauman’s term “redundant” may provide us with a helpful way of imagining Pierce and others like him:

To be “redundant” means to be supernumerary, unneeded, of no use—whatever the needs and uses are that set the standard of usefulness and indispensability. The others do not need you; they can do as well, and better, without you. There is no self-evident reason for your being around and no obvious justification for your claim to the right to stay around. To be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable... an unattractive commodity with no buyers... “Redundancy” shares its semantic space with “rejects,” “wastrels,” “garbage,” “refuse”—with waste. (12)

No less redundant, in many ways, was the witch. By definition, both in early modern demonological tracts, and as seen in literary texts and plays, the term “witch” referred to the often uneducated, impoverished, rural subjects, mostly women, who, it was supposed, practiced magic in order to exact revenge or to gain material wealth (or at least relief from poverty). The term “magician” signified the well-educated and often wealthy subjects, mostly men, who practiced the black arts out of curiosity. My usage follows James’s distinctions between “Magie or Necromancie” and “Sorcerie or Witchcraft” (though his use of “sorcery” as a synonym for “witchcraft” may be confusing, and I will avoid the former term here) (7). Practitioners of the former are enticed by

\textsuperscript{17} The mention of networks points to New Historicist readings of rogue literature through the lens of the “subversion/containment” model; however, this essay departs from such a perspective. Steve Mentz’s recent essay, and in general, the volume which he co-edited with Craig Dionne, usefully complicate the traditional New Historicist take on rogue literature.
curiosity, James explains, whereas practitioners of the latter are motivated primarily by acquisitiveness or lust for revenge (8). When I write “witch,” I mean the type of subject represented, for example, by Elizabeth Sawyer in The Witch of Edmonton. When I write “magician,” I mean the type of subject represented by Greene’s Friar Bacon, or, more relevantly, Doctor Faustus.

II. The Faust Myth and Jacobean Witch Beliefs

Who knew, in 1588, that the English Faust Book would have both the immediate and the long-term impact it did? Translated from the so-called German Faust Book with significant augmentations from the translator, one “P. F. Gent.,” the English Faust Book was the immediate source for Marlowe’s play, for a popular ballad, and for the prose romance Friar Bungay (1590) (Jones 10-11). Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus ushered in a new era of stage devils (Cox 127), and the English Faust Book itself, even if not a direct influence, was certainly a predecessor of prose works like Pierce Penniless His Supplication and The Black Book. The Faust myth, especially its Marlovian avatar, enjoyed special success because it manifested and shaped notions of devils and witchcraft in the cultural imagination. It was not just that Faustus was a compelling bourgeois “erring star” whose human foibles and alienated religious views were something the audience could latch onto (1.3.12); Faustus was a product of, and capitalized on, contemporary religious beliefs, one facet of which was belief in the devil. The possibility that there might be a Faustian over-reacher speeding towards his damnèd end right there in London was not beyond the imagination of Marlowe’s audience. That Lucifer and his crew would actually pay him a visit and rend his limbs from his body was conceivable. And perhaps as early as 1594, Renaissance audiences associated the performance of Marlowe’s play with the possible appearance of a real devil. The notorious rumored incident of the extra devil joining the cast in an early performance of Doctor Faustus is

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18 The famous performance in Exeter has been commented on extensively; apparently, the actors realized there was an extra one among them on the stage and panic ensued. In The Black Book, Lucifer alludes to another possible moment when he says, “He has a head of hair like one of my devils in Doctor Faustus when the old Theatre cracked and frightened the audience” (156-7).
symptomatic of the audience’s willingness to believe in the devil, and of the fact that the stage was indeed devil-friendly, as the anti-theatricalists had been saying all along.

Devils and witches had made other popular appearances in 1604 and the years just prior. Recently, the controversy surrounding possession events and the Puritan “cunning man” John Darrell had been made public in a series of pamphlets from Samuel Harsnett.\(^\text{19}\) In 1604, among the new Church Canons, Canon 72 responded to the recent controversy over fraudulent cases of possession and exorcism by expressly forbidding any clergyman to attempt exorcism without the permission of the bishop (which would never have been granted) (Thomas 485). One of the many revivals of *Doctor Faustus* took place in 1604. In 1603, the year of James’s accession, *Daemonologie*, originally published in Edinburgh in 1597, came out in two London editions, and one year later, the third in a series of witchcraft statutes outlawed practices including invocation of spirits, bringing about of harmful *maleficia*, use of a dead body for magical purposes, and friendly interaction, especially entering into a contract, with evil spirits (Thomas 443). Although England never experienced anything resembling the “witch craze” of the continent, James was influenced by continental beliefs (Clark “King James” 189), and *Daemonologie* inveighs against such skeptical works as Reginald Scot’s *A Discoverie of Witchcraft* and Johann Weyer’s *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (1563). Devils and witchcraft were taken seriously.

The role James played in shaping early modern witch beliefs is worth some consideration. James believed in witchcraft, and he was influenced by continental texts like Bodin’s *De la demonomanie des sorciers* (1580) as well as Kramer and Sprenger’s notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). James’s own distinctions between the witch and the magician reflect those expressed in continental demonological studies. The small tract *Newes from Scotland* (1591) describes the attempt on James’s life made by Scottish

\(^{19}\) Chapters three and four discuss the cultural impact of the possession controversy at greater length. On Harsnett, see F. W. Brownlow’s introduction in his edition of *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (in *Shakespeare, Harsnett, and the Devils of Denham*). For the most recent and arguably the most nuanced consideration of the circumstances surrounding the possession of William Sommers (the case around which much of the Darrell / Harsnett controversy swirled) see Marion Gibson, *Possession Puritanism and Print* (passim).
witches under the influence of one Doctor Fian; the graphic descriptions of the “interrogations” these witches underwent, under orders of the Scottish king, demonstrate that James did not suffer from lack of conviction when it came to indicting witches. Though Stuart Clark maintains that by the time James became king of England his zealous approach to witchcraft had become more moderate and even skeptical (193-94), associations between James and witch beliefs surely would have existed in the popular imagination. Thus, while “on the Home Circuit [witch] trials were at their zenith during the reign of Elizabeth I” (Thomas 451), the strong association between Elizabeth’s successor and witchcraft may explain the surge in witch plays that occurred in the Jacobean era. The proliferation of Jacobean witch plays and pamphlets suggests that the connection between James and witchcraft may have been responsible for establishing the “witch vogue” that helped define the cultural moment of early seventeenth-century England.

At stake in James’s appropriation of continental demonological theory was the particular emphasis on the devil as the malefactor behind witchcraft of any kind. Whereas traditional English witch beliefs focused more on the witch’s ability to enact maleficia without ascribing the power to perform maleficent magic to the witch’s compact with the devil, with the dissemination of continental beliefs sprang the link between the witch and the devil. Though magicians were technically more culpable and insidious, “as their error proceeds of the greater knowledge, and so drawes nerer to the sin against the holy Ghost” (James 26); according to Jean Bodin, James I, and William Perkins, to name only a few, witches were equally deserving of capital punishment as they too were guilty of entering into an alliance with the devil, overtly or tacitly. Thus, witch plays and pamphlets usually involved a devil in some capacity, from Mephistopheles who demands that Faustus write his deed in a manner of gift, to Tom the dog who brings about the downfall of the wretched Elizabeth Sawyer in The Witch of Edmonton. If instead of a pamphlet, Middleton’s Black Book were the play it aspires to be, it would fall right in line with other witch plays of the period.

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20 John Cox offers a helpful appendix in which he lists all known “devil” plays on the English stage from 1350-1642. Included are titles of many Jacobean witch plays, which contain devils as well (209-11).
But Middleton, unlike Shakespeare or Jonson, does not seek to flatter the king. Adopting the skeptical and socially conscious attitude found in Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Middleton would appear to be taking a blatantly oppositional stance. In his sole witch play, *The Witch*, Hecate’s spells consist of passages lifted directly from Scot. Though some have unconvincingly interpreted this as evidence that Middleton composed this play in haste, I find it more likely that through this intertextuality Middleton deliberately means to call attention to his source. James, who was something of an authority on witch lore, would have recognized it; so would other readers like archbishop George Abbot or fellow playwright Jonson. Middleton sets himself and his politics apart from those who scorn the poor as so-called witches. Like

21 Both Jonson and Shakespeare clearly draw on *Daemonologie* and *Newes from Scotland* as source material. Though both writers look to other demonological tracts as well, including Scot’s *Masque of Queenes*, a court masque, naturally aligns itself with the king’s politics; Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, though more nuanced, also pays homage to the king. Middleton’s *The Witch*, on the other hand, defiantly invokes both Scot and the uncomfortable subject of the recent Overbury scandal, a source of some embarrassment to the court. Indeed, Middleton’s play may have been censored for its topical references to the Howard affair; see Anne Lancashire (161-81).

22 Marion O’Connor’s commentary for *The Witch* illustrates the extent to which Middleton draws on Scot’s *Discoverie* as well as other contemporary demonological tracts.

23 See, for example, K. M. Briggs (81) and Anthony Harris (81).

24 Diane Purkiss finds fault with what she believes is Middleton’s recasting of “cunning woman” Anne Turner, who was tried and executed for her role in the Overbury scandal, as “an almost unrecognisable and practically inhuman monstrosity, the witch Hecate” (*Witch* 217). Purkiss believes that Middleton “was influenced by Scot’s contempt for popular beliefs and his wish to display them as grotesque and farcical” (217). While it is true that Middleton avoids depicting “traditional” popular culture in favor of contemporary London culture, I read Middleton’s witchcraft scenes in *The Witch* (which are also reinscribed in Middleton’s adaptation of *Macbeth*) as rather more festive and spectacular, and, yes, grotesque, but “farcical” may be carrying it too far. Middleton’s witch scenes do not, to my mind, mock Hecate, or Turner—if that is who Hecate is supposed to be. They do cast so-called witchcraft as innocuous, if grotesque, fun, but they also provide a contrast, so important in Renaissance “oppositional thinking,” by which to understand the true diabolism happening at court in Ravenna. Middleton never aims for the “frisson of fear” that Purkiss claims he fails to achieve (219); instead, these spectacles of elaborate song and dance make for entertaining theater and they deflate the notions of true evil attributed to witches by the king. Purkiss suggests that, like Scot, Middleton is misogynistic and eager to remove any possibility of agency from women witches. But this is certainly not consistent with Middleton’s depiction of women as
Scot, Middleton was both a Protestant and a skeptic. While concerned with issues of sin and salvation, Middleton emphasizes human agents and their choices, the causes and consequences of their actions, and the material circumstances of their daily life. This in part explains why the witches of The Witch are entirely ineffective compared to the courtiers and ladies at Ravenna. Witches cannot in actuality perform the tasks attributed to them.\textsuperscript{25} The skeptic espouses a sociological view of witchcraft that reads the social and economic circumstances out of which both practices and accusations emerge. While he did not dwell on the subject, Middleton’s one foray into witch drama suggests that Reginald Scot’s sympathetic description of how beggars were transformed into “witches” registered in terms of the poet’s concern with the demonization of the marginalized poor:

They go from house to house, and from doore to doore for a pot of milke, yest, drinke, pottage, or some such releefe; without the which they could hardlie live: neither obtaining for their service and paines, nor by their art, nor yet at the divels hands... either beautie, monie, promotion, welth, worship, pleasure, honor, knowledge, learning, or anie other benefit whatsoever.

It falleth out many times that neither their necessities, nor their expectation is answered or served, in those places where they beg or borrow... in tract of time the witch waxeth odious and tedious to hir neighbors... so as sometimes she cursseth one, and sometimes another... doubtlesse (at length) some of hir neighbors die, or fall sicke; or some of their children are visited with diseases...

both strong and sympathetic in his other dramatic works. Middleton’s treatment of the witches points to an argument that Anne Turner did not merit execution, and it is hard to see why this is a bad thing.

\textsuperscript{25} The view that witches cannot actually perform the tasks attributed them is held by both skeptics and believers, as we shall see in chapter two. Reginald Scot, the most thoroughgoing of skeptics, did not even believe that the devil was to blame, but that in fact, so-called maleficia were either natural phenomena which people just did not understand or that they were juggling acts or illusions, or else hallucinations or products of a disorder of the body. This was extremely radical of course. Like Scot’s, Middleton’s skepticism arises in part from a concern that humans attribute to other humans or to the devil acts that could only be performed by God. But also like Scot’s, Middleton’s God seems placed at a distance from the world of humans, he is not an intervening force but a disinterested observer.
Which by ignorant parents are supposed to be the vengeance of witches.  

(Scot 30)

Neatly describing the “charity denied” or “charity withheld” model, as it would come to be called, Scot’s passage in fact reflects precisely the model of witchcraft described at length by Keith Thomas. Though the Thomas model does not satisfactorily answer many of the questions raised by accounts of early modern English witchcraft accusations, the model as a model is extremely useful in that it compels us to examine the social and material circumstances of witchcraft accusations. There is an obvious connection between Scot’s understanding of witchcraft in the early modern era and Thomas’s account of witchcraft in that era, a connection that is not, to all scholars, a felicitous one. But because the “charity withheld” model of witchcraft has been shown to be moderately historically accurate and because the model propounds a view of witchcraft that is above all class-based, I find it instrumental in understanding discourses of witchcraft and poverty and in exploring Middleton’s intervention in these discourses. In the next chapter, I complicate the “charity withheld” model; here, I apply it, while remaining aware that, like all models, it is not a “one size fits all” answer to the complexities of early modern English witchcraft. Scot’s *Discoverie* and Thomas’s seminal *Religion and the Decline of Magic* invite us to look at the witch as the victim. Similarly, *The Black Book* is infused with this notion that it is the witch, rather than her ostensible victim, who is to be pitied. Where other productions and pamphlets titillated with their accounts of the magician’s ambitions and experiences, Middleton’s work expresses sensitivity to supposed witches and illustrates the view that “most accused persons lived in a state of impotence and desperation. Their commonest motive was thought to be the escape from grinding poverty” (Thomas 520). For Middleton, the

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26 Purkiss asserts, “Thomas and Macfarlane’s reading [of English witchcraft] follows Scot and [George Gifford]: where [the latter two] deny the witch all supernatural power, modern historians deny her all social and cultural power… If we see the Thomas-Macfarlane witch as an enabling myth, then historical identity is grounded in the powerlessness and speechlessness of woman. It also casts the historian as part of a lineage of progressive skepticism that places him firmly on the side of the future; the winning side, in fact” (*Witch* 66).
impoverished reality, the “redundancy,” of the Pierce character is more horrifying than anything Faustus can conjure.

III. Middleton versus Marlowe and Nashe

While witches might be won over to the dark side by a devil in the guise of a “familiar” who seizes on them in vulnerable moments when they feel the bite of penury and have been forsaken by the community, in early modern discourse, the devil is often more interested in gaining the “capital” of magicians’ souls. Doctor Faustus serves as an example:

Monarch of hell, under whose black survey
Great potentates do kneel with awful fear,
Upon whose altars thousand souls do lie,
How am I vexèd with these villains’ charms!
From Constantinople am I hither come
Only for the pleasure of these damnèd slaves. (3.2.29-34)

Mephistopheles is not a little aggravated that he has been called from the East by the “slaves” Rafe and Robin, whose silly tricks are the comedic subplot to Faustus’s tragic plot. Clearly, these two stablemen are a waste of Mephistopheles’s time, and he turns them into base creatures, an ape (appropriate because Robin has been “aping” Faustus) and a dog.27 In the subsequent scenes, Faustus and Mephistopheles, after entertaining the Emperor, come upon a horse-courser, and Faustus uses “reverse psychology” after he has sold his horse to the man, warning him not to take the horse into the water and knowing full well that he will. Faustus delights in cozening the poor man into giving him eighty dollars altogether. According to John Cox’s study of devils on the medieval and Renaissance stage, Doctor Faustus signals a change in the relations between stage devils

27 In turning Rafe into a dog, Mephistopheles casts him as a typical “familiar,” a role that Rafe seems to embrace as he realizes the potential for sexual contact with women. The portrayal of the familiar as a sexual partner who regularly accesses “witches’ marks” or teats located near the “witch’s” genitalia occurs in numerous witch pamphlets and plays. Robin’s transformation into an ape resonates with early modern notions of the devil and the magician as imitators of God, “God’s apes.” Gareth Roberts writes, “the devil was often described from Tertullian onwards only as God’s imitator, diabolus simia Dei. Devils, and magicians with their aid, thus produce effects which seem real but are not” (“An Art” 141).
and humans: the lower class characters “acquire no mysterious dignity as God’s ‘freindes dear’” but instead are “mere hapless gulls,” and “Mephistopheles thinks no better of commoners than Faustus himself does” (Cox 124). Emily C. Bartels posits that Doctor Faustus highlights the difference in value between “unlearned and learned subjects” through Mephistopheles’s rejection of “the tavern folk” and his pursuit of Faustus who is “embedded and renowned in mainstream culture, a figure of learning… who is watched and followed by a fan club of scholars…” (126). Ultimately, in Doctor Faustus, “rising above common origin becomes a good in itself, and the devil despises commoners as much as everyone else does” (Cox 202).

Rising above a common origin is precisely what gets Faustus into trouble. Coming from “parents of base stock” (Prologue 11), he is sent to live with his uncle in Wittenberg, “a rich man, and without issue, [who] took this Faustus from his father and made him his heir” (English Faust Book 1.22-24). Having attended university and surpassed his professors as a scholar (1.40-42), Faustus wants to learn more, but has no one to learn from. Mephistopheles will be his next teacher. However we choose to read the underlying causes for Faustus’s over-reaching, it is imperative to remember that Faustus’s motivation and ability to call on Mephistopheles first of all depend on his means. Faustus can over-reach because he is at leisure to do so. Rafe and Robin, by contrast, appear to turn to “conjuring” as a diversion from their lives of drudgery. If we recall the motives for witchcraft enumerated in early modern demonological discourse (acquisitiveness and revenge), the horse-courser is the most likely candidate of any in the play to practice the black arts—it would not have been surprising to see him place a charm or curse on Faustus to punish him for the mean trick. Because the emphasis is on Faustus as a trickster figure, however, who has fun at the expense of others (and Others, including Catholics, Jews, and the poor), Marlowe’s play operates as a vehicle for cultural ideas about others that turns them from feared Others into harmless laughing stocks.

The Faust myth is interwoven in Thomas Nashe’s Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil. Pierce’s opening lament is evocative of Faustus’s frequent despairing asides:

Why ist damnation to dispaire and die,
When life is my true happinesse disease?
My soule, my soule, thy safetye makes me flie
The faultie means, that might my paine appease.
Divines and dying men may talke of hell,
But in my heart her several tormentes dwell.

(6)

Just as the English Faust Book and Doctor Faustus highlight the role of social status in Faustus’s necromantic practices while also divorcing the concept of witchcraft from the actual social circumstances of its practice, so Pierce Penniless simultaneously discloses and disguises the reasons for practicing witchcraft. Pierce is poor, but the problem for him is not poverty in itself. It is rather that, in the upside-down world of nascent capitalism, Pierce is poor while his social inferiors are wealthy:

I grew to consider how many base men that wanted those parts which I had, enjoyed content at will, and had wealth at commaund . . . am I better born? am I better brought up? yea and better favored? and yet am I a begger? What is the cause? how am I crost? or whence is this curse? (7)

After considering that he may be a victim of witchcraft, Pierce decries the unworthy hacks by whom true scholars and wits are undone. He reveals that he has “clapt up a handsome Supplication to the Divell” (11) and hints that it was written in blood: “I determined to clawe Avarice by the elbowe till his full belly gave mee a full handle, and lette him bloud with my penne (if it might be) in the veyne of liberalitie: and so (in short time) was this Paper-monster Pierce Penilesse, begotten” (12). If Pierce Penniless is social criticism, its momentum gets lost in the lengthy catalogue of vices followed by the Faustian dialogue between Pierce and the Knight of the Post. Pierce is not the vox populi inveighing against the evils of burgeoning capitalism and the concomitant rise in poverty; he is bourgeois in his sensibilities and is concerned only with his own social betterment.

Middleton’s Pierce and his Lucifer differ considerably from their parents. Unlike Nashe’s Pierce or Marlowe’s Mephisopheles, Middleton’s characters are immersed in the economic and social realities of early modern London. Recalling Faustus’s fantasies as

28 I give page numbers here, as my edition has no line numbers. In another striking moment of intertextuality, this final couplet is quoted, verbatim, in Middleton’s Yorkshire Tragedy at lines 4.87-88.
he performs his invocation in the beginning of Marlowe’s play, Middleton’s Pierce, rather than imagining *Faustus*’s world of “profit and delight” or envisioning his nation “walled with brass” (1.1.55, 90), instead pitifully

muttered these reeling words between drunk and sober, that is, between sleeping and waking: “I should laugh, i’faith, if for all this I should prove a usurer before I die and have never a penny now to set up withal. I would build a nunnery in Pickt-hatch here and turn the walk in Paul’s into a bowling alley. I would have Thames leaded over, that they might play at cony-holes with the arches under London Bridge. Well,” and with that he waked, “the Devil is a mad knave still.” (433-40)

While clearly invoking *Doctor Faustus*, Middleton gives Pierce a modest, though bawdy, fantasy; notably, Pierce would find it humorously ironic if he should “prove a usurer” after having been so poor, in other words, if he should suddenly have enough money not only to subsist, but indeed, to lend at interest. To “prove a usurer” would be to become a successful capitalist. Pierce’s chimerical vision is a fascinating representation of the kind of cultural fantasy available to the early modern poor. Who better to illustrate the fantastic wealth able to be had by ordinary people than the figure of the usurer? Much talked about, dramatized, despised, and also resorted to, usurers were depicted as “cormorants” who consumed the commonwealth. They had appetite without end; they were demonized as figures of covetousness who did not eat their bread in the sweat of their brows. The charging of interest was unchristian and unnatural. When the state sanctioned the charging of ten percent interest on loans in 1571—an act that was meant to prevent “biting usury” or the charging of excessive interest—many, despite the reasonable intention behind the act, took this as a sign that the devil was indeed loose in the world. Thus, Pierce’s brief, “drunken” fantasy of “proving a usurer” is fraught with cultural significance. If we are meant to see Pierce as already damned, already in the hell of urban poverty in early modern London, then becoming a successful capitalist is a way out of hell. Paradoxically, to become a type of “devil,” as the usurer was thought to be, would be to ensure economic and social salvation. Importantly, Pierce’s fantasy

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29 For anti-usury tracts, see for example Blaxton, Fenton, and Wilson. Also see 13 Elizabeth c. 9, the “Act against Usury,” in Tawney et al, vol. 2, 160-2.
invokes the “witch’s” fantasy of gaining relief from poverty through diabolical means. For how else would Pierce gain such wealth?30

Unlike Marlowe’s Mephistopheles, whose ire at having been invoked by two unworthy subjects makes clear that socio-economic status matters to the devil, too; Middleton’s Lucifer is not “vexèd” by Pierce’s supplication. Less interested in world tours and trips to the exotic East, this devil is very much in and of London. From the Globe to Fleet Street, from St. Paul’s to Pickt-hatch, Lucifer knows London like the back of his cloven hoof. Where Mephistopheles snobbishly feels he is too good for the likes of Rafe and Robin, Middleton’s Lucifer would probably not think twice about dropping in on them for some fun. After all, he comes from hell to declare his last will and testament to

… smoky gallants, riotous heirs,
Strumpets that follow theatres and fairs,
Gild-nosed usurers, base-metalled panders,
To copper-captains and Pickt-hatch commanders,
To all infectious catchpoles through the town,
The speckled vermin of a crown,
To these and those, and every damnèd one,
I’ll bequeath legacies to thrive upon. (100-07)

30 Though Pierce fantasizes about becoming a successful capitalist, clearly Middleton in *The Black Book* and *Father Hubbard’s Tales*—and more ambiguously in the city comedies—laments the victory of the new money economy, and Pierce would not, after all, ever become a usurer since this would contradict his position in his “supplication,” Nashe’s piece, which rigorously attacks usury, avarice, covetousness, and so forth. Like Nashe’s *Sapplication* itself, *The Black Book* and *Father Hubbard’s Tales* criticize the idolatrous worship of gold; both long for the old “gift” economy, wherein a writer could live well by patronage. These days, both works suggest, talent counts for little; aristocrats expect to be valorized in works but do not want to pay for it. Both works not only invoke the traditional associations of virtue with poverty and vice with wealth but also play with these conventions. While Lucifer is a charitable deity in *The Black Book*, *Father Hubbard’s Tales* gives us another ironic revision of an allegorical figure: “cold Mistress Charity” dressed in taffeta disdainfully relinquishes only “a single halfpenny” for the benefit of the mangled, disabled soldier-Ant (1006-1023).
While Lucifer is here playful, he also has moments of what appear to be genuine sympathy and concern for the miserable Pierce. And not without reason, for Pierce’s living conditions are sobering:

I stumbled up two pair of stairs in the dark, but at last caught in mine eyes the sullen blaze of a melancholy lamp that burnt very tragically upon the narrow desk of a half bedstead, which descried all the pitiful ruins throughout the whole chamber. The bare privities of the stone walls were hid with two pieces of painted cloth, but so ragged and tattered that one might have seen all nevertheless, hanging for all the world like the two men in chains between Mile End and Hackney. The testern, or the shadow over the bed, was made of four ells of cobwebs, and a number of small spinners’ ropes hung down for curtains . . . In this unfortunate tiring-house lay poor Pierce upon a pillow stuffed with horse-meat [hay], the sheets smudged so dirtily as if they had been stolen by night out of St. Pulcher’s churchyard . . . (406-24)

Lucifer’s propensity to metaphor and personification is apparent in this passage: the naked wall has “bare privities;” the ragged cloth resembles hanging criminals; cobwebs, like fabric, are measured in “ells;” dirty sheets are like the wool coverings in which dead criminals were wrapped. But amidst his figurative language, the stark conditions are illuminated; Neil Rhodes goes so far as to suggest that the above description of Pierce’s quarters “is perhaps the first attempt in English prose actually to visualise what it is like to be down and out in a large city” (Elizabethan 59). Moreover, while engaging, according to Rhodes, in this early attempt at “social realism,” Lucifer, and Middleton, simultaneously maintain emphasis on the theatrical: even the lamp is “melancholy” and burning “very tragically.” Guided by this tragic luminescence, the comedy in which Lucifer has been playing the lead has transformed into tragedy for the moment, and he has found the tragic actor Pierce in an “unfortunate tiring-house.”

To the critics who have read The Black Book, Pierce Penniless bears a striking resemblance to Thomas Nashe himself. Nashe’s influence on Middleton is visible not only in The Black Book, but also in other pamphlets like Microcynicon (which came under fire, literally, along with Nashe’s work, in the Bishops’ Ban of 1599), Plato’s Cap,
and *Father Hubburd’s Tales*. In the latter, the Nightingale sings a brief ode to Nashe, which mourns the satirist’s early demise and inveighs against the Harveys, finally lamenting that “Thy name they bury, having buried thee; / Drones eat thy honey: thou wert the true bee.” In *Father Hubburd’s Tales*, Middleton is also strangely concerned with “railing like Nashe” (perhaps recalling how in the Bishops’ Ban, works were burned for “railing”). *The Black Book* does not “rail.” Instead, through his revision of the Pierce character and his portrait of the sympathetic devil, Middleton forwards a radical critique of the socio-economic conditions that permitted Nashe to meet his demise as a starving writer. As G. B. Shand suggests, “in *The Black Book*’s compassion for Pierce, and its implied scorn for the world that has so abused him, it is perhaps possible to catch a shadowy glimpse of the retribution threatened by Nashe” (204), and Rhodes posits, “Whereas Nashe’s descriptions of sordid living conditions are confined to the allegorical portraits of Greediness and Dame Niggardize, Middleton’s account is of Nashe’s own circumstances” (*Elizabethan* 59). So, where Nashe’s Pierce worries about the “world turned upside down” in which his social inferiors prosper while he receives no patronage, Middleton’s re-presentation of Pierce situates the character in such an alarming state of privation that he is not at leisure to gripe about such things. Precisely because of his sympathy for Nashe, and others like him, Middleton’s stress on the poverty not only of Pierce but also of brothel-owner Lieutenant Frig-beard revises the rhetoric of Nashe’s Pierce, who complains that “base men” are wealthy. “How am I crost? or whence is this curse?” Nashe’s Pierce cries. But Middleton’s Frig-beard, broker in the oldest business in the world, similarly laments, “I know not whether it be a cross or a curse, Noble Philip of Phlegethon, or whether both . . . but I protest . . . Pierce was never so penniless as poor Lieutenant Frigbeard” (372-7). Middleton shows that in early modern London, emergent

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31 The Nightingale’s ode to Nashe occurs in *Father Hubburd’s Tales* (252-69).

32 The Nightingale’s verses on Nashe begin with the lines “Or if in bitterness thou rail like Nashe-- / (Forgive me, honest soul, that term thy phrase / ‘Railing’ . . .)” (252-4). Again, in his “Tale when he was a ploughman,” the Ant tells us that he “began to rail like Thomas Nashe against Gabriel Harvey, if you call that railing” (655-6), and further, in the Ant’s “Tale when he was a soldier,” he recalls his “passionate, but not railing speeches” (1028-9).
capitalism damns out-of-work writers and bawds alike. Even sex doesn’t guarantee a living.

IV. Rogue literature and poverty

As dramatic representations of the lower classes participated in the “desanctification” of the poor, so too did rogue literature. Indeed, as Mark Koch argues, “the desanctification of the beggar found its greatest secular expression in … the rogue pamphlet or beggar book” (95). Middleton’s pamphlets, however, resist the impulse towards demonization, mockery, or strange idealization of the poor—all types of representations that emerge from rogue literature. The genre itself sprang from a matrix of fear and apprehension about the increase in London’s poor. As displaced rural labor migrated to the city, and the privation suffered by many urban dwellers became more visible, “rogue” literature sought to assuage the anxieties of the middle and upper classes. At the same time, the “discourse of poverty” articulated through “cony-catching” pamphlets “is riddled with contradictions;” it is reflective of the inescapable paradoxes of its emergent capitalist milieu (Carroll 2). In early modern “oppositional thinking,” the poor are a necessary counter to the rich, as is shown in this passage from John Donne:

Rich and poor are *contrary* to one another, but yet both *necessary* to one another; They are both necessary to one another; but the poor man is the more necessary, because though one man might be rich, though no man were poor, yet he could have no exercise of his charity, he could send none of his riches to heaven, to help him there, except there were some poor here. (quoted in Carroll 14)

In this complex justification, the existence of the poor is necessary so that the rich, through “investing” in the poor, may expand their spiritual coffers. Yet the poor were also demonized: similar tropes and modes of expression occur in portrayals of the poor, of witches, and of the devil himself. Like the devil, the rogue can “take up” a multiplicity of identities, can talk on any subject in the world, can insinuate himself into any situation. Like witches, rogues were said to belong to organized hierarchical networks, with a highly systematized language. “Cony-catching” pamphlets “discover” the secrets of the London underworld to potential “conies” who, armed with knowledge, might speak the
language and see through the beggars’ potential tricks. “Thus one paradox of their
representation: on the one hand, beggars are disordered, chaotic, without self-discipline,
utterly alien and opposite to the hard-working proper citizenry; but on the other hand,
they are said to make plans, form conspiracies… and act and sound very much like the
proper citizenry” (Carroll 38).

In some cases, rogues were cast as “God’s hangmen;” like the devil, they
punished vice. In Robert Greene’s The Black Book’s Messenger (1592), to take just one
example, rogue Ned Browne demonstrates how “conies” are ensnared because of their
own vices—lechery, covetousness, gluttony, pride. Greene’s narrator explains how cony-
catchers find out the special obsessions of their victims and then play on these vices:

   If [the victim] bee lasciviously addicted, they have Aretines Tables at their
   fingers endes, to feed him on . . .
   If they see you covetously bent, they wil tel you wonders of the
   Philosophers stone, and make you beleevve they can make golde of Goose-
   greace, onely you must bee at some two or three hundred pounds cost . . .
   Discourse with them of Countries, they will set you on fire with travailing,
   yea what place is it they will not sweare they have been in . . . If you
request his company to travel, [the rogue] will say Infaith I cannot tell: I
would sooner spend my life in your company than in any mans in
England, but at this time I am not so provided of money as I would,
therefore I can make you no promise . . . Tut, money say you (like a
liberall young maister) take no care for that, for I have so much land and I
wil sell it, my credite is so much, and I will use it. . . (21-2)

In Greene’s pamphlet, the reader derives satisfaction as much from learning the rogue’s
tricks as from seeing these particular “conies” caught. Rogue pamphlets like this one are
in some ways simple reconfigurations of morality tales, in which “the innocent cony who
wishes to play with the devil ‘gets his due’ and confirms for the reader a deeper sense of
moral equity in the turns of the world” (Dionne 52). But authors also turned away from
demonization of rogues and towards idealization. In The Bel-man of London (1608),
Thomas Dekker expresses an ambivalent appreciation: “this is a Ging [sic] of good
fellowes in whome there is more brother-hood … this is the Ragged Regiment: Villains
they are by birth, Varlets by education, Knaves by profession, Beggers by the Statute & Rogues by act of Parliament…” (B4v). In pointing out that the identity of the rogues is largely defined by society and the state, Dekker might be articulating a critique. That he follows up only a few lines later by referring to the people as “idle Drones of a Countrie, the Caterpillars of a common-wealth, and the Aegiptian lice of a kingdome” further couches the potential critique in ambivalence: is Dekker mocking Thomas Harman, whose Caveat for Common Cursetors was largely responsible for introducing such terms, and rhetoric, into the culture? Does Dekker mean to sympathize with the rogues, idealize their freedom and fraternity, or demonize their wanton ways? Dekker’s ambiguous politics at least make room for a variety of responses.

If Dekker’s praise of rogues is balanced with typical condemnations, John Taylor’s The Praise, Antiquity and commodity of Beggary, Beggers, and Begging (1621) idealizes the beggar and places him in an imaginary pastoral life of ease, where

Heav’n is the roofe that Canopies his head,
The cloude his Curtaines, and the earth his bed,
The Sunne his fire, the Starre’s his candle light,
The Moone his Lampe that guides him in the night.
When scorching Sol makes other mortals sweat,
Each tree doth shade a beggar from his heat:
When nipping Winter makes the Cow to quake,
A Beggar will a Barne for Harbour take,
When tree and Steeples are o’re-turn’d with winde,
A beggar will a hedge for shelter finde. (quoted in Carroll 64)

Responding to Taylor’s poem, Carroll observes, “This extraordinary idealization of the beggar’s life is a species of denial so absolute as to insist upon an inverted reading: it suggests just how desperate the beggars’ situation must have been at the time” (66).

Just as Middleton responds to and revises the ideological underpinnings found in James, Marlowe, and Nashe, so too he replies to the multifarious misrepresentations of the poor in various rogue literatures. Middleton’s Pierce Penniless lives no pleasant life in the country, seems not to be involved in any underworld gangs of rogues, and, when he speaks, he doesn’t speak in a canting tongue. Middleton’s Pierce is so far sunk into
penury that, apart from checking himself into Bridewell, his chances of attaining work are nil. While Faustus has the time and means to conjure a new tutor to answer his questions, and while Nashe’s Pierce is more akin to Melville’s scrivener, capable of other work but simply “preferring not to,” no character in *The Black Book* is at leisure to care about the philosophical problems Faustus is beset by; none has the time to sit around sulking as Nashe’s Pierce does. Lucifer finds Pierce in a wretched state and refers to him as “poor Pierce,” “poor Penniless,” or “poor slave,” five times in less than one hundred lines. Notice the emotionally expressive language Lucifer employs as he describes their first meeting:

‘How now, Pierce?’ quoth I. ‘Dost thou call me a knave to my face?’

Whereat the poor slave started up with his hair a-tiptoe. To whom by easy degrees I gently discovered myself, who, trembling . . . craved pardon of my damnable excellence . . . But at length, having recovered to be bold again, he unfolded all his bosom to me . . .

After I saw poor Penniless grow so well acquainted with me and so familiar with the villainy of my humour, I unlocked my determinations and laid open my intents in particulars, the cause of my up-rising being moved with both his penetrable petition and his insufferable poverty . . .

(441-57)

Lucifer is “moved” by Pierce’s “insufferable poverty”: this from the original resident of hell. When Lucifer speaks of “the cause of his up-rising,” we can read “up-rising” as more than just his ascension from hell. Lucifer seems to be rising up, rebelling, against his usual role as enemy and seducer. Playing against type, Lucifer takes on the allegorical role of Charity, as opposed to Temptation or Vice. It is Lucifer, after all, who admonishes the reader:

Wherefore was vice ordained but to be rich, shining, and wealthy, seeing virtue, her opponent, is poor, ragged, and needy? Those that are poor are timorous honest and foolish harmless, as your carolling shepherds, whistling ploughmen and such of the same innocent rank, that never relish the black juice of villainy, never taste the red food of murder or the damnable suckets of luxury (298-304)
Middleton couches the abstinence of the needy from vice in terms of starvation—they have never tasted, never drunk; vice “fats” the rich, while virtue bears no “juice,” no “food” or “suckets.” The irony is that even those poor like Lieutenant Frig-beard who are not “timorous honest” are starving nevertheless. Crucially, however, by writing his critique of the discourses of poverty around the flawed but sympathetic characters of Pierce and Frig-beard, among others, Middleton humanizes the poor, rather than demonizing or idealizing, and thus elucidates an alternative to the styles of discourse represented in the texts discussed above.

As in dramatic works like Dekker’s *If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil Is in It* (1611) and Jonson’s *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616), the Friar Rush motif “of a devil in human guise whose machinations barely compete with those of human beings” (Cox 158) functions as a vehicle for social criticism in Middleton’s *The Black Book*. But Middleton’s Lucifer is not inept, and his friends in the London underworld are not particularly cunning. Rather than a simple inversion, of the kind seen in Jonson’s play, where the devils are too “virtuous” to keep up with the infernal Londoners, Middleton’s pamphlet depicts a situation that is more complicated. In *The Black Book*, Pierce Penniless has invoked the devil not out of boredom or curiosity or an intemperate desire, like Faustus’s, to be “glutted more with learning’s golden gifts” (Prologue 24); neither has he called on the arch-fiend to set right the inverted social hierarchy so that he can reclaim a place nearer the top. Middleton exposes a reality of the urban poor through his resurrection of the Pierce character, and he opposes the contradictory ideology of beggars and rogues by “discovering” the rogue on his deathbed. Part of the large population of urban poor, Pierce is not a “metaphor” or a “symbol” for the “spiritual struggles” or “conflicted world-view” of the Renaissance; nor is he a wily rogue who successfully dupes innocent gulls. While Lucifer elicits occasional chuckles, Pierce is no laughing matter—Renaissance readers on their way to see a play at the Globe might have easily happened upon Penniless’s twin as they proceeded into Southwark.

While the urban poor are humanized through the character of Pierce, those who refuse to offer charity or sympathy are demonized; they are worse than Lucifer himself. John Cox ends his history of the devil on the English stage thus: “[the devil] was the originator of social oppression, as well as other kinds of social ills, and it is hard to see
why any peasant would seek a social oppressor for a friend” (208), but Middleton’s pamphlet captures a very different spirit; the same spirit embodied in the harrowing accounts of the very poor who, like Pierce, appeal to the devil out of sheer desperation (Thomas 519-26, 560-69). That these poor, whether rural “witches” or urban “rogues,” might take the devil himself to be a figure who might offer help instead of harm was an obvious sign of just how desperate their situations were. Middleton, in casting Lucifer as Charity, shows awareness of the plight of England’s “redundant” population.

Middleton’s Lucifer is unique, too, not just because he gets to play the good guy. Within Middleton’s oeuvre, Lucifer is the only character who might rightly be called a “stage devil,” the pamphlet form notwithstanding. As a general rule, Middleton avoided the supernatural. With the exceptions of The Witch and A Mad World, My Masters, the latter featuring a succubus in the form of Mistress Harebrain, diabolical and divine agents are decidedly absent from his drama. Middleton’s materialism, illustrated so vividly in the city comedies, is one of the defining characteristics of his work, certainly one of the things that set him apart from his contemporaries. By the time he writes A Game at Chess, his last and, in its day, his most popular work, Middleton reduces hell to a bag of chess pieces. The characters who have been “taken” in moves throughout the game appear at the end, in the bag, quarreling, and the White Knight (Charles) sneers, “Contention in the bag? Is hell divided?” (5.3.198).

This is not to say that the devil is never conjured or invoked in Middleton’s other works. Certainly, the city comedies display the traditional interconnections between the devil and usury or other capitalist practices. A Trick to Catch the Old One and Michaelmas Term give us vaguely devilish characters with suggestive names: Dampit, Gulf, Hoard, Lucre, Lethe, Hellgill, and the Ariel-like “spirits” Falselight and Shortyard. Numerous moments in the dialogue illustrate conventional early modern notions about the mammonesque worship of wealth and the unnatural, apparently magical or diabolical reproduction of money through interest, of coin begetting coin. The usurer is a “trampler of time,” as “old Harry” Dampit is called in A Trick to Catch the Old One (1.4.43),

33 Anti-usury tracts inveighed against usurers for “selling time.” For example, Thomas Wilson writes, “And wil these idle men sell the sunne, the ayer, and the tyme for theire proper gayne? Howe can hee bee of god that so dothe?” (288).
precisely because his wealth reproduces unnaturally quickly; interest compounds with dire speed. In the same play, Witgood, pursued by creditors, cries out, “I am in hell here and the devils will not let me come to thee [his friend, the Host]” (4.4.66-7). Finally, the gentleman Lamprey, watching Dampit in a drunken stupor and perhaps approaching death, sententiously observes, “Here may a usurer behold his end. What profits it to be a slave in this world, and a devil i’th’ next?” (4.5.63-5). In *Michaelmas Term*, Hellgill suggests that the devil’s current reign on earth prior to the imminent millennial reign of Christ is all the more reason for the Country Wench to become a courtesan: “Wouldst thou, a pretty, beautiful, juicy squall, live in poor thrummed house i’th’ country in such servile habiliments, and may well pass for a gentlewoman i’th’ city?… O, now, in these latter days, the devil reigning, ‘tis an age for cloven creatures” (1.3.4-10). The “cloven creature” is, of course, the courtesan herself, another type of devil who lures men to damnation.  

One of Vindice’s many aphoristic statements in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* pithily describes the interconnections among women, money, and damnation: “Were’t not for gold and women there would be no damnation; / Hell would look like a lord’s great kitchen without fire in’t. / But ‘twas decreed before the world began / That they should be the hooks to catch at man” (2.1.250-3). One might go on, but for most readers of Renaissance drama this is standard fare. What is unusual in *The Black Book*, then, is Middleton’s break with the typical linking of the devil with economic oppression. While the city comedies are certainly critical of the emergent capitalist ethos, satirizing it in figures like Andrew Lethe and Quomodo in *Michaelmas Term* and the usurers in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, Middleton’s dramatic works do not elicit the sympathy for the poor that the pamphlets do (*The Black Book* as well as *Father Hubburd’s Tales* and the two collaborative efforts with Dekker). Furthermore, while the city comedies are avowedly secular, invoking the devil in name but in fact depicting human agents, actions, and consequences, and merely describing them as demonic, *The Black Book* goes even

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34 There was much punning on the vagina as “hell” or “damnation;” even Dampit’s name bears this connotation, as Valerie Wayne points out in her commentary to *A Trick to Catch the Old One* at 1.4.4.1.
35 Middleton does still derive humor from connecting illicit sexuality, whoredom, or adultery with the devil in *The Black Book*. See Daileader for a fascinating reading of Lucifer’s “prologue to his own play,” and his ascension on the Globe stage in terms of sexuality and black magic (132-4).
further to divorce the devil from the causes of economic and social oppression. Unlike Milton’s Satan, Middleton’s Lucifer is not the cause of “all our woe” (*Paradise Lost* 1.3). Instead, in casting Lucifer as defender of the poor and fighter of economic injustice, Middleton extends an incisive critique that upsets traditional ways of thinking about poverty, witchcraft, and the devil. From works that malign the poor tacitly or explicitly as those imposing economic oppression, Middleton’s *The Black Book* distinguishes itself in representing the poor as those suffering from economic oppression. Middleton gives us Pierce as an effect, not a cause.

V. The Faustian Mystique

Finally, I wish to revisit one of the ideas I have touched on here: that the Renaissance witch, as defined above, and the historical circumstances of early modern witchcraft lie in the shadow of the apparently more fascinating figure of the Faustian magician. While countless witches, real and literary, suffered at the hands of their antagonists—everyone from neighbors to the state—magicians had a more visible and legitimate history.\(^36\) Thus, from early modern magicians, like Faustus, Roger Bacon, Simon Forman, and John Dee, to modern representations in such films as *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*,\(^37\) the Faustian figure of the conjurer who performs amazing feats by what supernatural means the audience knows not still excites. This “Faustian mystique”—our age-old fascination with the over-reaching magician—is, I believe, a symptom of capitalist culture. As David Hawkes so convincingly demonstrates, the Faust myth is a story about the rise in belief in the efficacy of the performative sign, which accompanies the alienation of the soul in capitalist culture. This faith in the sign, exhibited so well by Faustus, is itself a sort of “magical thinking.” Indeed, “magic tricks”

\(^36\) Phillip Butterworth’s recent study of magic on the early stage highlights connections between the figure of the magician, real “jugglers” who entertained wealthy patrons, and cony-catchers, whose illegitimate performances put money in their pockets. Interestingly, many of the early modern magic tricks Butterworth describes come from accounts in Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Though Scot obviously aimed to demystify the supposed “magic” of such acts, the detailed descriptions in his text, as well as in cony-catching pamphlets, show how such books might have been used as manuals or “how-to” books as well.

\(^37\) Both films were released, almost simultaneously, in 2006.
are all about the performative sign: “Hocus Pocus,” or “Abracadabra,” or, as Middleton’s Hecate crows, “A ab hur hus!” (*Witch* 1.2.106).38

But where stage magicians know—or ought to know—that their magic works not through their words, but through the deception of the audience, often with the help of a confederate (be it a hired stage hand or a more ambiguous helper like Mephistopheles or Ariel), witches’ desperate curses had the power to bring about dreadful consequences: their own marginalization, persecution, even trial and execution. In Renaissance England, there probably were middle-class, well-educated people who, like Faustus, “tried their brains to gain a deity” (1.1.65), but these were not the ones who faced the dire ends proposed by the demonologists. The accused—and those who confessed—were the members of the lower classes who were themselves victims of misfortune or indigents whose communities refused to help them meet their basic needs (Thomas 520). *The Black Book* captures a bleak reality that is circumvented in the *English Faust Book* and *Doctor Faustus* and that is an instrument for the condemnation of the good fortune of social inferiors in *Pierce Penniless*. Middleton creates a satirical literary response to a *Supplication* to the devil; he replies ostensibly to Nashe, but *The Black Book* can also be read as a reply to actual contemporary appeals to Lucifer for relief.

In the topsy-turvy world of Renaissance England, it hardly seems surprising that the devil, who was ubiquitous and powerful, could shape-shift just as everything else seemed to be doing. The ambiguity surrounding the devil and the dialectical, almost Manichean, relationship between God and Satan intermingled with the social and economic changes concomitant with burgeoning capitalism, allow for a character like Middleton’s Lucifer: a devil/deity to whom the poor could turn to help them survive the overwhelming struggles of their lives. Amidst the contradictions of religious ideology and social and economic realities, Lucifer’s besmirched reputation does not prevent the weak from calling on him for immediate gratification, rather than waiting for a God who might not accept them anyways. The grim fact of the matter is that whereas Middleton’s

38 This spell, borrowed from the pages of Scot’s *Discoverie*, was supposed to cure a toothache.
Pierce receives succor from Lucifer, real early modern “witches” probably did not. If anything, the belief in the efficacy of charms and curses was cold comfort against the harsh life of the poor.

Through Middleton’s subversive Lucifer who takes pity on the destitute and incriminates the potential Faustuses in the audience, *The Black Book* opposes the increasingly popular impulse to demonize the poor, and Middleton’s humanizing portrayal of the unfortunate criticizes the abandonment of charity as a social obligation in particular and the competitive and appetitive atmosphere of the city in general. The mystique surrounding the invocation of devils, black masses, the selling of souls for unlimited knowledge and power, and the tragic end of the over-reacher is a legacy of the Renaissance, but not of Middleton.
CHAPTER TWO
“YOU TAKE NO LABOUR”:
WOMEN WORKERS OF MAGIC IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

In 1653, a pamphlet entitled *Doctor Lamb Revived, or Witchcraft Condemn’d in Anne Bodenham* told the story of a woman who in her later years, taught divers young Children to read, pretending to get her livelyhood by such an employment. She was a woman much addicted to Popery, and to Papistical fancies… she would often tell those, that had converse with her of lucky and unlucky days, which she would have them observe in their employments…she was one that would undertake to cure almost any diseases, which she did for the most part by charms and spels, but sometimes she used physical ingredients, to cover her abominable practices; she would undertake to procure things that were lost, and to restore stolen goods, upon which employments she was made use of by many people, and amongst the very many that came to her, there came one Anne Styles… (Bower 1).

Of the many interesting details offered in this brief passage, one of the most striking is Edmond Bower’s claim that Bodenham is only “pretending to get her livelyhood” by teaching children to read. She actually earns a living, we are left to infer, through her magical practices. Bower’s narrative, describing Bodenham’s practices—those of a cunning person—and her self-styling as both a professional working woman and as a magus in the humanist philosophical tradition, invites an examination of early modern women’s magical practices as work. In what follows, I focus primarily on two representations of women workers of magic: Bodenham and Delphia, the title character of Fletcher and Massinger’s 1622 play, *The Prophetess*. In a final section, I turn briefly to Jonson’s Doll Common from *The Alchemist*. In each of these representations, magic is depicted both as an enabling practice through which each of these women is represented as being able to engage in the self-fashioning of her own magical identity, and as an occupation by which each earns a living. Taken together, these representations are suggestive in terms of new ways of thinking about women workers of magic and about
performed magic as labor both on and off stage. In the face of both performed and written texts in which women’s positions as “working subjects” were demonized or obscured, the representations I consider provide interesting counterpoint, sometimes through explicit rejection, sometimes through implicit questioning, of such negative representations.

I. “Workers of wonders”

Not all magical practice may be construed as work, and early modern representations of magic as work are rare. In that these three characters, Doll Common, Delphia, and Anne Bodenham, are composite figures, whose magical identities include elements borrowed from other more narrowly defined magical types—the witch, the magician, the cunning person, the juggler—they are less easily distinguished and relegated to a pre-identified category that would exclude the possibility of perceiving them as workers. For, while the former two magical types listed above, the witch and the magician, were decidedly not workers, the latter two might be. Cunning people engaged in the kinds of practices described in the passage from Bower’s narrative at the beginning of this piece: prognosticating and divining, locating lost or stolen goods, performing protective or curative magic through charms and herbal remedies, and, significantly, lifting curses or spells through counter-magic. Like Bodenham, cunning folk exchanged services for payment in cash or kind. Their profession was a valued one, and perhaps a profitable one, and cunning folk were numerous. According to some estimates, there was a cunning person within walking distance of most English households (Davies 67-68). Cunning folk might be itinerant workers, paying house-calls to clients, or they might practice their business within their own homes. Cunning folk had clients ranging from the very poor to members of the elite.  

Yet, cunning folk were ultimately ambiguous

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39 For example, Doctor Lambe’s aristocratic client was George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham. Frances Howard, wife and divorcee of the Earl of Essex, sought the help of a cunning woman, Anne Turner, for a charm that would prevent Robert Devereux from consummating their marriage; the intrigues that followed served as the basis for Middleton’s *The Witch* (see Lancashire).
figures—as “good witches” who worked counter-magic, had they, too, entered into a tacit compact with the devil? Protestant divines and demonologists thought so.\textsuperscript{40}

Jugglers were similarly ambiguous and perceived with ambivalence. These practitioners of magic made a living of working wonders. Jugglers might be legitimate, putting on staged magic acts before an audience who knew they were seeing a magic show, or they might be illicit performers, much more akin to “cony-catchers,” whose tricks were aimed at cozening the poor gulls who might be taken in by their magic acts. Jugglers might give licit performances at court, in fairs, as part of traveling shows; illicit performances would be held wherever they could find a sufficiently clandestine “stage.” Doll and the venture tripartite are of the latter group, as they turn Lovewit’s home into the locus of their juggling acts. But licit or illicit, onstage or off, the staged magic of jugglers, the performance of illusions and working of wonders, required real work, including practice, attaining of various props, and training and hiring of confederates who would then share in the profits. Whether those profits were ill-gotten or not, they were the juggler’s income, which audiences exchanged for the entertainment, or which “private” audiences unwittingly gave in return for the deception.

More frequently represented in early modern culture and more frequently studied by scholars and historians are the witch and the magician, neither of whom may properly be called workers. In fact, the magical practices of magicians and witches are usually seen in opposition to work. To begin with, demonologists held that neither the witch nor the magician accomplished magical feats through their own powers, but rather that because they had explicitly or implicitly entered into a contract with the devil, he or his minions performed tasks for them.\textsuperscript{41} The devil and his imps were the workers, not the human beings. Because of their expenditure of labor, the demonic contract is necessary. William Perkins explains: “It is a point of policie, not to be readie at every mans

\textsuperscript{40} William Perkins, for example, believe that cunning people are even more dangerous than maleficient witches, as they drew people towards idolatry and superstition—the “bad witch” might harm the body, but the “good witch,” or cunning person, endangered the soul (Perkins 174-76).

\textsuperscript{41} In contrast to the rhetoric of demonologists, including James, who was influenced by continental demonological beliefs and especially by Bodin, English popular notions of witchcraft held that the power of the witch inhere in the body. See my discussion of this in the introduction, 10-12.
command to doe for him what he would, except [the devil] be sure of his rewards, and no other meanes will serve his turne for taking assurance hereof, but this covenant” (45). The depiction of the devil as the “real” worker of magic is present in many early modern representations, from Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* to Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s *The Witch of Edmonton*.

Witches’ and magicians’ reasons for practicing magic differed. James I lists the typical motives, which are

Curiositie in great ingines: thirst of revenge, for some tortes deeply apprehended: or greedie appetite of geare, caused through great poverty.

As to the first of these, Curiosity, it is onelie the inticement of Magiciens, or Necromanciers: and the other two are the allureres of the … Witches (8).

The differences between witches and magicians are many: in terms of gender, socio-economic status, education, and even geographical location, as well as cultural reception, the witch and the magician are practically binary opposites. Demonologists felt the thing they had in common was that they were both damned, having entered into the demonic compact, explicitly or implicitly. Another common characteristic is that neither was thought to work for a living. So, the Neoplatonic magician is typically depicted as male, wealthy, educated, and cosmopolitan. Because he need not work to earn a living, he instead is at leisure to study humanist philosophy and to learn the occult arts.\(^42\) In the case of witchcraft, Reginald Scot in the sixteenth century and Keith Thomas in the twentieth both espouse the “charity withheld” model, which emphasizes that the accused witch is an unemployed woman who depends on the community for assistance. According to this model, the witch’s constant demands become an annoyance to her neighbors; they deny her charity the next time she comes begging; then those neighbors’ children grow ill or their livestock become lame; they conclude that the witch has placed a curse on them; and they accuse her of witchcraft (Scot 30). This model has been

\(^{42}\) On Neoplatonic magic and the development of the stage magician, see Barbara Traister Howard. On elements and foundational beliefs of Neoplatonic magic, see D. P. Walker (*Spiritual Magic*) and Frances Yates.
problematized by scholars and historians from a wide variety of angles, and rightly so. Among the many things that need complicating in Thomas’s methodology, one is his treatment of socio-economic factors in witchcraft beliefs and accusations. Charitable giving was still important in post-Reformation England, even with the secularization of poor relief. As a result of the poor laws of 1598, people paid taxes into funds which would be distributed to the “deserving poor” (Slack 113-37 and passim). “Witches,” if lame or widowed, might have met the criteria of the “deserving poor,” though if they were singlewomen or never-married women they were less likely to receive poor relief, as both Natasha Korda and Amy Froide indicate. Along with the Statute for the Relief of the Poor, the Statute of Artificers and the Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds further attempted to ensure that the “idle poor” would be gainfully employed or properly punished. If the “desanctification of the poor” led to the kinds of portrayals of the poor increasingly found in literary and dramatic representations, this did not exactly correspond to the treatment of the poor in many communities. Significantly, the population increase and the socio-economic changes which led to a larger population of mobile poor should have resulted in more women being incarcerated in bridewells or otherwise employed—not necessarily or obviously in more witchcraft accusations.

In addition, women accused of witchcraft were not always poor and pitiful members of the community who depended on the help of others; women witches might have been bad neighbors, who demanded goods, slandered community members, or took property without asking first (Holmes “Women” 52-53; Willis 41-43). Even under such

43 Many important critiques of Thomas are extended in Barry et al, and Jonathan Barry’s introduction is perhaps the best summary of Thomas’s argument and analysis of the counter-arguments and critical responses. As mentioned in the notes to the previous chapter, Diane Purkiss also offers an incisive critique of Thomas’s handling of early modern English witchcraft (see note 15), and in general, Purkiss’s chapter “The witch in the hands of historians” is an informative and astute critique of much scholarship on early modern witchcraft (59-88).

44 I follow Amy Froide’s usage of the term “singlewomen” (as one word, unhyphenated).

45 On the secularized poor relief as a mechanism for social regulation, see Slack (130-31 and passim). On poor relief and the social regulation of women, and on widows versus singlewomen as “deserving poor,” see Korda (176-79 and passim) and Froide (34-42).

46 I borrow the term from Mark Koch.
circumstances, some communities would not “out” their witches; instead, it took the zealous righteousness of an outside member of the elite (Holmes “Women” 52-53). Witchcraft accusations may also have been expressions of large political conflicts within communities, in which the accused and the majority of members of the community did not differ in socio-economic status, as Annabel Gregory has shown (62 and passim).

Yet, the foundational understanding of the witch as a beggar, as not a worker, does have important precedents in early modern representations. Indeed, the witch is often seen not just as not a worker, but even as an anti-worker. She deliberately destroys the products of others’ labor or others’ means of making a living, for example, by interfering with churning, brewing, and other domestic cookery practices, or by laming livestock. Witches were demonized as anti-workers in similar terms and for the same reasons as other anti-workers, like usurers, rogues, whores, even players: they were all “caterpillars of the commonwealth” who not only reaped where they did not sow, but also provoked vice and idleness in others. As demonized types represented in performed and printed texts, all of these figures, including witches, could be blamed for economic hardships in communities and in the nation (Pugliatti 47-51 and passim).

The majority of early modern representations of magicians and of witches preclude readings of women workers of magic as workers. Representations of cunning folk and jugglers also tend to demonize these figures as fraudulent performers whose work only consists of duping people into believing the illusions they create are real. Both figures take advantage of credulous early moderns; both make their livings through morally dubious practices. No wonder, then, that modern scholarship on women and magic and on women’s work in early modern England also fails to articulate an understanding of magic as women’s work. Indeed, while feminist historians of women and magic have become more conscientious about falling into the trap of assuming that all women “witches” were victims of a misogynistic patriarchal culture, the economic

47 Diane Purkiss conceives of the witch, similarly, as “anti-housewife” in that she disrupts the domestic practices of the housewife and because she “usurps [the housewife’s] authority over the household in order to misuse it, to invert it” (97). This interfering with household practices also interferes with nurturing and mothering; both Purkiss and Deborah Willis conceive of the witch as “anti-mother” (Purkiss 100-112; Willis 1-81 and passim).
reading of the “witch” as socio-economic victim remains in place. Studies of women’s work tell us much about women’s practices in the “private” sphere of the home and about their participation in trades and taking up of occupations. They do not, however, regard the practice of magic as an occupation and so exclude it from consideration. In my exploration of the practice of magic in terms of women’s work and in reading several representations of women practitioners of magic as workers, I share many of the same concerns as feminist historians who study women as witches and women as workers and identify an important bridge between these two fields of inquiry. I also approach the texts in question as layered cultural products in which multiple ways of thinking about magic, women, and work are embedded. If the most visible beliefs or ideologies obscure other less visible, or more unstable, or just plain unpopular, ways of thinking, they simultaneously invite consideration of what precisely is being concealed and why. While early modern English drama and learned culture was broadly derisive in its characterizations of women as workers and of women practitioners of magic, there are a few unusual instances where such derision is balanced if not completely displaced by alternative, and more positive, ways of thinking about women as working subjects.

In the cases of Anne Bodenham and Delphia, magical labor becomes a means of deliberately appropriating the distinguishing characteristics of a specifically masculine magical identity, that of the magician or sorcerer in the Neoplatonic humanist tradition. Through such appropriation, each comes to possess the agency and power culturally ascribed to the Neoplatonic magus and denied to the witch. In addition, the traditional role of the magician as elite non-worker is revised, as the apparently working-class Delphia and Bodenham practice magic to earn a living. In borrowing the characteristics of the magician to shape their own magical identities, Delphia and Anne Bodenham, or their authors, remove Neoplatonic magic from the lofty heights of the educated elite and situate it within the figure of a woman, in the place of a woman’s domestic sphere. And within this domestic sphere, each character endeavors to create decidedly feminocentric professional relationships and workspaces. *The Alchemist*’s Doll Common invites the audience to consider jugglery as magical work, thus emphasizing an aspect of magical labor that, while present in the other texts, is amplified in Jonson’s play: that the performance of magic, whether “real” or “fake,” is acting, and acting is work. The
theatricality of magic, whether onstage or off, was attested to by skeptics and playwrights, and the focus on performance enabled by Jonson’s play is particularly significant in putting forth an understanding of magical practice as work.

II. “To use their cunnings”

_The Prophetess_ is a little-studied play, which means a brief summary will be helpful. When we meet Delphia in the beginning of the play, she is assuring her niece, Drusilla, that the latter’s love-interest will indeed become emperor of Rome. Delphia has prophesied that Diocles will become emperor after killing the “fatal boar.” Hunting wild boars day after day, Diocles has yet to realize that the “fatal” boar is a man, Volutius Aper, who has assassinated the current emperor, Numerianus. Learning of the assassination of their brother, Charinus and Aurelia take out a proscription on Aper’s life, promising that whoever kills Aper will rule as co-emperor with Charinus and will wed Aurelia. Diocles then realizes the meaning of Delphia’s prophecy. He kills Aper and becomes emperor, but he also breaks his engagement to Drusilla in favor of Aurelia’s offer of marriage. Delphia is furious, and spends the remainder of the play teaching Diocles, or rather, prompting Diocles to realize on his own, that a life with the chaste and fair Drusilla in the pastoral seat of his humble country grange is preferable to life at court, where even good people are turned sour by ambition and focus on outward appearances. Diocles learns his lesson, marries Drusilla, turns the throne over to his nephew, Maximinian, and retires to the grange to live the good life. Maximinian marries Aurelia, and, suspicious that his uncle may one day wish to return as emperor, decides he must kill Diocles. Accompanied by an army, Maximinian marches on the grange, where Diocles’s and Drusilla’s marriage masque is in progress. Maximinian’s murder attempt is halted when Delphia calls forth the hand of god carrying a thunderbolt. Rather than punishing Maximinian, however, Diocles merely tells him to “learn to deserve” the position of emperor, and in the end, the play promises a humble but hearty feast at the grange for the entire group.

48 There are only two scholarly discussions of _The Prophetess_ that I am aware of: McMullan’s and Teissedou’s.
Delphia is an ambiguous figure. A “curiously feminized Prospero,” Delphia is, for Gordon McMullan, a thoroughly ambivalent character in whom he finds echoes of Faustus, Prospero, Clorin of *The Faithful Shepherdess* and Dionyza of *Pericles* (183-5). What is clear, however, is that Delphia is not only a prophetess; in constructing her character, Fletcher and Massinger incorporated crucial characteristics of the male magician figure, and especially the stage magician, as well. Descended from Prospero and Faustus, Delphia’s powers surpass theirs: she commands deities, not simple daemons. She performs rites to Hecate and Ceres; from the latter she “force[s] her winged dragons” (2.1.336),\(^49\) and flies, in a bit of spectacular stage magic, over the action of the play with her niece, Drusilla (2.3.341). The moon, an emblem for Hecate, hides when Delphia crosses the sky, afraid that Delphia will “force her from her sphere” also, just as she forced Ceres’s dragons (2.3.341). Delphia raises a she-devil for the fool, Geta, in an echo of Marlowe’s play (3.3.354-5); in a scene that would be echoed in Milton’s *Maske performed at Ludlow-Castle*, Delphia raises a spirit from a crystal well (5.3.385). She engages the services of Ceres and Pan for a marriage masque, like Prospero (5.3.386); she calls forth the angry hand of a god armed with a thunderbolt (5.3.388), perhaps another echo of *Doctor Faustus*, this time, of the moment in which Faustus cowers before an angry god who “Stretcheth out his arms and bends his ireful brows!” (5.2.80).\(^50\)

Unlike other plays in the Fletcher canon, in which “apparently magical events turn out to have been orchestrated and fabricated by ordinary mortals” (McMullan 183), *The Prophetess* displays magical practices that are real and effective, and a woman magician who possesses supernatural power. Delphia’s magic, while spectacular and evocative of other significant contemporary representations of magic, is portrayed as work. Without an Ariel or a Mephistopheles to perform tasks on her behalf, Delphia works her own magic, and she does so in order to earn a living. In a play largely

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\(^49\) My edition of *The Prophetess* does not give line numbers, so my parenthetical citations give act, scene, and page numbers throughout.

\(^50\) And if this angry god armed with a thunderbolt is supposed to be Jupiter, than there is a felicitous connection to Bodenham, who was known to have prayed to Jupiter, he being “the best and the forunatest \[sic\] planet of all” (21). Henry More mentions Bodenham’s preference of Jupiter in two of his treatises, *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* (48) and *Trectys anti-astrologica* (26-27).
concerned with questions of work, virtue, social status, and social mobility, the attention Fletcher and Massinger devote to the representation of Delphia as a working woman ought not be overlooked.

In the beginning of the play, the view of a true believer, Diocles, is presented in contrast with the skeptical view of Maximinian. Maximinian’s derisive and misogynistic comments about Delphia’s magical practices exemplify typical early modern views on women as witches from both sides of the demonological debate; his claims reflect the arguments of skeptics like Reginald Scot and Johann Weyer, as well as those of believers like Jean Bodin and James I. Maximinian’s remarks reveal how both skeptics and believers emphasize the powerlessness of the woman witch. If the skeptic believes that the witch is a delusional melancholic who obviously is not capable of performing the acts attributed to her, the credulous demonologist argues that the witch’s acts are performed by the devil. From both sides, the argument is not about the power of the woman—it is about the power of the devil and the nature of his relationship with the powerless woman in question.  

Maximinian deeply resents the fact that he, Diocles, and Geta “provide [Delphia] daily, / and bring in Feasts while she sits farting at us, / and blowing out her Prophecies at both ends” (1.3.327). Maximinian’s rhetoric cleverly invokes the classical image of the Pythia at Delphi whose inhalation of hallucinatory gases aided in her prophecies in order to satirize this image by relocating the otherworldly phenomenon of prophecy in the bodily phenomenon of flatulence. Maximinian’s tactics here are reminiscent of those employed by Samuel Harsnett in the possession controversy at the end of the sixteenth century. As Katharine Maus notes, Harsnett used satire in order to discredit both the possessed and the dispossessor. Satire is “a genre that from time immemorial has operated by uncovering a ‘base’—that is, bodily, this-worldly, self-interested, and local—explanation for behaviors that pretend to be spiritual, transcendent, altruistic, or

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51 That the demonological debate reduces not to women but to the devil is implied in Sydney Anglo’s discussion of Reginald Scot’s “skepticism and Sadduceeism.”

52 I thank Kay Stanton for pointing out this specific connection between the Pythia and the terms of Maximinian’s demonization of Delphia in her response to the version of this argument presented in the “Working Subjects” seminar at the 2008 meeting of SAA in Dallas.
universal” (Maus 336). Here, Delphia’s prophecies are reduced to the scatological. As the “transcendent” prophecy takes the form of a specific bodily function, Delphia becomes another example of the woman as a “leaky vessel.” For Maximinian, food and prophecy are intimately related, and he, Diocles, and Geta are the “gulls” who have been duped into feeding this fake prophetess: Delphia prophesies in order to obtain food—a payment in kind—from the men, and her prophecies, cyclically, take the form of wind produced as she digests the food. “‘Twould make a fool prophesie to be fed continually; / What do you get? your labour and your danger; / Whilst she sits bathing in her larded fury, / Inspir’d with full deep Cups, who cannot prophesie?” (1.3.328). Maximinian implies that it is Delphia’s supposed excessive consumption of food that reveals her to be a fraud; true prophets did not eat to excess; just the opposite: they fasted.

But Maximinian does not stop there. He changes his tack by next demonizing Delphia in terms influenced by continental demonological theory and espoused by James:

I would have [malice]
Against these purblind Prophets; for look ye, Sir,
Old women lie monstrously; so will the Devil,
Or else he has had much wrong; upon my knowledge,
Old women are malicious; so is he;
They are proud and covetous, revengeful, lecherous;
All which are excellent attributes of the Devil;
They would at least seem holy; so would he;
And to vail over these villainies, they would prophesie;
He gives them leave now and then to use their cunnings,
Which is, to kill a Cow, or blast a Harvest,
Make young Pigs pipe themselves to death, choak poultry,
…
But when he makes these Agents to raise Emperors,
When he disposes Fortune as his Servant,
And tyes her to old wives tails [sic]—
(1.3.328)
Maximinian would finish by saying something like, “that’ll be the day”—even Satan himself would not permit ridiculous, slavish “witches” to “raise Emperors,” or let “old wives tails” dictate fate.

Subsequently, as Maximinian lurks in the shadows, awaiting an opportunity to prove whether or not Delphia can foresee the moment of her own death, Diocles accuses Delphia, interestingly, not of fraud, but rather of not eating her bread in the sweat of her brow—of not working for a living, and of delaying the fulfillment of the prophecy in order to gain more from Diocles:

… you are cunning, Mother;
And with that Cunning, and the faith I give you,
Ye lead me blindly to no end, no honour;
You find ye are daily fed, you take no labour;
Your family at ease, they know no market,
And therefore to maintain this, you speak darkly,
As darkly still ye nourish it, whilst I,
Being a credulous and obsequious Coxcomb,
Hunt daily, and sweat hourly, to find out
To clear your mystery; kill Boar on Boar,
And make your Spits and Pots bow with my Bounties;
Yet I still poorer, further still—
(1.3.330)

Though Diocles accuses Delphia of “taking no labour” and “knowing no market,” he also twice employs the word “cunning,” a word that also previously appears in Maximinian’s preceding speech. Through the inclusion of this term, Fletcher and Massinger invoke the figure of the cunning person in relation to Delphia, thus inviting us to conceive of Delphia not just as a daughter of Prospero but also as a working woman. Having already revised the magician figure in terms of gender, the playwrights further complicate the figure by exchanging the elements of elitism and leisure for those of the cunning folks’ popular magic and occupational labor. Delphia practices magic in order to put food on the table, rather than for any of the reasons detailed in typical demonological treatises (curiosity, acquisitiveness, revenge). In his discussion of cunning people, Owen
Davies writes, “There are a number of reasons why people may have wanted to become cunning-folk. The desire for money, power, or social prestige, and even to do good, all undoubtedly played their part… it has been suggested that cunning-folk were primarily motivated by the desire for prestige rather than payment” (84). In contrast, Delphia does not seem to care about prestige: “I am a poor weak woman, to me no worship,” she tells Maximinian and Diocles once they become convinced of her power (1.2.332). Diocles and Maximinian, voicing the derisive and misogynistic rhetoric of learned culture, stand to be corrected over the remaining four acts of the play. Parts cunning person, magician, prophetess—and also worker, singlewoman, maternal guardian—Delphia is vindicated.

The problem of demonization and skepticism that Delphia faces early in the play is also at the heart of Bower’s narrative about Bodenham, and, as with Delphia, this is also a problem of mistaken classification. Bodenham was a cunning woman who appropriated identifying characteristics and displayed the accoutrements or magical props associated with the male magician. In this, she was not entirely unique. Davies and Thomas both point out that some cunning folk displayed the signs of learning as a way of accessing the symbolic capital surrounding the figure of the learned magician in order to increase their respectability and to bring business (Davies 69-71; Thomas 269). Though they might be illiterate, they might have large and impressively ancient-looking magic books. They might employ scrying glasses, draw conjurer’s circles, or write Latin charms the precise meanings of which remained unknown to them. They incorporated elements of Catholic ritual. By engaging in these practices for the purposes of ensuring or improving business, cunning folk attest to the importance of performance and outward display in their profession, and Anne Bodenham provides an example of this. Yet, just as Delphia was obviously cut from the same cloth as the stage magician, so Anne Bodenham seems to have aspired to the role of magician.54

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53 There is no indication that Delphia is an “ever-married” woman or a widow; she looks after her niece Drusilla in a maternal role, but viewing Delphia as a singlewoman also enables ways of thinking about her as a threatening figure who also possessed some degree of agency in deciding her own fate.

54 In Bower’s narrative, at least, Bodenham boasts about being a better magician than “Master Lilly,” referring to the famed astrologer and cunning man, William Lilly (8). Bodenham also says her prayers daily, reciting the creed “forward and backward,” in a Faustian parallel (17).
Bodenham learned her craft through an apprenticeship not with a “wise woman” or cunning person, but with a male magician, Doctor Lambe, the favored sorcerer of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. Bodenham’s magical “self-fashioning” is unusual and may be understood as a reaction against cultural assumptions about how women functioned as receptacles for popular magical beliefs and practices. For most women who practiced magic, skills and knowledge were acquired through apprenticeship relationships within the domestic space of the household. In Renaissance culture, children of accused witches were deeply suspect, and not without reason. English witchcraft beliefs held that witchcraft was inherent and it passed on through bloodlines. More practical-minded writers noted that in the predominantly female domestic sphere, women “witches” passed their practices on to their daughters and granddaughters (Holmes “Popular Culture” 96-97). In addition to magical practices, women caregivers passed along fairy stories and “old wives’ tales,” forms of magical thinking that were increasingly satirized and demonized (as in Maximinian’s speech above). Regina Buccola writes that fairy beliefs were “firmly tied to the domestic, agricultural economy and thus logically fell into disfavor in an increasingly urban, mercantile culture,” the latter comprising the primary audience for printed texts and dramatic performances (118). Likewise, after quoting a particularly dismissive and degrading passage from Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* that attributes fairy stories to frightening, manipulative women, Wendy Wall writes that “Scot links [fairylore] to lower-class domestic forms

55 Here is an extended quotation of the same passage:

It is a common saieng; A lion feareth no bugs. But in our childhood our mothers maids have so terrified us with an ouglie divell having hornes on his head, fier in his mouth, and a taile in his breeches… whereby we start and are afraid when we heare one crie Bough: and they have so fraied us with bull beggers, spirits, witches, urchins, elves, hags, fairies, satyrs, pans, faunes, sylens, kit with the cansticke, tritons, centaurs, dwarifes, giants,imps, calcars, conjurors, nymphes, changlings, Incubus, Robin good-fellowe, the spoorne, the mare, the man in the oke, the hell waine, the firedrake, the puckle, Tom thombe, hob gobblin, Tom tumbler, bonles, and such other bugs, that we are afraid of our own shadowes… (139).

Interestingly, Scot attributes belief in and fear of these other figures to the initial frightening indoctrination into the Christian belief in the devil. In other words, belief in the devil leads, not, or not only, to belief in God, but also to belief in other spirits, demons, fairies and pagan beings.
of knowledge and, more generally, to behavioral control—the moment when an earlier and vulnerable self was coerced into obedience through mystification” (98). The ascription of fairy stories and witchcraft to mean mothers and diabolical witches, and more generally to uneducated rural female culture, by both skeptics like Scot and believers like James, served to demonize both sides of the coin: women as the bearers of traditional magical beliefs, and magical beliefs as ridiculous “old wives’ tales.”

Given learned culture’s skeptical and satirical treatment of traditionally female forms of magical thinking and practice—treatments that the literate Bodenham likely had access to—the argument that Bodenham was actively resisting such demonization by staking out her role as magician seems entirely plausible. In finding a positive example of a practitioner of magic in the educated and successful Doctor Lambe, Bodenham apparently was able to adopt a way of thinking about magical practice that transcended the beliefs represented on the stage and in many printed texts. Lambe trained Bodenham in an alterative style of magical practice, that of the magician rather than the witch; Bodenham’s apprenticeship with Lambe may have prompted her to view magical practices specifically as an occupation. Too, the presence of cunning folk in early modern England, as practitioners of magic whose functionality was attested to by their prevalence, may also have provided an alternative to the negative representations based in London and learned culture. Certainly, Bodenham’s authority in the community, suggested by the length and success of her practice, may have hinged both on Bodenham’s own professionalism and on the community’s identification of her as an educated sorcerer who had learned from one of the best (and most notorious). According to Bower’s narrative, Bodenham herself recounts her professional history as follows:

she then also told me that she had been a Servant to Dr. Lambe, and the occasion she came to live with him, she said was, that she lived with a Lady in London, who was a Patient many times to him, and sent her often in businesse to him, and in particular, she went to know what death King

56 Mary Ellen Lamb explores the relationship between tellers of “old wives’ tales,” women caregivers, and the male children of the “better sort” who would go on to Latin grammar schools; she suggests that “old wives’ tales disturbed the patriarchal gender relations underlying notions of individual authorship” (15, see pp. 45-62).
James should die; and the Doctor told her what death, and withal said that none of his Children should come to a natural death... she said she then saw so many curious sights, and pleasant things, that she had a minde to be his Servant, and learn some of the art; and Dr. Lambe feeling her very docile, took her to be his Servant; and she reading in some of his Books, with his help learnt her Art, by which she said she had gotten many a penny, and done hundreds of people good, and no body ever gave her an ill word for all her paines, but always called her Mrs. Bodenham, and was never accounted a Witch but by reason of this wicked Maid [Anne Styles]… (27)

The adoption of the role of magician was a deliberate strategy on Bodenham’s part, one that helped her achieve professional success and may have helped protect against both explicit witchcraft accusations as well as the kind of misogynistic derision poured on female practitioners of magic. Diane Purkiss concludes: “Anne Bodenham seems to have been able to borrow the role of male magus from Lambe, and with it the mage’s authority. Her use of this role makes unequivocal her deliberate self-fashioning as a practitioner of magic” (148).

Bodenham apprenticed with Lambe, and learned his art, so she wishes to take Anne Styles on as an apprentice, offering her a magical legacy of knowledge and materials, presumably so that Styles can one day take over Bodenham’s practice. Might Bodenham’s efforts to pass on her magical profession to Styles also be seen as an additional effort to appropriate and reproduce in another woman a traditionally male and more respected cultural role? It is certainly tempting to think so, and whether Bodenham had these ideas in mind or not, the implications of her attempt to take on Styles as an apprentice allow for fruitful ways of expanding our views of magical practice and women’s agency. Bodenham, we know, had worked in service, like Styles; she served the lady in London. She might have had an opinion about how difficult or unrewarding service work could be.57 She also knew, when she made her proposal to Styles, that Styles had just been let go by her former employer, in part because she may have been

57 See Mendelson and Crawford, and McIntosh (passim) for detailed accounts of women and the early modern service industry.
implicated in a conspiracy—Styles knew too much. Perhaps Bodenham made her offer out of pity. Possibly she considered that Styles would have an idea of the kind of living one could make practicing magic, as Styles had been the one conveying requests and money to Bodenham on behalf of her employers (just as Bodenham herself had acted as intermediary between her Lady and Doctor Lambe). The narrative tells us that Bodenham “earnestly desired the Maid to live with her, and told her, that if she would do, she would teach her to do as she did, and that she would never be taken [arrested]” (10). A ballad imagines Bodenham’s proposition thus: “Sweet heart quoth she if that you please, / I will teach you my art, / So you may live in wealth and ease / according to your heart.” Bodenham offered Styles protection and an apprenticeship in a skilled trade which would provide a moderate income. Bodenham’s endeavor to create a feminocentric master/apprentice relationship and practice, and her efforts not only to take on the role of magician for herself but also to pass this role along to another woman, suggest that we read Bodenham’s character both in terms of resistance to learned culture’s denigration of female magical culture and in terms of agency in appropriating literary, dramatic, and intellectual elements of the character of the male magician in the fashioning of her professional identity.59

58 The anonymous ballad is fascinating for a few reasons: first, it attests to the fact that Bower’s pamphlet was widely read and the Bodenham case was sensational news. Secondly, the ballad includes two recycled woodcuts; one, I have not identified, but the other comes from the title page of Thomas Middleton’s masque The World Tossed at Tennis. The paper is torn and so a fragment of the woodcut is missing—a snippet of the devil’s tail is barely visible on the page. Woodcuts were frequently recycled by printers and applied to documents other than the originals for which they were made, but this is an interesting case because of the specificity of the image—no generic devils or peasants here, but rather six men holding the world, and missing from the image, a small King James being tapped on the shoulder by the devil. John Astington discusses the woodcut, though he does not mention its recycling for the Bodenham ballad (235-36).

59 The significance of Bodenham’s “other job,” too, is worth mentioning. As someone who taught young people to read, Bodenham can be viewed as a woman who resisted social norms not only by appropriating a typically male identity and by attempting to “save” a young woman from having to reenter a patriarchal household as a servant, but also by teaching young people to read, think, question. It is tempting to see Bodenham as a social revolutionary of sorts, though of course such a reading would depend primarily on speculation and hypothesis (if not anachronistic fantasy and projection).
III. “Labour kindly in the common work”

The skeptical view of magical practice sought, in part, to deprive practitioners of magic of any real power attributed to them, so, for example, Reginald Scot’s Discoverie includes a lengthy catalogue of the “juggling tricks” that might be mistaken for magic. Prior to this section of his book, however, Scot apologizes to those who might make their living through such practices. He is “sorie that it falleth out to [his] lot, to laie open the secrets of this mysterie, to the hinderance of such poore men as live thereby: whose doings herein are not onlie tolerable, but greatlie commendable, so they abuse not the name of God, nor make the people attribute unto them his power” (268-69). Scot demystifies magical performance and reveals it to be work. Such unveiling of magical performance as work occurs in other expressions of culture. Mountebanks, itinerant performers peddling their medicinal wares with the help of juggling acts, attracted audiences through staged magic and then astonished them with the powers of their tonics and tinctures. Mountebanks worked with confederates, people in the audience who were in on the trick, who might, for example, have fake teeth in their mouths, which the mountebanks would pull with the greatest of ease. Theatricality was an integral aspect of the mountebank’s profession.  

Texts such as Robert Greene’s and Thomas Dekker’s rogue pamphlets chronicled these tricksters’ sly performances and their successful duping of naïve gulls. Scot’s Discoverie and Greene’s and Dekker’s pamphlets might have been perceived as manuals, both for citizens wishing to avoid being tricked, and for literate tricksters, wishing to pick up some new skills. Real manuals followed shortly thereafter. In 1612, Samuel Rid’s The Art of Jugling, or Legerdemaine instructed readers on how to convincingly perform juggling tricks, suggesting, “You must also have your words of Arte, [so] you may

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60 See Katritzky for a fascinating and succinct exploration of depictions of mountebanks in early modern Europe.
61 See Dionne on rogue pamphlets as “domestic handbooks” and manuals.
induce the minde, to conceive, and suppose that you deale with Spirits” (B4). With a first edition in 1634, and numerous subsequent editions, the enormously popular Hocus Pocus Junior, the Anatomie of Legerdemaine was published “so that an ignorant person may thereby learne the full perfection of the same, after a little practice” according to the title page.

On the stage, jugglers were nowhere better represented than in Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist. While Reginald Scot explicitly acknowledges that some “jugglers” may work their magic tricks for a living, Jonson’s play shares with the texts of Greene and Dekker the paradoxical feature of demonizing as idle and vicious the very characters that are simultaneously revealed to be working subjects. Adjouring Face and Subtle to “labour kindly in the common work” (1.1.156), Doll Common, especially, performs a wide range of magical roles: she becomes a fairy queen, a radical prophetess, and a witch promising a demon familiar. She is also ostensibly a “common” whore who is strangely able to quote from Broughton and to imitate, with ease, a member of the elite. Jonson satirizes this working woman, along with the rest of the characters, certainly; but he also explicitly and emphatically portrays magic as theatrical performance, and theatrical performance as work.

Readers who see Doll, Face, and Subtle as fraudulent workers of magic miss out on seeing the play within what was obviously a popular element of Renaissance magical discourse, and, what is more, they miss out on seeing Doll specifically as a woman worker of magic. Just as with The Prophetess and Edmond Bower’s narrative about Anne Bodenham, our understanding of women practitioners of magic as workers depends on our reading the characters against the dominant discourse, which demonizes them and identifies them as witches, idle women, and so forth; so, similarly, in order to understand Doll as a working woman, we are required to read beyond the signifiers that identify her as an idle whore, or as a rogue’s “doxy,” as the terms from contemporary rogue literature would identify her. Fletcher and Massinger make the project of understanding Delphia as a woman worker of magic somewhat easier for us, and so, in a way, does Jonson. A performance of The Alchemist would clearly show the main characters constantly on the move, preparing for their next client, negotiating identities, slipping into one and then another, spouting terms from the discourse of witchcraft, from erudite alchemical science,
from radical religion, and so on. This obviously required practice; as performers of jugglery, Doll, Face, and Subtle were professionals.

If much early modern drama colluded in the trend of demonizing practices specific to women, including traditional magical practices and women’s domestic labor, representations of women as workers of magic complicate this trend. It is not easy to identify early modern women practitioners of magic as workers, whether in dramatic representations, literary texts, or the accounts found in pamphlets and treatises; but if one concern of feminist literary scholars and historians is to continue to seek out cultural spaces where subject positions for women were articulated, rather than elided—even if that articulation is shadowy and even if those spaces are liminal—then this is certainly an area of study worth pursuing at greater length. Cunning women and women jugglers were working subjects, and, paradoxically, this is sometimes revealed in the very treatments that would ostensibly efface the possibility of seeing women workers of magic as such. The texts I have examined here, however, come from a range of perspectives: the playwrights Fletcher and Massinger, creating Delphia, whose status as worker and as powerful magician, is confirmed throughout the majority of the play; Jonson, whose skeptical and satirical comedy portrays its jugglers, the “idle” rogues of the “venture tripartite,” including a woman worker of magic, as the hardest workers of all the play’s dramatis personae; and Doctor Lamb Revived, in which a zealous Protestant condemns a cunning woman as a witch, but also figures her as a working woman, as he describes her apprenticeship in her trade, her magical practices, the details of how much she is paid for her services, and even her success within the community. We find women working subjects, in this case women workers of magic, in rather unexpected places when we look for them.
CHAPTER THREE
“SO MUCH IN DIVINE RAPTURE”:
TRAPNEL, MILTON, AND THE MAGICAL PUBLIC SPHERE

While some magical practices, like those of the male magus or the female witch, take place in the private realm and depend for their efficacy upon privacy and secrecy, other practices, such as those of the juggler, take place in public, before an audience, and depend for their success upon the reaction of that audience. As we saw at the end of the previous chapter, jugglery, or staged magic, if licit, implies a tacit agreement between a knowing audience and a performer. As Philip Butterworth suggests, such licit magic and the concomitant agreement are framed by a single question: “Would you like to see some magic?” (Butterworth 2). Jugglery might also be illicit; the success of illicit tricks depends precisely upon the audience not knowing that they are witnessing sleight of hand instead of actual magic. The gulls of Jonson’s *The Alchemist* are such an unwitting audience; the venture tripartite, the cunning performers.

Other sorts of magical practices depend on public witnessing and recognition as well. In particular, what I call “possession events” require an audience. While my primary focus is on divine possession, I believe that the divine possession practices and the publics forming around them in the mid-seventeenth century bear a considerable debt to the demonic possessions and possession narratives that arose out of godly communities in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Engaging recent scholarship on the Habermasian public sphere and on women prophets’ practices of ecstatic prophecy during the Civil War and Interregnum, I argue that possession events constitute loci for early modern public spheres. It was among such publics that women prophets like Anna Trapnel and Sarah Wight fashioned their prophetic identities and became public figures of godliness. The publics of possession events formed in close proximity with those other more widely discussed and acknowledged publics, of letters, of Parliament, of gathered churches. In
this chapter, I explore the interrelations among divine possession, publicness,\textsuperscript{62} and magical beliefs through the life experiences and works of Anna Trapnel and John Milton.

My argument serves as an intervention in current scholarship in several respects. First, I reconsider scholarship on early modern prophecy and women prophets by connecting public performances of ecstatic prophecy to possession practices and texts of the late-sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries. Possession events were important, even defining, moments for some members of godly communities, both in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, and then again, during the mid-seventeenth century. In such events, the practices of the divinely or demonically possessed may be construed in terms of de Certeau’s tactics; possession was sometimes, as Diane Purkiss notes, an enabling practice in which the “oppressed”—children, young adults, or women—in a household might escape their daily duties, express oppositional thoughts or rebellious ideas, liberate the repressed feelings that were squelched in the godly household (“Invasions” 241). But around these maneuvering subjects formed publics that read the signs of possession; discussed, debated, and interpreted these signs; prayed and fasted; observed, witnessed, and waited. Sometimes accounts were published; a witness might recount the possession event for a broader public of readers who could then witness and interpret for themselves.\textsuperscript{63} Accounts of fraudulent possessions were published as well; indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, the practice of possession was, during our period, haunted by the possibilities of fraudulence, fakery, and skepticism. People had to judge what they were seeing and decide for themselves. If communities were divided, controversy might ensue. The print battle between John Darrell and Samuel Harsnett, for example, demonstrates the ways in which possession was simultaneously a practice among the godly, a discursive form circulating among a broader public, and a

\textsuperscript{62} I use the term “publicness” in this chapter in order to encompass several things: the notion of the public sphere and public formation, the formation of a public identity, and the making public (or publishing) of written work (including public prophecies and accounts of public possession events).

\textsuperscript{63} Almond’s recent anthology of possession pamphlets is exemplary and replete with an informative introduction.
controversial sign which might mean fakery and theater, or godliness and grace, depending on who was asked. 64

Some work has hinted at connections between prophecy and possession; Phyllis Mack, Diane Purkiss, Keith Thomas, and others have noted the easy mistaking of ecstatic prophecy for demonic possession and have observed the instability of the signs of possession. 65 But scholarship focused on women prophets has often emphasized the specific milieu of the mid-seventeenth century, with special attention given to the body of the possessed (or inspired). 66 Such work is informative and important, and has influenced my thinking about women prophets a great deal. But I also believe that it does not go as far as it might in thinking through the implications of ecstatic prophecy as part of a possession tradition among the godly. Work on the “Puritan conversion narrative” by Patricia Caldwell and Owen Watkins discuss the formulations of narratives or spiritual autobiographies; one common feature of the spiritual journey of conversion is temptation by the devil that might appear to be a kind of possession. Demonic possession narratives, though not often written by the possessed themselves, share some features with the spiritual autobiography, most noticeably in that the possessed subject is usually saved and experiences grace at the end of the ordeal. Bewitchment narratives, too, incorporate conversion narratives. Edmond Bower’s narrative about Anne Bodenham is also a kind of conversion story, and it ends by focusing on the salvation and grace found by Bodenham’s “victim,” Anne Styles. In general, the possession ordeal, whether demonic or divine, confirms the power of God over both humans and the devil. Emphasizing the

64 On the Darrell/Harsnett controversy, see Gibson (Possession passim), Brownlow (49-105), Thomas (575-88), Greenblatt “Loudun and London” (passim).
65 See Mack (89), Purkiss (“Invasions” 241), Keith Thomas (150-66, 569-75).
66 Hilary Hinds writes “This emphasis on the prophetic subject as an embodied one has focused on the meaning of the prophetic body in extremis. Indeed, the prophetic body might be said to be definable as such precisely by its manifestations of extreme bodily conditions…” (1); however, she argues, that such attention to the body’s physical conditions eschews the significance of the body’s physical location: “attention needs to be paid to the ways in which the prophetic body was represented through the production of spatial meanings” (2). Like Hinds, I am interested in the signs of the divinely-possessed body, but I also attend to the reception of those bodily signs both at the time of the possession and in the textual transmission of the possession narrative.
place of the devil in the possession event further enables a view of ecstatic prophecy within the broader tradition of possession events and accounts.

Thinking about possession events and publicness raises questions about the emergence of the public sphere, and specifically the Habermasian public sphere, in early modern England. Taking into account recent work on Habermas and the milieu of revolutionary England, I point to possession events as further arenas in which public formation might be witnessed. Scholarship has broadened Habermas’s view of the rational bourgeois, or civil, public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) to suggest that communities of godly sectarians may be considered publics, too—that publics might be located not only in coffee houses or salons but also in gathered churches or godly communities. Not just rational and political, but also religious, the emergent public sphere of the mid-seventeenth century was, I argue, also magical. If, for Habermas, the public is defined in part by “people’s public use of their reason” (27), then arguably the communities of the godly witnessing possession events may be considered publics. Possession events and texts demanded that audiences perform public acts of interpretation. They developed a critical awareness in audiences and clarified audiences’ understanding of their own authority and agency as readers and interpreters; in other words, they depended for their very meaning upon people’s public use of their reason, and they assisted in developing that reason.

While this chapter focuses primarily on one woman prophet, Anna Trapnel, I also incorporate Milton into this discussion in order to highlight differences in the prophetic self-fashioning, experiences of publicness, and magical practices and beliefs (or disbeliefs) of Milton and Trapnel. I show how women’s emergence into the public sphere and their status as public political figures were contested and opposed. In addition, whereas Milton occupied a position from which he could negotiate magical beliefs and practices by choice, Trapnel negotiated such beliefs and practices out of necessity. Not only did Trapnel’s emergence in the public sphere happen by way of the magical practice of divine possession, but also, after having gone public, Trapnel was problematically subjected to the magical beliefs of others. The most prominent display of this occurs when she is accused of witchcraft in Cornwall. The latter portion of this chapter discusses Milton and Trapnel together and elucidates shared beliefs and
experiences, as well as moments where their experiences clearly differed. That Milton and Trapnel shared significant religious and political beliefs may be easily seen through a comparison of their prose works. Both were vehemently opposed to forcers of conscience, to tyranny, to mindless obedience, to what Trapnel calls the “clergie-puff” of the prelates (Report 19). My interest, however, is not in the overlap in their religious and political beliefs—though I am aware that “religion,” “politics,” “publicness,” “prophecy,” and “magic” are all inextricably intertwined—but rather in their experiences and representations of divine possession, their self-fashioning and emergence as public prophets, and their interactions and engagements with magical discourse and practices. Both become prophets possessed of the Spirit who have no choice but to prophesy. Both enter the public sphere; they make public their “private” experiences and struggles with becoming prophets. Both invoke magical discourse and practices in their works, though in considerably different ways. While Milton invokes magical beliefs by choice in his work, Trapnel is physically threatened by the magical beliefs of others. Her experience highlights the danger involved in sectarian women’s prophetic practices and the increase in instability of possession signs, already unstable, when deployed by women. Trapnel and other divinely possessed women had to carefully negotiate the publics that would bear witness to their possession events; naïve or careless acts could end in trial and execution.

Men and women participated in the publics and counter-publics of the mid-seventeenth century, and these publics were defined by gender, class, geography, and circumstance or event at the center of the activity. Gender was both enabling and limiting, in different ways, for both men and women, and we see this, among other

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67 The best discussion of Milton’s religious beliefs in relation to those of the various radical sects is still Christopher Hill’s Milton and the English Revolution. Walter Lim and David Loewenstein also illuminate shared political and religious beliefs between Milton and Trapnel. McGregor and Reay’s collection of essays and Christopher Hill’s The World Turned Upside Down offer informative discussions of the most prominent religious sects, including the groups Anna Trapnel belonged to, the Baptists and Fifth Monarchists. Juliet Cummins’s recent collection contains important new work on Milton’s millenarianism, and several of the essays in that volume situate Milton’s beliefs in the imminent reign of Christ in relation to similar beliefs among the radical religious sects—see especially Stella Revard’s and Barbara Lewalski’s essays in that volume.
places, in and around possession events during the mid-seventeenth century. In assuming such complexity, this chapter avoids facile assumptions about power and oppression and circumvents the problems accompanying quick identifications of oppressor and oppressed. By locating agency in terms of negotiation and appropriation, practice and performance, community and publicness, I read Trapnel and Milton as representatives of the highly nuanced and complicated, heterogeneous, and contested culture in which magical, religious, and political publics and counter-publics emerged in early modern England.

I. Why Trapnel matters

Right now, at the beginning of 2009, the field of early modern studies is friendly to Anna Trapnel, and has been for several years. In fact, of all the radical women writers of the Interregnum, Trapnel has received the most attention, perhaps, and there are a number of reasons for this. First, we know a lot about her from her printed works. Second, she receives mention by other powerful figures in her time, attesting to her visibility and the impact of her texts and public performances. Third, the scholarship on Trapnel has been powerfully persuasive and diverse, demonstrating that her life and works may be analyzed and understood from a range of critical perspectives. Finally, she is a strange and interesting character who was active during the Civil War and Interregnum and whose works are explicitly political and provocative. Trapnel’s accounts stand as powerful testimony to her ability to fashion and negotiate a charismatic and authoritative identity and voice in a time when this was not such an easy thing for women to accomplish. Trapnel has rightly been called by James Holstun “one of the

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68 On seventeenth-century female prophets, see Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, Phyllis Mack, Megan Matchinske, Hilda L. Smith, Nigel Smith, and Diane Watt. On Anna Trapnel in particular, see Teresa Feroli, Katharine Gillespie, James Holstun, David Loewenstein (Representing Revolution 92-124), and Maria Magro.

69 For example, Holstun takes up a materialist, even specifically Marxist, approach; Berg and Berry see Trapnel through the lens of feminist theory; Feroli and Gillespie do primarily feminist historicist work on women writers and public figures; Magro considers Trapnel among the “bad girls” of the radical sects, but she also does something like genre study as she considers the features of Trapnel’s texts in relation to other genres and forms.
most important public political women to emerge from the sectarian ferment of
seventeenth-century England and New England” (262). For these reasons and more,
discussions of Trapnel need no justification.

But discussions of Trapnel and Milton together might. Not only is Milton girded
by his greatness, which might deter comparisons to the not-great or the un-transcendent,
but Milton remained “aloof off,” to borrow one of Middleton’s favored directions, while
the Anna Trapnels and Christopher Feakes, the John Lilburnes and Margaret Fells were
actively entering the fray in London. Milton, the austere, rational, highly educated,
independent Christian poet-prophet, does not prompt an immediate comparison to the
likes of Trapnel. And indeed, even since Trapnel’s gain in popularity among scholars
and historians, few scholars have discussed her and Milton together. James Holstun
invokes Milton, problematically, from time to time in his chapter on Trapnel—as though,
while Trapnel is at the center of the discussion, Milton still looms like the ghost of
Hamlet Senior, alternately bedeviling and blessing Holstun, the readers, and Trapnel,
from the sidelines. So with Katharine Gillespie’s use of A Maske performed at Ludlow-
Castle in her recent monograph. A better and more explicit discussion of Milton and
Trapnel together is in Walter Lim’s work on Milton and republicanism, a chapter of
which discusses the two 1654 texts, Trapnel’s The Cry of a Stone and Milton’s Second
Defence. David Loewenstein’s Representing Revolution in Milton and his
Contemporaries offers a part of a chapter on Trapnel, but his book sequesters Milton
from the radical fray, and Trapnel and Milton are not discussed together. In general,
neither Miltonists nor scholars who study seventeenth-century women writers have been

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70 David Loewenstein’s essay, “Milton among the Religious Radicals and Sects” imagines Milton perhaps
as seeing the outspokeness of the radical sectarians as a sign of hope, a sentiment expressed in
Areopagitica. Milton alternatingly defends and condemns the sectaries, and in many cases, especially after
1644, he remains silent. Loewenstein gathers from these silences that Milton was a conflicted member of
Cromwell’s party who “withheld his prophetic voice during this period of internal crisis, thereby
maintaining his voice as the Commonwealth’s polemician. He chose to say nothing against the martyred
Levellers and nothing in their favor during and after the suppression” in 1649 (223).

71 Loewenstein’s Representing Revolution does provide a persuasive and useful account of ways that beliefs
of the radical sects are represented in Milton’s work, and performs the helpful task of highlighting several
key radical figures from Milton’s milieu.
very keen to discuss Milton and Trapnel together. Why is this the case? Milton lived during a time when there was a multitude of active women prophets. Yet, in the recent *Milton and the Ends of Time*, which focuses on the topic of Milton’s millenarianism, mention is made of male Fifth Monarchists, but not of Mary Cary or Anna Trapnel. And in what is likely an endeavor to decenter Milton’s patriarchal voice, what Gilbert and Gubar have termed “Milton’s Bogey,” scholarship on early modern women writers, while filling in gaps and creating fascinating dialogue on non-canonical texts, does no service to its female subjects by “protecting” them, as it were, from their male contemporaries. While this chapter clearly devotes more time to Trapnel specifically, I also discuss Milton and Trapnel together. In forwarding my argument about these two figures, possession events, publicness, and magic, I also illustrate the type of productive discussion that might take place when scholars overcome the ostensible obstacles preventing readings of these figures together.

II. The openness of Öffentlichkeit

Habermas’s civil public sphere has been the subject of much discussion and debate since *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was published in 1962. Many historians and scholars have quibbled with Habermas about the historical timeline staked out in his work; feminist scholars have called the model implicitly masculinist and have emphasized that the model categorizes as “private,” and thus effaces, the realm in which women’s work, life experiences, and struggles take place. Through the private space of the household, women are elided as public persons and their concerns and their work are overlooked as “beyond” the issues of the public sphere.

These are valid concerns, and indeed, it is from feminist criticism of Habermas that the useful notion of the “counter-public” emerges. Nancy Fraser defines counter-

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[72] See Phyllis Mack’s appendices for an astonishing list of hundreds of women prophets active during the Civil War and Interregnum (413-24).

[73] Thomas Burger translates “bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit” as “bourgeois public sphere,” but notes that it may also be translated as “civil public sphere” (Habermas xv). The latter translation may offer less impediments for discussions of the public sphere in the seventeenth century (or earlier), as it does not place the same emphasis on class, and particularly on a class that was still only emergent in Renaissance England.
publics as “discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to form oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (“Rethinking” 123). Michael Warner describes the relationship between the public and counter-public thus:

… some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. (56)

For those who join feminists like Fraser and Seyla Benhabib in questioning the so-called egalitarianism of Habermas’s model and others who point out that the inclusivity of the public sphere is ostensible and ideal, but not actual, the idea of a counter-public may be a profitable way of taking into consideration class or gender politics, or the politics of specific social groups, in relation to the public sphere. Michael McKeon dismisses the need for such a concept, suggesting that people who argue in favor of it misunderstand Habermas:

The public sphere’s impulse toward universality bespeaks not a (bad faith) claim to equality of access and representation (which most contemporaries would have dismissed frankly as neither possible nor desirable) but rather the will to make tangible the notion of a discursive and virtual calculus capable of adjudicating between an indefinite number of inherently legitimate interests. For this reason, the impulse to correct Habermas either by pointing out the non-egalitarian nature of the public sphere or by adducing ‘counter-publics’ to supplement his partial vision of it misunderstands its ‘rationality,’ which entails not a claim to liberal-democratic practice but a nascent cultural skepticism… about the age-old assumption of ruling elites that public policy goes without saying” (275).
Even if we believe McKeon’s reading of the public sphere in terms of this “calculus” that assumes dialogue among a multiplicity of “inherently legitimate” perspectives, I believe McKeon misses the point. For feminists and other scholars concerned with both the homogenizing and exclusive rationality of the public sphere, and concerned also with staking out and defining various sub-groups or sub-cultures in specifically oppositional terms or in highlighting the fact that such counter-publics formed in spite of and because of larger publics, it becomes desirable to conceive not of one public sphere, monolithic and all-inclusive, but rather of multiple spheres, some of which may arise in opposition to others. In communities that were divided between orthodox Protestants and the godly, it may be more useful to describe the publics that formed around the possession event among the members of the godly as a counter-public, a public formed in opposition to, or in tension with, the public of orthodox believers. In communities that were more homogeneous, the formation of a public may seem more straightforward. If we acknowledge that Habermas’s model might include the counter-publics we describe, I believe the latter term may sometimes be usefully applied to the publics forming around possession events.

Indeed, one thing scholars and critics have recently emphasized is the sustained relevance and applicability of Habermas’s model, owing to the model’s very openness. “The chief virtue,” Seyla Benhabib writes, “of the Habermasian ‘discourse model of public space’ is its radical indeterminacy and openness” (84). For Benhabib, Habermas’s model is viable precisely because neither access to the public sphere nor the topics considered worthy of debate are limited by Habermas’s account (84):

The public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity. In effect, there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms. (87)

Similarly, A. E. B. Coldiron, citing Steven Mullaney, emphasizes that our translation of Öffentlichkeit as “public sphere” overlooks the significant presence of the verb öffnen, “to open,” in the term: “Öffentlichkeit is a state of openness, implicitly an availability to scrutiny and intervention” (210). Habermas’s paradigm itself transcends the spatial and
social limitations of the cultural moments in which public spheres appear. McKeon emphasizes, “Not the content of the debate but the very fact of it—the making explicit of what formerly had been tacit—lies at the heart of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere” (273). This openness suggests that the public sphere is circumscribed by neither time nor place. It is, therefore, redemptive; the openness restores Habermas’s paradigm from its own potentially problematic historical flaws.

The historical problems of Habermas’s model are easily overcome, for the most part. Scholars including David Norbrook, David Zaret, Coldiron, and others have discussed ways in which Habermasian public spheres are clearly emergent well before the Restoration. It is worth pointing out, however, that Habermas’s historical mistakes arose not only from his ignorance about the early modern era, but also from “the Enlightenment genealogy of his own thought” (Loewenstein and Stevens 203). And if the “religious Civil War” seemed inimical to Habermas’s idea of the rational public sphere, surely what “reasonable” modern observers would take to be public expressions of superstition, hysteria, and anti-rational beliefs in religion and magic would seem decidedly antithetical to Habermas’s way of thinking. Fortunately, however, Habermas’s model is capacious enough to allow for its application in our readings of possession events. More than that, Habermas’s model of a rational-critical public defined by public use of its reason goes far in reminding us to read possession events in terms other than those of superstition, hysteria, and anti-rational thought. Instead, we might view such events in terms of practice, of the individual and the community; in terms of religious and political debate and discourse; in terms of emergent notions of publicness; and in terms of women’s and men’s different methods of participating in a public sphere.

III. Divine possession and prophecy

Keith Thomas shows that divine possession and prophecy had long traditions in England. “Ancient prophecy” or prophecy in which the subject interpreted passages from apocryphal texts, such as those from Merlin, Mother Shipton, and others, in order to make predictions about the future was a well-established practice. Biblical prophecy, or prophesying through scripture, for example, reading the book of Revelation in order to interpret the present or the future, was also practiced. Divine possession (or religious
enthusiasm or ecstatic prophecy) was also grounded in tradition; figures over the centuries had been possessed of the spirit and claimed to speak for God. But beginning in the 1640s, divine possession became a more popular mode of expression than it had been in decades prior. No doubt this was owing to the multitude of radical sects, the promises of religious freedom and freedom of expression before the Protectorate cracked down, the efforts of sectarian leaders to bring more subjects to their congregations through what amounted to the performance of feats and wonders. Divine possession also had much in common with demonic possession, however, and it seems to have served in a role similar to that of demonic possession during Elizabeth’s reign. Both were powerful practices among communities of the godly; both were dismissed and decried by skeptics. Both divine and demonic possession were events in which publics (or counter-publics) of the godly convened to speak, write, and interpret the signs of the possessed. Both divine and demonic possessions were enabling practices for marginalized people. In both, the possessing agent might speak some terrible truth about the community or nation. Both ultimately served to affirm the beliefs of the community, but both might also mend social or familial relations, or they might restore or convert the faithless or those fallen from grace. Both were finally seen as blessings from God; the end of the ordeal was a sign of God’s grace, of the efficacy of prayer and fasting, and of the faith of the community.

With possession practices of all sorts, it is important to bear in mind the specific circumstances surrounding each possession event. Possession and its meanings were multifarious, and careful contextualization provides the best way to understand possession events. Marion Gibson’s work on possession in godly communities serves as an excellent example of such research; in her book, she carefully demonstrates that the social valences of possession events, especially in communities divided between the godly and their less radical Protestant neighbors, varied, and that such events might implicitly serve political purposes, not just religious ones. The magical practice of possession became in some cases a political act of consolidating groups and exhibiting

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74 On ancient prophecy, see Tim Thornton (14-52 and passim). Thomas discusses all manner of prophecy (133-178, 461-515). William Perkins’s *The Art of Prophesying* discusses biblical prophecy. An example of biblical prophecy is the Fifth Monarchist Mary Cary’s *The Little Horn’s Doom and Downfall* (1651).
power in communities. While many accounts of demonic possession survive, notably those implicated in the Darrell/Harsnett controversy, Gibson points out that the “written and published text was not the favoured medium of the godly—that was speech, and so it has not survived” (Possession 17). Does this change by the Civil War and Interregnum years? Both sectarians, including women religious figures, and their critics published pamphlets. Some, like Eleanor Davies, had them printed overseas and brought them back into England (Watt 132); others, like Sarah Wight, had accounts of their divine possessions and prophecies written—thus authorized and legitimated—by male sectarian leaders, in Wight’s case, Henry Jessey. The skeptical religious conservative Thomas Edwards published the objectionably long Gangraena in response to the writings and doings of the sectaries (and in which he also inveighed against Milton’s divorce tracts). Henry More, Milton’s companion, also published a tract, Enthusiasmus Triumphatus, criticizing the radical sects. Religious radicalism produced a spate of printed works, both from within and from without the sects. The mid-seventeenth-century fondness for the printed word would seem to bear out the earlier aims of the godly in relation to demonic possession events. Gibson argues, “[the godly] would have seen [demonic possessions] as, firstly, occasions for speaking and for writing texts, rather than acting, and secondly as sociable matters” (Possession 17-18). Numerous social acts of interpretation and of writing events take place around divine possessions in the mid-seventeenth century, for example, at the bedsides of Sarah Wight and Anna Trapnel. Yet, scholarship on the religious radicals who engaged in prophetic practices or who experienced divine possession has not considered ways in which divine possession as a public possession event may be very much related to the practices of demonic possession and its role in public formation in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. And the same seems to be true in the other direction: scholars who study possession do not usually get past the Jacobean era—so that when the earlier possession pamphlets stop, the discussion ends. Another factor contributing to this oversight is too much attention paid to language, and not enough to the practices signified, so that scholars researching “prophecy” may not immediately think about “possession” and vice versa. And if scholars who write about prophecy in relation to emergent publicness have a difficult time enabling readers to understand the irrational practices of ecstatic prophecy, the anti-rational practices of
possession might be too much for readers to stomach—surely they would never be convinced of the presence of the civil public sphere in such circumstances. If discussing magical practices and beliefs is inherently difficult because of modern readers’ skepticism and cynicism, discussing them in relation to something identified as decidedly rational, political, and modern, may seem all the more difficult, in other words.

But what are we missing? When we fail to see mid-seventeenth century possession practices as possession practices, we are missing a fragment, perhaps large, perhaps small, of the history of these practices and their interpretation. That means that we miss seeing divine possession among the sectarians in relation to demonic possession among the Puritans, from whom sectaries descended. We miss seeing the signs of possession as relatively constant signs, albeit ones that might signify differently in different circumstances and depending on the gender and religious affiliation (among other factors) of the possessed individual. We miss seeing possession as a practice that remained powerful over time, across reigns and political situations, and specifically as a practice deployed to great effect by marginalized people in a variety of situations. We miss out on the relationship between skepticism towards demonic possession in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and skepticism towards “enthusiasm” during the mid-seventeenth century. We miss out on all this at least.

From demonic possession to bewitchment to divine possession, from Elizabeth’s reign to the Interregnum, possession events seem always to have been occasions for public formation. These publics, of the godly, of families and communities, of credulous readers and skeptical readers—these, too, are examples of pre-Enlightenment publics in which people put to use their reason, their abilities to think critically and interpret, and in which possession as a practice, specifically as an enabling tactic in de Certeau’s sense, may be understood.

IV. “Let pens make known what is said”: Trapnel’s divine possession and public prophecies

“England’s Rulers and Clergie do judge the Lords hand-maid to be mad, and under the administrations of evil angels, and a witch, and many other evil terms they raise up to make me odious, and abhor’d in the hearts of good and bad, that do not know me”
In an effort to correct the mistaken judgments of people who did not know her, Anna Trapnel made public her political prophecies, her prophetic self-fashioning, and her spiritual and physical trials. Though chaste, Trapnel was defiantly loud and disobedient, at least in the eyes of Cromwell and other patriarchal state officials, whose perceptions of this woman were probably, above all, that she was dangerous. Revising the rhetoric of other critics’ perspectives on Trapnel, James Holstun writes, “The Protectorate feared Trapnel not because she exposed her ungovernable female body or uttered a semiotically ecstatic discourse, but because she convened a seditious collective and uttered fairly straightforward threats in their presence” (285-6).

That fear is expressed in a letter in early February of 1654, now oft-quoted (because it says so much) in discussions of Trapnel. Marchamont Nedham wrote to Cromwell about a twofold design now in hand, concerning the prophetess Hannah, who played her part lately in Whitehall at the ordinary. The one is, to print her discourses or hymns; the other, to send her abroad all over England, to proclaim them, in the name of the Lord, *viva voce*. To this she is daily persuaded by one Mr. Greenhill a preacher, and by thousands of the Familist crew, but chiefly by Mr. [John] Simpson’s congregation. She is now continually frequented, and doth a world of mischief in London, and I believe will abroad in the counties. Her prophecies and hymns I have seen, and read most part of them over, being insufferably desperate against your highness’ person, family, relations, friends, and the government, and the publication would be very pernicious, for, however such things be frivolous in themselves, yet the vulgar is a superstitious animal… (CSPD 2/7/1654)

The imminent publication Nedham writes about is Trapnel’s astonishing *The Cry of a Stone*, in which are recorded Trapnel’s prophecies, political outcries, songs, and physical and spiritual hardships. Trapnel’s “pourings forth” were taken down by an amanuensis in the midst of a fluctuating public of passing observers, fellow radicals, and religious

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75 Holstun implicitly questions the reading of Trapnel by Phillipa Berry and Christine Berg (one of the earliest studies of Trapnel). Maria Magro also questions the so-called divide between women radicals’ “hysterical” discourse and male independents’ “rational” one.
leaders. Published later in February, *Cry* sets about both illustrating and creating publics around Trapnel’s possession event. Trapnel’s possession practices, her methods of going public, and her negotiations with the “superstitious animal” of the broader public are recorded at length in the two pamphlets *The Cry of a Stone* and *Anna Trapnel’s Report and Plea.*

When Anna Trapnel went public at Whitehall in 1654, her divine possession appears to have been a spontaneous, unforeseen event. She was suddenly “seized” by the spirit, and lay in a prophetic trance for twelve days. Trapnel had received signs prior to this, however, that she would become a public prophetess. In 1647, when she was ill with a fever, she was revived by the spirit, and “the Lord made use of [her] for the refreshing of afflicted and tempted ones, inwardly and outwardly” (*Cry* 3). She reports that God then said to her, “I will make thee an Instrument of much more; for particular souls shall not only have benefit by thee, but the universality of Saints shall have discoveries of God through thee” (3). Here, Trapnel learns that her prophecies are meant to be made public before the nation of saints. Trapnel is told, further, “I am about to shew thee great things and visions which thou hast been Ignorant of” (4). In the years following, Trapnel has visions of Cromwell as a Gideon who will usher in the imminent millennial reign of King Jesus. In February 1653, she is tempted by the devil “to blaspheme” and to commit suicide or acts of self-injury. She tells us that Satan further tempted her by “drawing [her] from all institutions, making [her] believe that [she] should find the presence of God in reading and praying, and in the book of the Creature, and that should satisfie [her]” (9). Trapnel laments having been brought “into those Familistical ranting Tenents, that I had almost spent my lungs in pleading against” (10). The phrase “Familistical ranting Tenents” suggests that Trapnel sees Familists and

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76 The pamphlet *A Legacy for Saints*, also published in 1654, is more specifically a conversion narrative and religious document; it is a public profession of Trapnel’s faith meant to edify godly readers. My primary focus is on the two pamphlets, *Report* and *Cry*. *Strange News from White-hall* is essentially an abridged version of *Cry*. It is worth pointing out that Trapnel had four publications in the year 1654, a further testament to her popularity.
Ranters as two sides of the same heretical coin, and as sects she associates with Satan’s temptations and from which she desires to distance herself.\textsuperscript{77}

In other words, the temptation is to withdraw from the larger community of fellow Baptists and Fifth Monarchists and to believe that “God would deal in a singular way with [her]” (Cry 10). But Trapnel’s singularity depends on the recognition and confirmation of the larger community. Trapnel receives word that she must be a public figure; through her, God will reveal himself to “the universality of Saints.” Having received signs and visions prior to 1654, when the possession event at Whitehall took place, Trapnel may have also learned both the practice of divine possession and the significant role of the community in identifying and confirming the status of the divinely possessed when she observed another woman prophet, Sarah Wight, in 1647.\textsuperscript{78} As Wight lay in a trance, Trapnel and other members of the godly community gathered around as witnesses. The prominent sectarian leader Henry Jessey recorded and published Wight’s prophetic experiences as \textit{The Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced} (and therefore served in the role of male religious leader authorizing and validating the experiences of the woman prophet). In that tract, Jessey is at pains to establish the veracity of Wight’s divine possession. An “Eye and Ear-Witnes,” Jessey provides a formidable list of visitors, including saints who would later bear witness to Trapnel’s divine possession, as well as Trapnel herself. Jessey’s explicit aim is to dispel skepticism: “The \textit{Reason} of naming many, is there rendred, \textit{viz.} that some more incredulous, might the sooner beleeve, and reap benefit, and not reject the mysteries of God, against themselves, to their hurt… Which may plead excuse for naming them” (av). After naming further witnesses, Jessey emphasizes,

\begin{quote}
these are sufficient to witnesse what they have seen, or heard, and beleeve:
many of them being persons of note, and of much esteem in \textit{London}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{77} Both Familists and Ranters believed that “Christ was within every believer,” according to Christopher Hill (\textit{World Turned Upside Down} 35). On Ranters more specifically, see Hill (197-241). Trapnel’s temptation to withdraw from institutions and to believe that God “dealt … singularly with [her]” (Cry 9) signifies in terms of the beliefs of Familists and Ranters, at least those attributed to them by their dissenters.

\textsuperscript{78} Teresa Feroli discusses Sarah Wight and Anna Trapnel at length (97-147); Nigel Smith also comments that Trapnel may well have “learned” her prophetic practice by observing Wight (49).
amongst them that fear the Lord. The naming of them, the Relator desires may not be offensive to any of them, seeing ‘tis done for the more assuring this great and memorable worke of God’s mercy, to some that (like Thomas) will not beleeve it, unlesse (at least) they may speak with some, that have been present with her. (10)

Jessey and his fellow saints form a public audience for Wight and confirm that hers is a divine possession, not a fraudulent act, an expression of a physical illness or imbalance, or a demonic possession. Similarly, Trapnel and her relator work to dispel skepticism by recounting several earlier visions, always naming both the place in which the visions occurred and the witnesses who verified their divine origin. In 1653, she tells us, she envisioned the dissolution of Parliament, and was singing about it, when

Colonel Bingham, which was one of them [a member of Parliament], being present, hearing what I spake, as to Gideon, and to the rest of the Representatives, he was pleased (as I was told) to call it a Prophesie; saying, that he was glad of that Prophesie of their breaking up, for he thought little good would be done by them. This Vision I had the third of the seventh month, called September, at Hackney, 1653. (Cry 11)

During Trapnel’s divine possession at Whitehall, a number of fellow godly people were there to bear witness. The relator records that Trapnel’s prophecies were poured in the ears of very many persons of all sorts and degrees, who hearing the Report came where she lay; among others that came, were Colonel Sidenham, a member of the Council, Colonel West, Mr. Chittwood, Colonel Bennet, with his wife, Colonel Bingham, Captain Langdon, Members of the late Parliament; Mr. Courtney, Mr. Berconhead, and Captain Bawtrey, Mr. Lee, Mr. Feak the Minister, Lady Darcy, and Lady Vermuden, with many more who might be named. (Cry 2)  

79 Holstun suggests that Trapnel “did not so much venture out of the intimate sphere into the public sphere as break down the division between them: moving her earlier bouts of fasting and prophecy into the public eye, she created a sort of fragmented Fifth Monarchist household by allowing the spirit to move her from one domestic space to another” (280). This is partially true; however, as Holstun must surely be aware, it is also true that the boundaries between public and private spaces were not solidly in place yet. More than
While these witnesses verify the nature of Trapnel’s possession and the provenance of her prophecies, Trapnel herself is encouraged, by the relator, to respond to some questions which will confirm that she is indeed divinely possessed. When asked if “it was only a spirit of faith that was upon you, or was it Vision wrapping up your outward senses in a trance, so that you had not your senses to see, nor hear, nor take notice of the People present” (14)—admittedly a leading question with a clear correct answer—Trapnel responds, “I neither saw, nor heard, nor perceived the noise and distractions of the people, but was as one that heard only the voice of God sounding forth unto me” (14). Further, in case the names of the witnesses and Trapnel’s own testimony are not enough to quiet doubting Thomases, the relator offers his own observations:

the effects of a spirit caught up in the Visions of God, did abundantly appear in the fixedness, and immoveableness of her speech in prayer, but more especially in her songs: notwithstanding the distractions among the people occasioned by rude spirits that unawares crept in, which was observed by many who heard her, who seemed to us to be as one whose ears and eyes were locked up, that all was to her as a perfect silence. (14)

Finally, prior to the relation of the prophecies and songs Trapnel uttered during the Whitehall possession event itself, the relator (perhaps regretting the prior leading question), asks Trapnel to explain what caused her to grow silent at times, to which she offers her own description of her experiences: “It was as if the Clouds did open and receive me into them: and I was as swallowed up of the Glory of the Lord, and could speak no more” (15); the relator, to confirm the truth of this, suggests that at one point her words trailed off, “like the words of a man falling asleep” (15).

Two publics, then, form around Trapnel’s possession event: the public of observers present at the time (including the “rude spirits,” skeptics or dissenters who that, Trapnel’s journey into Cornwall, her trial at Truro, and her stay in Bridewell clearly show her venturing well beyond the domestic space. In fact, nowhere does Trapnel come across as a “domestic” woman. She moves in pubic spaces often, and her spatial movement, across the terrain of London and surrounding areas, figures into her prophecies themselves, as Hilary Hinds demonstrates. Further, if Trapnel operates within a “Fifth Monarchist household,” it is worth remembering that the household was itself figured as a public, a smaller version of the body politic: “‘An Household is as it were a little Commonwealth’ (West-Pavlov 23).
entered the chamber “unawares” and presumably challenged the unwritten communal script by means of which the event unfolded—but because such scripts are unwritten, they may accommodate “rude spirits” and unexpected turns of events, as well), and the public of readers who witness the event by way of the pamphlet. Between these two publics, Trapnel became quite a famous figure, occupying a position which she seems both to desire and to abjure. During her divine possession, one of Trapnel’s songs includes repeated adjurations to “Come write down...,” “Come write also...,” “Let pens make known what is said,” and “Be not afraid to pen also” (Cry 19-20). After this particular song ends, the relator states that “she proceeded in Prayer, which for the press of people crowding and darkening the Chamber, could not be taken...” (21). Trapnel’s prayers and songs, he assures us, are “of a publique nature” (21).

Women were better able to enter the public sphere during the Interregnum because of the rise of the radical sects. Because “the Spirit bloweth where it listeth,” and because, to use Milton’s words, God prevails “by small / Accomplishing great things, by things deemd weak / Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise / By simply meek” (Paradise Lost 12.566-69), “weak” female creatures were paradoxically in a “stronger” position than their male counterparts. Rachel Trubowitz argues that women like Trapnel were aided by a culture in which “cross-dressing,” literal and cultural, took place.

While women entered the public arena, from which they had hitherto been largely excluded, to gain ‘male’ authority as preachers, prophets, and pamphleteers, men were ‘domesticated’ by their appropriation of the tropes of wife and mother as emblems for their subjugation to and rebellion against monarchical and prelatical authority as well as for their hopes of personal redemption. (113)

If men wanted to feel Christ’s embrace or to become “brides of Christ,” they had to adopt feminine roles, refigure themselves as women in relation to the divine father / husband / son. Yet, while this symbolic reconfiguration of men as “brides of Christ” certainly may have contributed to increased freedom for women to preach, prophesy, and publish, it was also the object of derision in much pamphlet literature in the time period. Sexual

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80 All quotations from Milton’s works come from The Riverside Milton.
satires made fun of radical groups, and “the woman on top” was the subject of scorn. Sharon Achinstein observes that scholars have not accounted for the very real political content of the revolutionary attacks on women; the sense that what was wrong was not that women were provoking or signifying a general or even a particular kind of social disorder, but that they were voting, speaking out in public spaces, voicing religious truths, challenging authority in ways that were not wholly irrational or “other,” but that were politically recognizable. (“Women” 135)

Sexual satire and slander in pamphlet literature is a political discourse in itself, one that is reacting to women’s very real presence in the political public sphere. Anna Trapnel’s “defiance” is in part a reaction to such slander. Whether she was the subject of pamphlets is unknown, but certainly she feared, during and after her stay in Bridewell, that her reputation would be tarnished, that she would be known as a “Ranting slut” (Report 38) and a “Bridewell bird” (40).

Trapnel’s entry into the public sphere was, then, facilitated by the Interregnum milieu. As God adjured her to go public, Trapnel’s self-fashioning as a divinely possessed woman took place in a magical public sphere. The physical public space in which her possession event took place was populated primarily by those who would believe in and confirm her status as a divinely inspired prophetess, but that status was contested and threatened in the larger public of readers, religious conformists and conservatives, and skeptics. For this reason, the notion of counter-publics is useful in terms of women prophets and the publics they convened—not only did they form in spite of and in opposition to broader publics, but also these broader publics, the “rational” public spheres of state politics and orthodox religion, did not want them, did all they could to expel or suppress them. Trapnel faced opposition from Cromwell’s government and from villagers in Truro, from skeptics and believers who perceived her “to be mad, and under the administrations of evil angels, and a witch.” But she also faced opposition from within—her own fear and reluctance, and Satanic temptation to keep quiet. “I prayed against this publick-spiritedness,” she tells us (Report 17). In reading the other side of Trapnel’s publicness—the side in which she is bedeviled by accusations, threats,
human weakness, and struggles against Satan—we see how, for her, as for many women prophets, entering the public sphere and remaining a part of it was no easy task.

V. Magical mystery tour

Trapnel’s journey to Cornwall and back truly is a “magical mystery tour”: magical in that she comes up against the magical beliefs of the inhabitants of Truro who take her divine possession for something else, mysterious, in that she herself expresses and represents the mystery of the divine, but also in that the Cornwall narrative is an adventure story, full of mystery and suspense. The narrative of Trapnel’s tour displays ways in which Trapnel’s presence in the public sphere is contested and dangerous, and how her remaining there requires that she negotiate the beliefs and politics not just of the public sphere of divine possession, but of political and religious public spheres more broadly.

Trapnel initially resists the divine command to travel to Cornwall, however. In fact, we get the impression that Trapnel frequently argues with God about her vocation. Addressing God in *The Cry of a Stone*, Trapnel says, “Oh, thou knowest that thy Servant hath often wrastled with thee that thou would employ some other, but thou hast overruled her, and hast put her to silence? and shall I not be willing to do or suffer thy Will?” (*Cry* 42). Over the course of her spiritual journey, Trapnel “wrastles” with both God and the devil. It is worth noting that as Trapnel participates in a discursive practice that is defined in part by speech practices, she invokes the threat of silence surprisingly often. Sometimes God silences her, sometimes she beseeches God to silence others, sometimes the relator commands skeptics to be silent. Trapnel’s voice and the voices of her contemporaries are at stake in the spiritual battle among the saints and the skeptics. As Cromwell has transformed from Gideon to the Little Horn of Daniel 7:7-8, Trapnel’s message is more urgent than ever, and the threat and temptation to silence equally strong: as I was walking in the fields, I was suddenly very hoarse, and I could not well speak, but softly: and I was greatly tempted as I walked in the fields, that I should be hoarse while I lived, like as a woman of the Congregation was, with whom I walk; so should I be, not able to speak but hoarsly, *And therefore go not thy journey*, said Satan, *for that extraordinary*
dispensation of prayer and singing shall not be with thee; then they will not regard thee whom thou goest with, for they look at that, and not at thee; and that departing from thee, thou will not be regarded by them; and being in a strange place, how sad then will it be with thee, and they are but strangers to thee; Acquaintance with them hath been but a little while: therefore don’t go. (Report 3)

This is a temptation, specifically, because Trapnel has already acknowledged that her “minde was so strongly bent against that journey” (1) that she prayed against it, repeatedly. The temptation is a reflection of Trapnel’s own fears, but it is also a sign of lurking pride and vanity: Trapnel will not be “regarded” once her divine gifts of singing and prayer part from her; she will be overlooked and sad among strangers. Once Trapnel overcomes this temptation, her voice is restored so that she might perform her prayers and songs, as Nedham wrote, *viva voce*. Prior to her departure, however, Trapnel experiences further demonic temptation:

the tempter tempted me against my journey: and when I went up a pair of stairs, I was tempted that I should fall from the top to the bottom of the stairs and break my limbes, so that I should in such a way be hindered my journery; and I was often tempted that week before I went, that some evil should befall me, so hinder me from going to Cornwal; or some would hear of my going that would stop it (6)

Clearly Trapnel is apprehensive about traveling to Cornwall, and, as it turns out, with good reason. Once there, what Trapnel’s London friends have taken to be divine possession and prophecies are viewed suspiciously, and Trapnel does not receive a particularly warm welcome among the residents of Truro. “Most of them gave me but a sowre greeting,” she writes, “they having been informed before concerning my Spirit, as it was reported to me afterwards” (11). After having received “divine cordials” while walking alone in Captain Langdon’s garden, Trapnel “could better bear their sowre countenances, and girding expressions” (13), she tells us. The garden in Cornwall transforms into a kind of Eden for Trapnel; there, she receives “the Lord’s loving welcome, and kinde salutations” (12), and, indeed, because her “communion in the garden” is so joyful, she regrets having to go inside to the skeptics (13).
The term skeptic must be qualified here, however, as these same people who doubt Trapnel’s prophetic status also suspect her of witchcraft. “A witch, a witch,” they cry, “making a great stir on the stairs; and a poor honest man rebuking such that said so, he was tumbled down stairs and beaten too” (21). Pinching and prodding her numb body, one Mr. Welsted suggests that “A whip will fetch her up” (21). Trapnel reports that “The Lord kept me this day from their cruelty, which they had a good minde further to have let out against me, & that witch-tryer-woman of that Town, some would fain have had come with her great pin which she used to thrust into witches, to try them: but the Lord my God in whom I trust, delivered me from their malice” (21-22). The villagers’ accusations of witchcraft raise interesting questions about the deployment of witchcraft beliefs and anti-witchcraft practices. It is tempting to say that if these people did not believe in divine possession or prophecy, instead suspecting Trapnel of fraud and sedition, then it seems unlikely that they genuinely believed in witchcraft and were instead wielding the possibility of a witchcraft accusation and trial self-consciously as a means of maintaining order and suppressing an unruly outsider. But this is too simple a conclusion. For one thing, belief in some forms of magic did not imply belief in all, and possession seems to have been a particularly contested magical belief. For another, as Trapnel was a radical sectarian, her religious non-conformity may have been perceived as heresy—and the sins of heresy and witchcraft were crucially connected. Both heretics and witches typify rebellion, social disorder and inversion, the subversion of authority and convention. Finally, the function of the witchcraft accusation in this instance perhaps may be best understood, not in terms of conscious or subconscious desires and fears, but in terms of social practice. In Trapnel’s London community, the collaboratively formed and tacitly agreed upon invisible script allowed that Trapnel’s divine possession was legitimate, her prophecies real, her public status acceptable. Truro’s invisible script differs from that of London; it can accommodate Trapnel, but only as a figure around whom the community may convene and confirm its own communal values, agreed-upon practices, and conventions.

81 See, for example, Peter Elmer’s discussion of Quakers and witchcraft accusations (164-65), and Gareth Robert’s discussion of the Circe figure and female rebellion (“Descendents” 200-202 and passim).
Called to appear at the next session of assizes, Trapnel reports that the townspeople believed “That I would discover my self to be a witch when I came before the Justices, by having never a word to answer for my self; for it used to be so among the witches, they could not speak before the Magistrates, and so they said, it would be with me; but the Lord quickly defeated them herein” (25). During the session, Trapnel comes across as articulate, self-assured, and smart—she knows not to answer certain questions, and when Justice Lobb presses her about her book (either Cry or Strange News from White-hall), she responds, “I am … careful [not] to answer you in that matter, touching the whole book, as I told you before, so I say again: for what was spoken at White-hall, at a place of concourse of people, and neer a Counsel, I suppose wise enough to call me into question if I offended, and unto them I appeal” (25), and she further points out that the justices in Cornwall “had not power to question me for that which was spoke in another county” (25). After the proceedings, Trapnel feels vindicated as “the rude multitude said, Sure this woman is no witch, for she speaks many good words, which the witches could not. And thus the Lord made the rude rabble to justifie his appearance; for in all that was said by me, I was nothing, the Lord put all in my mouth, and told me what I should say” (28).

Trapnel’s experiences in “Cornwell, Cornhell in the West” demonstrate well the ways in which women’s public speaking, prophesying, and possession events could easily be misinterpreted, or read and figured in ways that confirmed the beliefs and ideologies of others rather than those of the divinely possessed person. Here, the “rude multitude” expresses the belief that words have inherent value, that the space of the assizes is somehow sacrosanct such that a “witch” will not be able to utter false words in this space, in the presence of the justices. In contrast to the learned belief, expressed by William Perkins, that words, including so-called “witch’s spells,” are just empty signs that are not, in themselves, efficacious, but rather “things absent” and “bare significations” (135-36); this “rude rabble” believes that meaning inheres in speech signs, in spaces, and in people. This magical belief paradoxically works to exonerate Trapnel in the eyes of the villagers.

Trapnel’s magical mystery tour continues as she is kept under guard, then escorted back to London and imprisoned in Bridewell. She recounts the difficult journey
home in her narrative, and, once in Bridewell, she again becomes a public figure, transforming the “private” space of the prison into a public space of divine utterance.82 From Whitehall to Cornwall to Bridewell, Trapnel fashions and maintains her public persona sometimes in the face of considerable opposition, including opposition from the devil and from within, and sometimes with dire consequences—threats of witchcraft, trial, and imprisonment. Clearly, Cromwell’s government and religious conformists wished to suppress Trapnel’s “viva voce” performances; for various reasons, it behooved the villagers of Truro to read Trapnel’s divine possession as fraudulence or witchcraft.

Trapnel’s spiritual progress and her narratives are, in fact, haunted by the dark side in the form of satanic temptations and witchcraft accusations. Satan is, literally, irrepressible, and what if Trapnel gave in to his temptations? Then the witchcraft accusations would not be far-fetched but rather accurate. Trapnel’s own magical beliefs, and the beliefs of those around her, then, convene to shape a vivid threat that looms over her experiences with the divine, indeed, that are part and parcel of her divine possession. The divine and the demonic form a dialectic, and Trapnel’s experiences seem to confirm that Renaissance aphorism, “No devil, no God.”

For Milton, the relationship between magic and the divine is similarly complex. Milton’s experiences with divine possession, magic, and publicness may be productively juxtaposed with Trapnel’s; as we shall see, Milton’s own representations of magic and his emergence as a poet-prophet are beset by apprehension.

VI. Dreams and fears of flying

In his early poem “The Passion,” possibly intended as a companion poem to the “Nativity Ode,”83 Milton writes, “There doth my soul in holy vision sit / In pensive trance, and anguish, and ecstatic fit” (41-42). In fact, Milton’s soul did not “in holy

82 Holstun points out that “the porous early modern prison easily became part of the public sphere” (294), and Hilary Hinds comments, in relation to another woman prophet, Dorothy Waugh, that “The prison was not a prohibited or exclusive space, hidden from those not enclosed within its walls. Instead, typical of early modern prisons, Carlisle gaol was itself something of a ‘public’ space” (6).
83 Flannagan writes, in the introduction to the poem, “The poem must have been intended to be a companion to the Nativity Ode, the ‘joyous news of heav’nly Infants birth,’ and was quite likely written on the occasion of Easter, 1630” (50).
vision sit” for very long; “The Passion” ends abruptly only two stanzas later with the following explanation: “This subject the Author finding to be above the years he had, when he wrote it, and nothing satisfi’d with what was begun, left it unfinisht.” The final lines of “Il Penseroso” similarly depict the poet struggling to create his prophetic persona:

There let the pealing Organ blow,
To the full voic’d Quire below,
In service high, and Anthems cleer,
As may with sweetnes, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into extasies,
And bring all Heav’n before mine eyes.
And may at last my weary age
Find out the peacefull hermitage,
The Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell,
Where I may sit and rightly spell,
Of every Star that Heav’n doth shew,
And every Herb that sips the dew;
Till old experience do attain
To something like Prophetic strain. (161-174)

From the early works to the late, Milton’s efforts to construct himself as Protestant poet-prophet and his struggle to acquire “something like Prophetic strain” are evident. Significantly, Milton’s prophetic self-fashioning necessitates making public his prophecies, and his journey to prophetic strain resembles the magus’s endeavors to edify and refine both mind and body in order to arrive at the purified state in which he could

84 Author’s endnote to “The Passion” (52). Italicized in text; I’ve chosen normal text for ease of reading.
85 Interestingly, the poet’s “Prophetic strain” will be accompanied by knowledge, specifically an understanding of both astrology and botany. The wisdom of the poet is not unlike the wisdom of the magus, the witch, or the cunning person—figures who studied and believed in the divine influences of the stars and planets and who implemented plants in their charms and spells.
86 For Milton and prophecy, see William Kerrigan and Joseph Wittreich. More recent works on Milton’s millenarianism, prophecy, and politics, include those by Michael Dietz, Barbara K. Lewalski (“Milton and the Millennium”), David Loewenstein (Representing Revolution), Stella P. Revard, and Reuben Sanchez.
communicate with numinous entities. In his poems and prose works, Milton longs for the gift of divine prophecy; simultaneously, he sets divine prophecy in opposition to magic, and he expresses feelings of ambivalence about publicness.

Whether or not Milton believed in witchcraft and the power of witches has been discussed at length. More interesting, for my purposes, is Jacqueline DiSalvo’s essay which takes a psychoanalytic approach to understanding Milton’s dreams and fears of flying. “Fear of Flying,” which, with some irony, shares its title with Erica Jong’s novel, persuasively suggests that in tracing Milton’s depiction of witchcraft, we can identify a state of consciousness associated with women that Milton condemned and feared as a danger to his identity as a man and poet. We can … examine the possibility that the same fallen psychology, which Milton marginalizes in the intoxication and the nocturnal flights of witches, is paradoxically, not just the enemy, but the source of his own poetic inspiration. (115)

I believe this is exactly right. Milton’s prophetic self-fashioning is couched in terms of aspiring to “prophetic strain,” and to existing in a celestial spiritual/physical state. DiSalvo juxtaposes the temptations of the Lady and Eve to night-flying or night-wandering in *A Maske performed at Ludlow-Castle* and *Paradise Lost* with Milton’s own flights in the latter poem: “Along with Satan and Eve,” she writes, “it is mostly the poet himself who flies, though with significant ambivalence” (129). DiSalvo’s assertion that Milton’s “fear of flying becomes a fear of rapture as dissolution not inspiration” (131) is suggestive for our discussion of Milton and Trapnel. For consider Trapnel, whose divine possession is often described as flight: in *The Cry of a Stone*, we hear, “Oh it is good to walk up that Ladder, where there is such precious Aire, and such sparkling Stars, where there is not only seven daies light, but seven thousand such as none can number” (48). At the beginning of that same text, the relator states, “If any may be offended at her Songs, of such it is demanded, If they know What it is to be filled with the Spirit, to be in the Mount with God, to be gathered up into the visions of God, then may they judge her; until then, let them wait in silence, and not judge in a matter that is above them” (A2v). And again, as previously mentioned above, when asked to describe her experience of

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divine possession, Trapnel responds, “It was as if the Clouds did open and receive me into them: and I was as swallowed up of the Glory of the Lord, and could speak no more” (15). Trapnel travels with God through the heavens, she is “in the Mount” with him, atop some celestial beast, traversing the vast, starry sky. Lest we think she has only imagined this, she tells us:

there is a zeal which is but from Nature, a mans own spirit may prompt him to, but the zeal of God is accompanied with meekness, humility, grief for Christ.—Since thy Handmaid is taken up to walk with thee, thy Handmaid always desired that she might be swift to hear, slow to speak; but now that thou hast taken her up into thy Mount, who can keep in the rushing wind? who can bind the influences of the Heavenly Orion, who can stop thy Spirit? It is good to be in the Territories, in the Regions, where thou walkest before thy Servant; oh how glittering, and how glorious are they, what Sparklings are there! (17)

Maybe if he had read Trapnel’s texts, in which she declares that “there is no self in this thing” (Cry 43) and assures us that her prophecies come directly from God, and yet in which she seems entirely self-possessed, articulate, confident, and smart, Milton would have been less worried about losing himself in the Spirit. DiSalvo writes that, for Milton, “a desire to stand solidly on earth, definitely bounded, becomes a dread of dismemberment by ecstatic women” (131). If Milton’s poetic persona draws on the typography of Orpheus, whose body was rent by the Bacchantes, was Milton’s “fear of flying” also informed by his actual witnessing, whether in real time or through a written or oral account, of the “flying” ecstatic women of London?

Or perhaps here is a better way of phrasing the question: were Milton’s “fear of flying,” his uncertainty about his prophetic calling, and his ambivalence about publicness symptoms of something like performance anxiety? Did Anna Trapnel do it better than Milton, and was his lack of engagement with the radical prophets and prophetesses, with the publics that formed around divine possession events, a product of his concern that perhaps God would not choose him, would not take him up into the mount? Book seven

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88 Trapnel invokes Job 38:31: “Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?”
of *Paradise Lost* anxiously invokes Bellerophon, who was punished for attempting heavenly ascent astride Pegasus (7.17-20). Obviously, climbing into the mount without God’s approval is risky business. Elsewhere, too, Milton expresses hopes and fears of flying and publicness. In “Ad Patrem,” he writes,

> Do not despise divine poetry, creation of the prophetic bard: nothing better shows our heavenly origins, our divine seed, our human intellect, those holy traces of Promethean fire… In poetry the secrets of the far-distant future are revealed by the daughters of Apollo, and by ecstatic, pale-lipped Sibyl. The priest composes songs at the holy altars, either while he sacrifices the bull as it tosses its gilded horns, or while he examines the prophecies hidden in the entrails, searching for fate in the beast’s guts. So I too, when I revisit my native Olympus, and time stands immoveable, endlessly delayed, I will go through the heavens wearing a golden crown, marrying my sweet words to the soft music of the lute…” (“Ad Patrem,” translation of lines 17-34)

And in that same poem, he further fantasizes about withdrawing from what Trapnel calls “the rude multitude”: “Since I am already a part, though only a low part, of the troop of learned people, I will sit someday among those who wear crowns of ivy and of laurel; I will not mix any longer with the witless populace; I will keep out of the sight of the common people” (“Ad Patrem,” translation of lines 101-104). Whereas Trapnel, whom Milton would probably consider to be a part of the “witless populace,” both dislikes and depends upon the “rude multitude” that comprise her various publics, Milton’s education is figured as the means by which he may withdraw from them.

Both Sonnet 7 and Sonnet 19 show Milton worrying about his prophetic calling and the proper investment of his talents. In fact, both sonnets imply that Milton is unsure about exactly what his talents consist of. Both are dialogic, reflecting an internal debate. In Sonnet 7, Milton worries about growing older and lacking the “inward ripeness” (7) he needs in order to be a proper *vates*: he lacks the maturity “That some more timely-happy spirit indu’th” (8). Perhaps these “timely-happy spirits” were poets of the near or far past, but perhaps they were contemporaries whose “inward ripeness” was reflected in their confident communication with the “great task Master” (14), their certainty of
purpose, their clearness of vision. Sonnet 19, probably written in 1652, similarly worries about the inability to express “that one Talent which is death to hide” (3). Here, the speaker believes he has identified the Talent but has now lost the means by which he might properly invest it; thus it is “useless,”—not invested, put out to use, placed into circulation. But the reply of “Patience” to the poet is that “God doth not need / Either man’s work or his own gifts, who best / Bear his milde yoak, they serve him best” (9-11). The poet is too strongly self-possessed, in the beginning of the poem, to realize that the fealty he owes God is to “bear his milde yoak,” not to perform work or offer gifts. That self-effacement is required to properly serve God, and that, through self-effacement, the self-possessed poet may be transformed into a vehicle for the divine message—these are the revelations of the sonnet.

Milton represents divine possession in relation to a bounded self, however, in A Maske performed at Ludlow-Castle. His Lady, figured as an inspired prophetess, counters the offending magic of Comus, who tempts her to a different sort of rapture. Descended from Circe and more powerful, Comus is a figure of witchcraft and black magic; his “orient liquor” (65) transforms men into beasts who “roule with pleasure in a sensual stie” (77). But the Lady (who unwittingly seduces Comus with a song that reminds him of his mother’s and of the Sirens’ tunes) is well-protected:

So dear to Heav’n is Saintly chastity,
That when a soul is found sincerely so,
A thousand liveried Angels lacky her,
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,
And in cleer dream, and solemn vision
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,
Till oft convers with heav’nly habitants
Begin to cast a beam on th’outward shape,
The unpolluted temple of the mind,
And turns it by degrees to the souls essence,
Till all be made immortal (453-63)

The Lady is imagined having private communication with myriad angels; specifically, they communicate with her through dreams, visions, and “convers.” The divine spirits
poured into her pure ears slowly transform her into a pure immortal being, into a fellow angel. Milton’s Lady is further depicted as a prophetess in her dialogue with Comus, and Milton invokes the image of the Woman Clothed with the Sun from Revelation 12:1, an image frequently deployed by women prophetesses, including Anne Askew and Eleanor Davies.

Shall I go on?
Or have I said anough? To him that dares
Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words
Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity,
Fain would I something say, yet to what end?
Thou hast nor Eare, nor Soul to apprehend
The sublime notion, and high mystery
That must be utter’d to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of Virginity (779-87)

The “Sun-clad power of Chastity” invokes one biblical passage, and the Lady’s criticism that “Thou hast nor Eare, nor Soul to apprehend” may be a loose allusion to the passage from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians: “The eye hath not seen, and the ear hath not heard, neither have entered into the heart of man” God’s plans for his people (1 Corinthians 2:9).

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89 Evocative of other spirit-pouring-into-ear scenes from early modern culture—Macbeth and Paradise Lost, for example—this scene suggests that the forces of good, as well as the forces of evil, work through the ears.

90 See Diane Watt’s discussions of Askew and Davies, in which she elucidates the allusions to the “Woman Clothed with the Sun” in the works of each (104, 107, 119, 123, 148-49).

91 One of several possible parallels between A Maske and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The allusions to Circe (invoked in Titania’s name—Titania is Circe’s patronymic, as Gareth Roberts emphasizes [“Descendents” 202]), threatened chastity, benighted virgins, and Bottom’s detainment by Titania are all, arguably, refigured in A Maske. Like Midsummer, A Maske represents fairies and mischievous creatures engaging in popular festivities in the woods. While Shakespeare appropriates and refigures popular lore and culture, his representations of popular culture are not denigrating. Milton, on the other hand, clearly demonizes popular culture.
The Lady threatens Comus with the power of her inspiration, claiming the ability to wield
such a flame of sacred vehemence,
That dumb things would be mov’d to sympathize,
And the brute Earth would lend her nerves and shake,
Till all thy magick structures rear’d up so high,
Were shatter’d into heaps o’re thy false head. (795-99)

In *A Maske*, Milton imbues his Lady with divine power, a “sacred vehemence,” that will topple the idols and worldly powers of “base enchanters” like Comus. The masque ends by adjuring the audience to “Love virtue, she alone is free. / She can teach ye how to clime / Higher then the Spheary chime” (1019-21). Here, celestial ascent takes place through the freedom bestowed by virtue, but the Lady’s own assurance of her virtuous self plays an integral role in the power she claims she has to resist Comus. “Fool do not boast / Thou canst not touch the freedom of my minde / With all thy charms” (662-64).

Milton’s Lady is the bearer of contradictory sentiments and ideas. Not a “nothing-Creature” (*Cry* 38), she is nevertheless virtuous and pure enough to be the recipient of divine discourse and for angels to slowly turn her into one of them. She is a symbol of faith, hope, and chastity, but her presence in the masque is accompanied by powerful images of witchcraft and magic, both classical and popular. Here, divine inspiration and witchcraft are invoked in one breath. Comus’s (and Circe’s) potions are the means by which the self is lost, but the self may be retained while divinely possessed. Katharine Gillespie suggests that Milton’s Lady and Sabrina are types alongside which women prophets of the Civil War and Interregnum may be read. This may be so, but I think it is also important to consider that if this Lady is Milton’s idea of a woman prophet, what must he have thought about his female contemporaries, women like Trapnel?

Certainly, there are resemblances: not just in their strong sense of self, but

92 See Gillespie’s introduction for her brief reading of the Lady in terms of the “possessive self” (1-3).
93 It’s worth pointing out that there is a relationship, textual and historical, between Fletcher and Massinger’s *The Prophetess*, the prophetess Eleanor Davies, and Milton’s *Maske*. The texts and people are linked by the families of the Earls of Huntingdon, Bridgewater, and Castlehaven. Gordon McMullan details this relationship more gracefully and at greater length (194-96); I would simply note that not only do

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also in that both are “benighted” in the periphery of the isle, separated from their kinsmen and friends, tempted by devil figures, associated with witchcraft. But Milton’s Lady, who predates Trapnel by roughly two decades, is a character in a masque written to be performed by the Egerton children at Ludlow Castle; this is specifically a scripted, rehearsed, and acted performance, as well as a poetic text. Further, the masque applies the discourse of witchcraft to single women in a way that suggests that, even if Milton’s Lady is virtuous, her character is in question. In her Report and Plea, Trapnel tells us that Justice Lobb asked her, “Why did you come into this Country?” to which she replies, “Why might not I come here, as well as into another Country?” (26). The Justice presses her: “But you have no lands, nor livings, nor acquaintance to come to in this Country.” Trapnel responds, “What though? I had not I am a single person [sic], and why may not I be with my friends anywhere?” (26). And finally to the point that she is not married, she retorts, “Then having no hinderance, why may not I go where I please, if the Lord so will?” (26). Like Milton’s Lady, Trapnel is associated with witchcraft; though her own “sacred vehemence” saved her, it could just as easily not have. It is interesting to compare historical figures with literary ones, as I did in the previous chapter, and careful comparisons can be illuminating; but in terms of actual women prophets, the comparison with the Lady or Sabrina risks diminishing the threat posed by the multitude of Comuses against whom real women prophets struggled. And in a discussion of Milton, focusing on this one work does not do justice to the ambivalence that may be seen when we broaden our scope to cover a range of his works.

What if Milton’s Lady is meant to be the poet’s vision of himself? By displacing his fantasy of flying and his temptation or fear of loss of self onto a woman character,

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Milton’s masque and Fletcher and Massinger’s play share textual parallels (some of which probably derive from their shared interest in The Tempest and The Faithful Shepherdess, but some of which seem to link these two texts specifically), but also Milton’s connection with the Earl of Bridgewater, for whom the masque was written suggests that he would also have been uncomfortably aware of the Castlehaven scandal (brother-in-law to Bridgewater and to the countess of Huntingdon, whose sister was married to Castlehaven) and thus of the prophetess Eleanor Davies, who was Castlehaven’s sister and vehement defender. “Milton is very careful to situate his Lady at a distance from this kind of subversive prophecy,” McMullan posits, though “There is nonetheless a degree to which the Lady’s prophetic speech makes it difficult to avoid such issues…” (196).
perhaps Milton was better able to imagine his prophetic self-fashioning, virtue, and
temptations. While in the years leading up to the Civil War, Milton seems uncertain
about his call to public prophesy, in the autobiographical “digression” at the beginning of
the second book of *The Reason of Church-Government*, he seems considerably more
confident. Flannagan affirms, “The autobiographical references in the preamble show
Milton’s astonishingly consistent plan for his own career” (902). The preamble has many
parallels in *The Cry of a Stone*, and Milton’s frank discussion of prophecy and of his own
prophetic calling are interesting to read in comparison to the earlier works in which he
has not yet received such a calling and anxiously looks forward to being inspired by the
deity. As Trapnel will, Milton conceives of the gift of prophecy also as a burden: “For
surely to every good and peaceable man it must in nature needs be a hateful thing to be
the displeaser… of thousands” (920); like Trapnel, Milton writes of the divine voice as a
sound impossible to keep in:

But when God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous or
jarring blast, it lies not in mans will what he shall say, or what he shall
conceal. If he shall think to be silent, as Jeremiah did, because of the
reproach and derision he met with daily, and all his familiar friends watcht
for his halting to be reveng’d on him, for speaking the truth, he would be
forc’t to confesse as he confest, his word was in my heart as a burning fire
shut up in my bones I was weary with forbearing, and could not stay.
Which might teach these times not suddenly to condemn all things that are
sharply spoken or vehemently written, as proceeding out of the stomach,
virulence and ill nature… no man can be justly offended with him that
shall endeavour to impart and bestow without any gain to himselfe those
sharp, but saving words which would be a terror, and a torment in him to
keep back. (921)

Milton dismisses blame for saying the things he must say in the anti-prelatical tracts; God
has commanded it and it would be “a terror, and a torment” for him to hold these
sentiments in—even though his statements will be met with disapproval. He further
suggests that “these times” should not dismiss expressions of what the Lady calls “sacred
vehemence” as “proceeding out of the stomach”—out of the same place from which the devil’s voice arose within the body of the possessed.

The voice of *Reason of Church-Government* is a confident one—confident that God has, in fact, shown him visions of things to come, and if he fails to share this knowledge, “I foresee what stories I should heare within my selfe, all my life after, of discourage and reproach” (921). Like Trapnel’s, Milton’s adjuration to prophesy is also a call to prophesy publicly, and Milton overtly defends the making public of religious and political debate in *Areopagitica*. Barbara Lewalski writes that, in that text, “Milton does not construct himself as a solitary prophet (his more usual stance) but as part of a community of authors, each working independently to recover lost truths and to test them by trial and contestation with one another” (“How Radical” 65). He seems also to believe that both men and women may receive divine inspiration (60). As well he should—indeed, he would have to be mightily skeptical, in the same way that his contemporary Thomas Edwards was, in order to dismiss out of hand the possibility that at least some of those men and women who claimed to be divinely possessed, truly were. Though Milton was never at the center of a possession event himself, it is very likely, again, that he read some accounts of such events. The performances of contemporaries like Trapnel may have seemed attractive to Milton, whose own performance anxiety, or austerity, or government post, prevented him from experiencing enthusiasm.

Though Milton does not describe being suddenly possessed by the spirit and taken up into the mount like Trapnel, he does describe his inspiration as a kind of divine possession in *Paradise Lost*. Particularly in the invocations to books three, seven, and nine, we see the poet-prophet come of age, having achieved his “inward ripeness,” divinely inspired and flying, like Trapnel. At the same time, as DiSalvo observes, Milton invokes images of Circe, of flying Night Hags, of the witch Sin with her fiendish familiars in the shape of Cerberus. At the beginning of book three, Milton has “Escap’t the *Stygian* Pool, though long detain’d / In that obscure sojourn” (14-15), and has flown “Through utter and through middle darkness” (16). That darkness, he discovers, is eternal: the light of the sun “Revisit’st not these eyes, that rowle in vain / To find thy piercing ray” (23-24). But, reascending to the “Muses haunt,” he reports,

Thee Sion and the flowrie Brooks beneath
That wash thy hallowd feet, and warbling flow,
Nightly I visit: nor sometimes forget
Those other two equal’d with me in Fate,
So were I equal’d with them in renown,
Blind Thamyris and blind Mæonides
And Tiresias and Phineus Prophets old. (30-36)

Like the Nightingale, the poet also “sings darkling” and lurks in “shadiest Covert” (39)
The poet is imagined as a blind, solitary figure whose inspiration is private and contained.
He is “from the cheerful wayes of men / Cut off, and for the Book of knowledge fair / Presented with a Universal blanc” (46-48). The poet is, in other words, unable to
access the published works of others or to participate in and observe the “wayes of men.”
Though Milton clearly entered into the public sphere of letters, indeed, played an
important role in that sphere, and though he fashions himself as a blind prophet who,
because of his blindness, has greater access to the light within, this passage from the
invocation expresses a certain regret and sadness about his isolation from the public.

The second invocation, in book seven, in an oft-quoted passage, calls on Urania to
help the poet find his “fit audience… though few” (31). Prior to this, Milton has climbed
into the mount with Urania, we learn:

Up led by thee
Into the Heav’n of Heav’ns I have presum’d,
An Earthlie Guest, and drawn Empyreal Aire,
Thy tempering; with like safetie guided down
Return me to my Native Element (12-16)

His “presumption” of flying here is framed by explicit condemnations of flying: both in
Eve’s dream, where such presumption is induced by a nocturnal visit not from Urania but
from Satan (5.28-93); and in book nine, after both Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit of
the tree of knowledge of good and evil and subsequently “fansie that they feel / Divinitie

94 The “Universal blanc” also signifies in terms of a specific type of book, the almanac. “Blanks” were
almanacs in which were included blank leaves for readers’ notes and records. Milton’s “Universal Blanc”
is interestingly a blank universe, in that he can see nothing but a blank, but it is also a universe as a book
unto which the poet can write his own text.
within them breeding wings / Wherewith to scorne the Earth” (1009-11). While Satan inspires Eve with dreams of flying in book five, Milton is inspired nightly by Urania. Yet, he wonders,

If answerable style I can obtaine
Of my Celestial Patrones, who deignes
Her nightly visitation unimplor’d,
And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires
Easie my unpremeditated Verse:
Since first this Subject for Heroic Song
Pleas’d me long choosing, and beginning late (9.20-6)

The epic, though divinely inspired, may be unsuccessful yet, he fears.

Over the course of his career, Milton is a font for ardent polemic, through which he maintains a place in the public sphere of letters. Milton was both an upholder of public authority (when in the office of Secretary of Foreign Tongues) and a person who, at times, enthusiastically disputed public authority and encouraged others to do so; but his relationship with the emergent public sphere of the seventeenth century was also intertwined with his own worries and desires regarding divine inspiration and prophecy. As Milton’s dreams and fears of divine possession and flying are displaced onto women characters, particularly the Lady and Eve, gender appears in his texts as a means for the poet to think through his own uncertain prophetic status. Milton’s gendered representations of prophecy and magic reflect and participate in the discourse of women as weaker vessels subject to both demonic and divine influence. But Milton also occupies a feminized role as prophet himself: as a Tiresian vates, he compares himself to a figure who was both man and woman, and as a prophet divinely inspired, he purportedly asked that his amanuensis “milk” him of his verses at dawn each day.95 The book, then, is the babe, and the words are the nourishing milk of the poet-mother.

At the end of Paradise Lost, Milton returns to the topic of night visions and prophesying women. While Michael instructs Adam, Eve receives visions, as she explains to Adam:

Whence thou returnst, and whither wentst, I know;

95 Flannagan quotes the passage from Darbishire’s biography (538, note 12).
For God is also in sleep, and Dreams advise,
Which he hath sent propitious, some great good
Presaging, since with sorrow and hearts distress
Wearied I fell asleep: but now lead on;
In mee is no delay…

…
This further consolation yet secure
I carry hence; though all by mee is lost,
Such favour I unworthy am voutsaft,
By mee the Promis’d Seed shall all restore. (12.610-623)

Eve is the harbinger of hope; her visions are visions of future salvation and a true restoration. If Milton was vastly disappointed by the Restoration, as his prose works suggest and as many of his contemporaries also were, perhaps this promise delivered through the divinely inspired Eve brings some comfort. As perhaps did the words of Trapnel and her contemporaries during the Interregnum. For, as David Loewenstein points out, Milton was primarily silent regarding the activities of radical sectarians while in office under Cromwell (“Milton” 223). Milton, who was a millenarian and Arminian, whose emphasis on free will cannot be overstated, may not have been altogether pleased with Cromwell’s coercive suppression of the Levellers and his intolerance of other radical sects. But at a comfortable £150 per year for life (after 1655),96 perhaps Milton did not feel as strong a command to blow a dolorous trumpet blast at Cromwell. Relegated by his performance anxiety, his blindness, his fear of self-loss, and, paradoxically, by his role as a male member of government welcome in the public sphere, to “sing darkling” from the sidelines, Milton’s many aspirations, for himself and his nation, are not fully realized. Whether his concerns were assuaged or fueled by the activities of women like Trapnel is impossible to know. But it is tantalizing to think that

96 See Flannagan’s chronology in The Riverside Milton; in 1655, he notes that Milton’s salary is reduced from £288 to £150 per annum, but that the latter pension is for life.
Trapnel and other women like her became the divinely possessed public figures that stolid, austere, and bounded masculine figures like Milton secretly, or not so secretly, identified with, aspired to be, and envied. Of course, zealous radical men like George Fox had no trouble channeling the divine, and they, like their divinely possessed sisters, were also accused of demonic possession, bewitchment, and witchcraft. Milton’s own fear of flying may have led him to think through this fear in gendered terms of witchcraft beliefs and divine possession. To be in the mount, as Trapnel was, was a consummation both dreaded and keenly desired.
This chapter considers the complex relationship between demonic possession events (in public, in print, on stage), skepticism, and belief, focusing primarily on dramatic representations of demonic possession. In order to discuss this fraught relationship, we ought first to consider the relationship between possession practices and pamphlets, the discourse of witchcraft, and the shifts in skepticism and belief over the course of our time period. We are already armed with the knowledge that, in fact, while possession practices and possession pamphlets may have gone out of style for a time in the Jacobean and Caroline years, there was a forceful reemergence during the Civil War and Interregnum. But what happened in the years in between? Why did possession pamphlets go out of style and what happened to possession and witchcraft beliefs during that time? Marion Gibson offers a possible explanation:

Interest in witchcraft had waned [by 1621, when the last Jacobean witchcraft pamphlet, Henry Goodcole’s *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer*, was published]… but from the evidence of possession and witchcraft pamphlets this loss of interest may have been, paradoxically, a result of too much interest in controversial forms of witchcraft, and forbidden forms of writing about it. Earlier writers began by discussing God, Pliny or their patron, secure in the knowledge that their genre was mainstream, safe, approved of. By the later Jacobean period this assurance had disappeared, and witchcraft pamphlets disappear with it. (*Reading* 190)

Gibson’s textual analysis of the witchcraft pamphlet and her examination of the print history of the genre are fascinating, as are her brief but provocative remarks about the relationship between witchcraft pamphlets and possession pamphlets at the very end of her study. If the controversial status of possession events and possession pamphlets produced a decrease in interest in witchcraft pamphlets and a general increase in
skepticism towards witchcraft, as both J. A. Sharpe and D. P. Walker believe,\textsuperscript{97} the spike in witchcraft trials (owing to Matthew Hopkins’s zeal), the rise in possession events, and the general deployment of the rhetoric of witchcraft and possession during the Civil War and Interregnum need better explaining. One argument might be that skepticism divorced the rhetoric of witchcraft and possession, a set of powerful signifiers, from the foundations of actual beliefs and practices so that these signifiers were then free to be levied against the opposition (whether radical or royalist). Peter Elmer writes, “During the Civil War itself, both sides habitually resorted to the language of witchcraft, most obviously as a form of crude propaganda, but equally as a valuable authorizing agent in the struggle to establish the righteousness of one’s particular cause” (163). Yet, Elmer is not convinced that such deployment bespeaks skepticism and the self-conscious politicization of such rhetoric—there is no indication that the opposing sides did not actually believe their enemies were agents of the devil. Indeed, if the rhetoric of demonology was occasionally deployed in a figurative and clearly skeptical manner, this was probably the exception and not the rule. In the mid-seventeenth century, “all forms of opposition, recalcitrance, rebellion or apostasy were now susceptible to demonological explication” (Elmer 174). Beliefs in witchcraft and possession and other supernatural beliefs shifted between Elizabeth’s reign and the Restoration. Continental demonological beliefs influenced English witch beliefs—the devil became a more prominent figure, figures like the incubus and the succubus appeared with more regularity. The relationship between the devil and the witch was eroticized; the witch, once her own powerful being, was now thought to be powerful only because of her compact with the devil. These shifts may be seen in a survey of contemporary literature. Possession, too, changed—its popularity waned as the possessed and dispossessor were demonized as frauds in the polemics of Harsnett, John Deacon, and John Walker. During the Harsnett / Darrell possession controversy between 1597 and 1603, no witchcraft pamphlets were published (Gibson Reading 188). When witchcraft pamphlets reemerged, they bore the

\textsuperscript{97}Gibson notes Sharpe’s observation that “scepticism grew in the 1620s / 1630s and because of the mass trials witch hunters were distrusted as ‘enthusiasts’ by the 1660s, while Walker believes that earlier possession cases damaged belief in witchcraft in the same way (Reading 186). She cites Sharpe’s Instruments of Darkness (126, 146), and D. P. Walker’s Unclean Spirits (1).
influences of possession accounts. Their style was more clearly in a narrative form, the emphasis was on the victims of witchcraft rather than on the witch herself, and the accounts became more controversial (187). But witchcraft pamphlets after 1612 do not invoke actual possession. Instead, we see possession only in the form of bewitchment. The next possession pamphlet after 1603 appears in 1622, with the account of *The Boy of Bilson*. Edward Fairfax published an apology for possession in 1621. And the last witchcraft pamphlet of the Jacobean era, Henry Goodcole’s appeared in 1621 (188-89).

That the public has suddenly grown weary of reading about witchcraft and possession seems unlikely, however. Arguably, possessions, witches, and devils still featured prominently in the religious and spiritual discourse of daily life, and, in addition, they were still appearing on stage. 98 The stage representations of devilry and possession suggest that drama was one medium in which sustained interest in these magical subjects is reflected. Certainly, it seems unlikely that Rowley, Dekker, and Ford would have written *The Witch of Edmonton* if they did not believe their subject matter would fare well with the public. Were plays increasingly apt to denigrate popular magical beliefs in the late Jacobean years? Perhaps. But in every case, arguably such denigration and skepticism is accompanied by ambivalence or the possibility of belief. For individual audience members, skepticism towards one form of magic or one expression of the supernatural clearly did not entail skepticism towards all, and so with belief; one might be a believer in witchcraft, for example, while also suspicious of the reality of demonic possession. Demonologists’ intellectual rigor helped to account for this at the learned and elite levels, of course, while at the popular level, any disparity, if it was perceived, did not necessarily present a crisis of belief or lead to pervasive skepticism.

It is difficult to gauge people’s beliefs and how or when they fluctuated and why. King James himself, whose *Daemonologie* responds to the skeptics Scot and Weyer may have always been skeptical about possession, in contrast to witchcraft, or he may have become skeptical after participating in the discovery of counterfeit possessions. Stuart

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98 See John Cox’s appendix for devil plays before 1642. *The Prophetess*, a play featuring a variety of magical practices appeared in 1622. Heywood and Brome’s *Late Lancashire Witches* appeared in 1634, based on Lancashire witchcraft events of 1633-34, as well as on the earlier events of 1612. See Laird Barber’s historical introduction to the play (44-69).
Clark points out that the problem with seeing James as someone who gradually embraced skepticism “is that a sceptical disposition and a reputation for probing impostures did not come to James late in life. He has scarcely arrived in London when he interested himself in the case of Mary Glover, a teenage girl suspected of counterfeiting possession” (162). James further investigated “a woman who vomited pins and needles…The case of the woman was very similar to that of Anne Gunter, whom James treated with a kindness so far removed from his behavior in 1591 that she readily confessed her deceit and even secured a royal dowry” (162). Clark further asserts that James displayed a degree of skepticism not only after he arrived in London, but even before he ascended the English throne. Finally, that witchcraft trials decreased during James’s reign surely must attest, to some degree, to the ruler’s lack of enthusiasm in persecuting witches. Despite other historians’ sentiments that James underwent a philosophical change and became increasingly, even radically, skeptical as he progressed in years, Clark suggests, first, that James always displayed a certain degree of skepticism, but that, second, he believed in witchcraft and that there is little evidence that his beliefs as outlined in *Daemonologie* changed or diminished over time. Third, James’s demonological treatise was crucially linked to his ideas about kingship, and fourth, James’s demonological beliefs were connected to his millenarianism. Clark paints a picture of the king as an intellectual who believed in witchcraft, but who also adhered to rigorous examinations of the accused, who took an active role in examining controversial cases of possession, and who, despite his belief that the devil would “rage the more in his instruments, knowing his Kingdome to be so neare an ende,” was still sufficiently skeptical to participate in exposing fraudulent possessions (Clark 167). James, then, typifies the capacity of many early modern subjects to sustain a variety of ostensibly conflicting or at least not comfortably compatible beliefs. “Individuals displayed a bewildering variety of views of the subject [of demonology],” Elmer writes, “which seem to have been shaped more by circumstances than the dictates of ideological consistency. King James I and Richard Baxter provide just two examples. Moreover, contemporaries were quite capable of subverting, or deconstructing, ‘sceptical’ authorities for their own ends” (172).

I believe that stage representations of demonic possession both express and make use of individual audience members’ diverse beliefs; they are, thus, sites of ambivalence.
The possession controversy, during which Samuel Harsnett published his *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, disseminated skepticism from the church and state, and the skeptical attitudes espoused by Reginald Scot and Samuel Harsnett were clearly sources for Renaissance dramatists, who borrowed language directly from their skeptical tracts. Dramatists were not, however, only mouthpieces for the machinery of church and state. Some dramatic representations that would seem to mock possession instead mock fraudulent practices of possession—leaving room for the underlying belief that the human body was penetrable and the spiritual forces of the demonic and the divine able to penetrate and take over the corporal vessel.

In thinking about dramatic ambivalence towards possession, this chapter revisits Stephen Greenblatt’s arguments about stage possession, state power, and skepticism, as they are articulated in his pieces “Loudun and London” and “Shakespeare and the Exorcists.” Greenblatt suggests that the theater demystified possession practices, and that possession events, because they were already inherently theatrical performances, were ripe for attack. The “similitude between theater and exorcism,” depends simultaneously on the existence of the public theater and on the ability of the performance of possession to be extracted, distanced, from the possession event—from the body of the possessed, the community bearing witness, and the community text that both serves as a script and arises from the event itself. Possession, in other words, could be faked, or acted, and no one could prove this better than the players of the Swan, the Rose, or the Globe. John Cox and Jan Frans Van Dijkhuizen have recently quarreled with Greenblatt’s declaration that “performance kills belief,” and I build on that work here by showing further ways in which the relationship between performance and belief in possession is complex and contested—not straightforward. Several plays serve as a foundation for this discussion: *Volpone* (1606), *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), *Twelfth Night* (1601), and *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621). Both of Jonson’s plays stage fake demonic possessions. In *Twelfth Night*, a godly man who is not possessed nevertheless becomes the center of a possession event. And in *The Witch of Edmonton*, demonic possession is tacitly invoked and represented, with the effect of raising questions about human agency and demonic power. As these plays offer a range of representations and interpretations—together, they display and encourage both skepticism and belief—I argue that the Renaissance stage was not a
locus of disbelief in possession events and practices. Possession on the Renaissance stage is not, paradoxically, always a specifically theatrical performance. Indeed, though actual possession events were public performances, stage representations of possessions may, on the other hand, explore and suggest a kind of interiority that the actual possession event may efface or deny. If the actor playing the possessed person has “that within which passeth show,” to use Hamlet’s words (1.2.85), then dramatic representations of possession arguably point to an ambiguous inner self that may or may not be possessed by the devil. The audience can neither confirm nor deny the nature of the act. Madness, the devil, confidence tricks—all become possibilities. I wish, then, to complicate the argument that the stage in highlighting the theatricality of possession dissipates belief in possession in particular and in the sacred and supernatural in general. Instead, if anything, the stage perhaps illuminated the instability of the signs of possession. The stage may not have precluded skepticism, but neither did it disseminate it on the behalf of state and church power. The sometimes decried and contested divine possessions of the Civil War and Interregnum suggest that possession practices were once and became again powerful signifying practices for the godly. Possession events brought more members to the various sectarian flocks, and, though learned men and state officials, from Thomas Edwards to Henry More to Joseph Glanvill, attempted to do the same thing Harsnett and Scot had set out to do—that is, to disseminate the view that possession was so much fakery and fraudulence—still, clearly these practices and beliefs were powerfully influential. Demonic possessions became unpopular in real life and in print, but they could be seen on stage in the London theaters. Could they also have been witnessed in communities of the godly? If the godly publics surrounding possession events were discouraged from writing and printing accounts—that is, from creating broader publics—did they nevertheless convene to bear witness? Was such news kept quiet until a time when it was again safe to share? Whatever the case, in the quiet years, the theaters perhaps fulfilled the role that the public events and print accounts had in the years before: they created critical audiences who had to decide for themselves.

I. Critical perspectives
Stephen Greenblatt’s “Shakespeare and the Exorcists” is perhaps one of the most widely read pieces of literary criticism on possession and early modern drama. Greenblatt’s other essay “Loudun and London” addresses the same subjects and articulates the same argument, if in a less precise form. The one essay reads King Lear, the other touches on Jonson’s plays The Devil is an Ass and Volpone. Greenblatt maintains that theatrical performances of possession “kill belief,” empty the signs of possession of their meaning, and that, ultimately, theatrical performances of fake possession become a means of representing and commenting on radical evil. “The devil,” in other words, is replaced by Foucauldian power. The audience grows enlightened and modern thanks to the work of Samuel Harsnett and Shakespeare.

In “Loudun and London,” Greenblatt invokes de Certeau and draws his reading of the possession event at Loudun from de Certeau’s insightful account of that event. De Certeau’s account is founded on the notion that historical groupings of possession events, or immensely public ones, such as that which took place at Loudun between 1632 and 1640, “mark serious fault lines within a religious civilization” (Possession 2). “The ‘diabolical’ crisis,” he writes, “has a double significance: it reveals the imbalance of culture, and it accelerates the process of its mutation… It is the confrontation (one among others, though more visible than others) of a society with the certainties it is losing and those it is attempting to acquire” (2). The idea of possession events as ideological collisions is useful. It helps us to think about why possession was more contested and controversial than other beliefs and practices, and the emphasis on collisions, on uncertain and unexpected confrontations, prevents us from seeing the forces of enlightenment bearing down on the superstitions of the benighted past.

But this idea is lost in Greenblatt’s reading of possession in early modern England. Instead, we hear about “the brilliant polemicist Samuel Harsnett” (“Loudun” 333) and the “remarkable book” A Discoverie of Witchcraft (333). Greenblatt’s description of Harsnett’s polemic shifts ambiguously. He writes, “all of this apparent absorption in the supernatural crisis is an illusion; there is nothing real out there on the bed, in the chair, on the pulpit. The only serious action is transpiring in the minds of the audience” (334); at this point, it is difficult to tell whether we are to attribute these sentiments to Harsnett or to Greenblatt himself. William Sommers, on the other hand, is
characterized as “unstable,” and Darrell as a “charismatic Puritan healer” (334). Later, however, as Darrell shifts from author of fraudulent practices to victim of state power, he becomes “austere and upright” (336). My purpose here is not to attack Greenblatt or to set him up as a straw-man; he is undeniably a wonderful writer and storyteller, and he possesses a profound understanding of the English Renaissance. In pointing out that his reading of the possession controversy is not as careful as it should be, I wish to emphasize the two overarching narratives that appear in his possession essays. One is the narrative about enlightenment versus superstition; skeptical brilliance versus ignorant credulity. The other is a narrative that emphasizes state institutions and larger institutional and ideological concerns. As a reader of de Certeau, Greenblatt should have known better than to emphasize the strategic maneuverings of the state over the tactics of the individual. That, however, is precisely what he does here. We are apprised that Harsnett’s successful demystification of possession as theater “transform[s] terrifying supernatural events into a calculable human strategy” (338). But if possession practices were learned and able to be duplicated and performed by actors, this does not mean that all possession events were calculable, that their aims or interpretations were homogenized, that individual tactics were outwitted by the state. Individual subjects negotiated their status within the household, the community, the parish, and then the nation. These may be seen to form concentric circles, with subjects tactically maneuvering within them. Greenblatt’s retelling of “the obscure and marginal history of Sommers and his ilk” (340) situates Harsnett and Shakespeare at the center of that history and overlooks the individual subjects in the periphery.

In “Shakespeare and the Exorcists,” Greenblatt’s argument, while problematic in many of the same ways, at least becomes more precise. “Performance kills belief;” we learn, “or rather acknowledging theatricality kills the credibility of the supernatural” (109). The machinations of state power through polemicist Harsnett are embraced by the theater: “When in 1603 Harsnett was whipping exorcism toward the theater, Shakespeare was already at the entrance to the Globe to welcome it” (115). In the theater, the work of the state is accomplished: the signs of possession are emptied out (119). But then the state’s position is itself “emptied out, even as it is loyally confirmed” (126). Shakespeare alienates the audience and exposes “a free-floating, contagious evil more terrible than
anything Harsnett would allow…” so that evil is extricated from the possessed body, from the province of religion, from the figure of the devil; it is “larger than any local habitation or name” (127). Greenblatt is discussing King Lear specifically here, but King Lear serves as an example, not a singular or exceptional case. Finally, the demystification of possession practices, and of all rituals, and the exposure of pervasive evil leave the audience desiring the very rituals that have been emptied out, and plays like Lear display these rituals, even if they are frauds, for our viewing pleasure (128).

As Cox and Van Dijkhuizen point out, Greenblatt’s theory that “performance kills belief” is indebted to E. K. Chambers’s secularization narrative, in which the relationship between stage devils and skepticism plays a crucial role. Chambers’s account sees secularization, skepticism, and Enlightenment emerging slowly but surely, overcoming the obstacles of superstition and irrational belief; and the role of stage devils in this account “remains largely unquestioned,” writes Cox (9). Keith Thomas’s influential study bears traces of the same sort of thinking; magic and modernity are opposed, and, as Diane Purkiss notes, Thomas favors the skeptics Reginald Scot and George Gifford, thus laying his bets with “the winning side” (Witch 66). Greenblatt’s essays are indebted to both Chambers and Thomas, and Greenblatt’s own influence on modern scholarship should not be underestimated. And thus we see a grand tradition of exposure of superstition, signs of skepticism, imminent Enlightenment. Van Dijkhuizen comments, “Far from puncturing the grands recits, then, Greenblatt’s thick description of Harsnett’s polemic only serves to confirm them, canonizing the supposedly sceptical voice of Church of England conformism, while suppressing dissenting, non-sceptical voices” (21).

The view that “performance kills belief” may be attributed, in part, to the “self-conscious theatricality” with which playwrights dramatized the demonic. This theatricality and “satirical distance,” Cox writes, has led to almost complete neglect of stage devils in the seventeenth century, on the assumption that no one took them seriously any longer. This assumption fits well into a teleological narrative of accomplished secularization in English drama, and it also reinforces the oppositional thinking that pits enlightened secularity against benighted superstition. On this reading, playwrights in the early seventeenth century were harbingers
of the coming age of reason, and their satirical and metadramatically sophisticated rejection of age-old beliefs about the devil and his influence is evidence of their progressive thinking. (150)

This reading does not account for the complexity of representations, the competing discourses, and the diverse habits of thought within the culture. “The ability of early audiences to tolerate inherent ambiguities in theatrical illusion is hard to overestimate. Every stage devil necessarily involves an actor in a costume and thereby produces an unavoidable ambiguity at the heart of what the play presents as an instance of the uncanny” (Cox 151). Ultimately, the relationship between the stage and the beliefs of a culture is not, despite Greenblatt’s claim, straightforward. Indeed, the beliefs of early modern people were multifarious, and stage representations of possession should be read within the context of the struggle among various available cultural positions on possession in particular and the supernatural in general, as Van Dijkhuizen suggests (22). Furthermore, the placing of the theater at the center of culture, as a vehicle for change in a culture, does not work, not in this case. Though the early modern theater undoubtedly made a profound impact on English audiences, this does not lead to the conclusion that the representations taking place on the stage were absorbed passively by an uncritical audience—nor were those representations themselves one-sided or straightforward.

Marion Gibson emphasizes the importance of examining the specific cultural texts and circumstances surrounding cases of possession—in real ways, the possession at Loudun is a far cry from possessions taking place in the English village of Burton-upon-Trent, and both are removed from Shakespeare’s theater. From the perspective of Samuel Harsnett, perhaps the connection between possession practices and theatricality was clear, but the views of both Catholic communities and godly ones would have differed. In the preceding chapter, we considered the publics that formed around possession events within communities of godly people and through the texts that emerged from such events. These publics share beliefs, beliefs that the possession event displays and confirms. Stage representations of possession may have, in some cases, performed the work of emptying out the signs of possession, as Greenblatt suggests, but they did not empty out these signs for the people who were their vehicles. Theater audiences, too, even if more cosmopolitan and skeptical, may have had diverse and ambivalent reactions
to various representations of possession. These publics formed around theatrical possession events were not necessarily of the mind that the stage devil or the fraudulently possessed disproved the possibility or the existence of real devils, or real possessions.

II. “The devil has entered him”: Staged possession in *Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass*

Ben Jonson’s plays, *Volpone* (1606) and *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) feature counterfeit possessions with obvious references to the subtle tricks of possession supposedly taught by Darrell to several demoniacs, including, most famously, William Sommers. If these plays invoke skepticism, they simultaneously highlight the confusion and conflation of counterfeit possession and real, of stage devils and real ones. Far from “killing belief,” these plays reflect the complex and sometimes contradictory notions surrounding the demonic that permeated Renaissance thought.

After Mosca uncovers Volpone’s treasure in the first scene of the play, the latter exuberantly cries,

Hail the world’s soul and mine! More glad than is
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram
Am I to view thy splendor darkening his,
That, lying here amongst my other hoards,
Show’st like a flame by night, or like the day
Struck out of chaos, when all of darkness fled
Unto the center. O thou son of Sol—
But brighter than thy father—let me kiss
With adoration thee and every relic
Of sacred treasure in this blessed room. (1.1.3-13)

Volpone compares the brightness of his gold to the divine illumination of the first day in the Genesis creation story. The sacrilegious invocation of Scripture to describe the brilliance of his treasure is followed by idol-worship, as Volpone bows down to his “relics”—perhaps an oblique reference to the Catholic cult of relics. A few lines further and Volpone brags that it is rather the acquisition of his relics than the treasures themselves that is so delightful to him, since he obtains them without any work at all
That Volpone does not eat his bread in the sweat of his brow (or, if he does, it is only fake sweat, applied superficially to deceive his hangers-on), would have been noted by Protestants who placed emphasis on the command in Genesis. And throughout the play, Volpone certainly bears a resemblance to the father of lies, as he shifts and cozens in order to amass his vast estate. Volpone is a quick-change artist and a confidence trickster. An insidious character whose destructive presence undermines the cohesion of the community, he may be seen to represent Vice or a devil.

Yet it is hardly the case that, were it not for the presence of Volpone, the citizens of Venice would for a tight-knit community. On the contrary, the citizens are self-serving and vicious, and Volpone epitomizes the vices in them all. Reading Volpone, then, as a kind of devil among fellow fiendish creatures becomes important at the end of the play, when Volpone convinces Voltore to fake possession:

Volpone: Sir, you may redeem it.
They said you were possessed; fall down and seem so,
I’ll help to make it good. (Voltore falls.)
[Aloud] God bless the man!
[Aside to Voltore] Stop your wind hard, and swell.
[Aloud] See, see, see, see!
He vomits crooked pins! His eyes are set
Like a dead hare’s hung in a poulter’s shop!
His mouth’s running away! [To Corvino] Do you see,
Signor? Now ‘tis in his belly.
Corvino: Ay, the devil!
Volpone: Now in his throat.
Corvino: Ay, I perceive it plain.
Volpone: ‘Twill out, ‘twill out! Stand clear. See where it flies,
In the shape of a blue toad with a bat’s wings! (5.12.21-31)

We know that Volpone is trying to save himself at this point. The fake possession is a last-ditch effort that fails when Volpone is revealed before the Avocatori.

Because Jonson does not need to involve a fake possession in order for the events of the play to make sense, the fake possession scene raises a question: what specific
purpose does it serve here? Cox observes that “The point of metathetre in Jonson’s fake possessions is… not to empty out religious symbols but to expose abuse of them, at least from the point of view of the English church” (157), or, in the case of Volpone, the Catholic church. In 1598, while he was in prison for killing Gabriel Spencer in a duel, Jonson converted to Catholicism. More problematically, Jonson had also been associated with conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot, though he was not implicated in the conspiracy.99 Volpone’s elaborate plot of conspiracy and discovery may be a form of commentary on contemporary events. Whether Jonson’s religious beliefs are reflected in his decision to include a fraudulent possession in the play is uncertain. If, as a Catholic, Jonson believed in the possibilities of real possession and exorcism, then the fraudulent possession in Volpone may be read as another of Jonson’s numerous anti-Puritan critiques (as the possession events he mocks took place in godly communities). Jonson’s Catholicism may also be visible in what Cox sees as his clear engagement with the generic conventions of the early English morality play, and in the fact that, although, or perhaps because, the play stages no real devils, “nothing in the diabolism of Volpone satirizes devils per se, or is even condescending about them, given the context of knaves, fools, and gulls. Despite Jonson’s rejection of staged devils in his Epistle as ‘antique relics of barbarism,’ his play is deeply continuous with the Vice tradition, so that whatever ambiguities attend the metathetricality of Volpone’s disguises also attend those of the Vice before him” (157).

99 This was potentially hazardous. Jonson had already had trouble with James, having been imprisoned, along with Marston and Chapman, for offensive lines in their collaborative effort, Eastward Ho! (1605). Quicksilver tells Sir Petronel that Gertrude “could have been made a lady by a Scotch knight” (2.2.264), a cynical remark referring to the distribution of knighthoods among many of James’s fellow native countrymen when he gained the English throne. Later in the play, two gentlemen happen upon the “shipwrecked” Sir Petronel, and one declares, “I ken the man weel, he’s one of my thirty pound knights” (4.1.157), a jibe at James’s selling of knighthoods to gain money for the court. Shortly after his release, Jonson appeared at a dinner engagement attended by conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot; this was less than one month prior to November 5, the scheduled date on which the plot was to be carried out (Donaldson). See Richard Dutton’s new monograph for an exploration of Jonson’s association with the conspirators in relation to Volpone.
Volpone thus stages both devilry and possession, though neither are “real” in the proper sense. For audiences who believed in the possibility of demonic possession, the counterfeit might easily have taken on the shape of the real. As the extra devil in the Exeter performance of Doctor Faustus indicates, there was already strong precedent for the devil’s tricks in the theater and a strong willingness to believe among audiences: the extra devil was constituted by a cultural imagination that was receptive to the presence of the devil. That Volpone stages a possession so-called may not have duped Renaissance audiences into forgetting that there was always a real possibility that the devil crept into the belly of Voltore: “If the best intellectual opinion could not distinguish demonic from human illusion, then it is understandable that audiences in the theatre—and perhaps even actors themselves—might regard the illusions they witnessed (or performed) differently from the way a modern audience does” (Cox 153).

A decade later, Jonson stages real devils in The Devil is an Ass. These devils are no match, however, for the fiendish humans, represented by Mere-craft and his ilk. Pug, who is like an apprentice just learning his trade, is unsuccessful in bringing about evil deeds, while the denizens of London are already entrenched in vice. Satan has to rescue the inept Pug from Newgate when things go awry. Meanwhile, Fitzdottrell has rejected Pug’s offer to make realistic his “possession” and is convincing all on his own. This city comedy turns a critical eye on London and suggests that it has become so efficient in its production of evil that Satan no longer need involve himself anymore:

they are other things
That are receiv’d now upon earth, for Vices;
Stranger, and newer: and chang’d every houre.
They ride ‘hem like their horses off their legges,
And here they come to Hell, whole legions of ‘hem,
Every weeke tyr’d. Wee, still strive to breed,
And reare ‘hem up new ones; but they doe not stand,
When they come there: they turne ‘hem on our hands,
And it is fear’d they have a stud o’ their owne
Will put downe ours. Both breed, and trade
Will suddenly decay, if we prevent not.
Unlesse it be a Vice of quality,  
Or fashion, now, they take none from us. (1.1.100-12)

Satan’s concern that Pug might further spoil his and Hell’s reputation by bungling the job in London is well-founded, and Pug thinks that being in London is a part of his hellish torture: “‘T would be a refreshing/ For me, to be i’ the fire againe, from hence” (5.2.16-17). These devils are innocuous compared to the insidious Mere-craft, who suggests to Fitzdottrell that he pretend to be possessed and then accuse his wife of witchcraft:

It is the easiest thing Sir, to be done.  
As plaine, as fizzling: roule but wi’ your eyes,  
And foame at th’ mouth. A little castle-soap  
Will do’t, to rub your lips: And then a nutshell,  
With toe, and touch-wood in it to spit fire.  
Did you ne’re read, Sir, little Darrels tricks,  
With the boy o’ Burton, and the 7. in Lancashire,  
Sommers at Nottingham? All these doe teach it.  
And we’ll give out, Sir, that your wife ha’s bewitched you. (5.3.1-9)

In contrast to the scene in Volpone, this scene is all the more theatrical since Fitzdottrell has a little bit of time to plan, and, presumably, the actor playing Fitzdottrell would have participated in producing the kinds of “special effects” Mere-craft mentions. While Cox asserts that both Volpone and Devil “[include] a coach (Darrell) and a performer (those whom Darrell claimed to dispossess)” (156), the situation is actually more complex in the latter play. Mere-craft plays the coach, but it is Sir Poule Either-side who plays the part of narrator, explaining the various phenomena of the possession. But what is especially provocative about the scene is the performance of the very phenomena many would have read or at least heard about: this is undoubtedly the moment the audience has been waiting for and the climax of the play.

In the eyes of the audience, Fitzdottrell’s possession may be credible. Specific signs of possession included physical strength, rigidity of the body, and speaking in tongues, as well as phenomena like clairvoyance or uncanny knowledge of an unrevealed truth, crying, vomiting strange materials like pins, foaming at the mouth, self-destructive tendencies, levitation, lumps moving about under the skin, smells, changed pitch or tone
of voice, and ventriloquism (Almond 27-8). During his possession, Fitzdottrell calls his wife a whore (and he has every reason to believe that she has committed adultery), foams at the mouth, has swelling in his belly (thought to be the place in the body where the devil would reside (Almond 33)), sees Wittipol enter the room without actually laying eyes on him, wallows and gnashes his teeth, cries out obscenities, and speaks Greek, Spanish, and French. His fake possession is indistinguishable from a real one. After Shackles conveys the truth about Pug and the hanged cut-purse in Newgate, Fitzdottrell stops his performance: “Nay, then, ‘tis time to leave off counterfeiting./ Sir, I am not bewitch’d, nor have a Divell:/ No more then you” (5.8.137-40). Even as Fitzdottrell denies the authenticity of his possession, he invokes that very possibility. Consider the case of Sommers who, like Fitzdottrell, confessed to “counterfeiting;” in Almond’s transcription of his account, we find also that:

the Devil appeared to him in the likeness of a mouse, threatening that if he would not let him re-enter, and would not say that all he had done touching his tormenting during his possession was but counterfeit, then he would be hanged. But if he would yield to him, he would save him. Thus, a new stipulation was made between them, the Devil entered. (Almond 250)

And so, frightening possibilities are discovered in Jonson’s ostensibly skeptical play. In addition to the presence of an actual possession—by Pug, who possesses the corpse of the cut-purse—there is also the undermining of the audience’s ability to know whether Fitzdottrell was actually possessed or only “possessed,” whether his confession to counterfeiting is inspired by threats from the devil or not. The result is that critics like Greenblatt may conclude that “the exorcised theatrical performance seems dead. The devil is, after all, an ass” (“Loudun” 342), while scholars like Cox can come away thinking “nothing in the play challenges the real existence of devils or their association with human evil” (158). Perhaps the play itself invites both responses, and these modern critical responses may be read as testimonies to the ambivalence present in the text itself. Jonson does not force us to come down on one side or another; rather, he leaves room for both doubt and belief and illuminates the slippery conjunction between them.
The account of William Sommers’s possession, confession of counterfeiting, and repossession, which is a defense of Darrell as much as anything, ends with a series of arguments and refutations, typical of the Renaissance, on the matter of counterfeiting. The narrator refutes objection after objection, thereby hoping to prove that neither Sommers nor Darrell is a fraud. Worth highlighting is one particularly relevant point:

*Sommers can act all those things again that are deposed.* First, if he can act them all in such manner and form as is deposed, then he is either still possessed, or more than a man. For no human power can do the like. Second, let him be brought before impartial persons, let the depositions be read, and let him act the same in such manner and form as is deposed, by natural or artificial power. Then Master Darrell will yield that he did counterfeit. If he cannot, as undoubtedly he cannot, then plead no longer for the Devil… (Almond 254)

Jonson takes up the challenge set down in this pamphlet. The statement that “undoubtedly” one cannot perform the signs of possession described in the depositions is cause enough for someone as antagonistic towards Puritans as Jonson to attempt to stage just that. *Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass* react to the zealous defender of the Sommers possession event. Jonson demonstrates awareness of the controversy; if he had not read all of the pamphlets and polemics, he had read enough to re-present Sommers’s acts of possession in his plays. Jonson must have realized the potential for provocative performances of possessions created, in part, by accounts like this one. What Jonson goes after, however, is not the devil or possession. Instead, his object of derision is the certainty of Sommers’s apologist, evidenced in the phrase “undoubtedly he cannot.” As they reveal the crucial impossibility of knowing, *Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass* perhaps exhibit an ethos of skeptical uncertainty. Jonson’s plays are good examples of the fact that this kind of skepticism does not preclude belief in the supernatural. Instead, it invites critical awareness of a variety of possibilities.

III. “In hideous darkness”: Failed possession in *Twelfth Night*

In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio unwillingly becomes the center of a possession event. The identity of possessed person is thrust upon him by the pranksters. The play blurs the
lines between possession and madness—Malvolio is treated as one experiencing both. Significantly, Sir Toby, Maria, Feste, Fabian, and the audience may be seen to represent the public of witnesses deciding the meaning of the possession event. *Twelfth Night* may, as Van Dijkhuizen avers, set out to save the theater from attacks on possession and theatricality (176-79), but I suggest that, like real possession events, *Twelfth Night* creates a critical audience and demands that that audience interpret the events to which they have born witness.

I do not mean to suggest here that *Twelfth Night* produces an “alienation effect” or even that it is singular in forming a critically aware audience. Arguably, much theater endeavors to create a critical audience, or, whether it makes this effort or not, ends up doing so. I suggest, however, that in highlighting not just the complicity but in fact the authority of the witnesses at Malvolio’s possession event, the play demands that the audience members see themselves as powerful subjects—indeed, as subjects who might wield that power over others. Be careful how you interpret these signs, the play says; be sure you are right when you thrust someone into hideous darkness.

*Twelfth Night* is an ostensibly skeptical play, and it features no devils and no actual possession. The complexities of the Malvolio character enable a more nuanced reading of his possession event that suggests more than just skepticism. Malvolio is part stock stage hypocritical Puritan, part humors character (as his name suggests, he is choleric), and part gull for the pleasure of the wily tricksters, at least. He most explicitly articulates the desires for social mobility that appear more obliquely in connection with other characters (especially Maria, Sir Andrew, and Viola as Cesario). Others social climb or marry for wealth; only Malvolio is punished for desiring to do so.

100 Donna Hamilton discusses the Malvolio possession scenes as a critical representation of the coercive power of church and state (100; cited in Van Dijkhuizen 178). Van Dijkhuizen argues that “*Twelfth Night* employs spurious possession and exorcism to defend the theater against its detractors, and even suggests a link between theatrical illusion and the supernatural” (179). Allison Hobgood argues that the cruel joke makes Malvolio the central character, and this the central plot, of the play; the audience of “witnesses” is complicit in the joke, takes pleasure in it, and then is shamed at Malvolio’s ill treatment.

101 Greenblatt compares the “emptying out” of the official position that takes place during stage representations of the supernatural or sacred to Brecht’s alienation effect (126).
In focusing on Malvolio’s punishment, I find illuminating Allison Hobgood’s recent article on the shaming of Malvolio; Hobgood’s discussion of the relationship between the Malvolio character and the public of witnesses speaks to my interest in the play’s possession event. In her reading of Malvolio as a humors character and as an embodied subject, Hobgood stresses that the audience is compelled to “acknowledge, assess, and react to the shameful spectacles they witnessed on stage” (3). Malvolio, who fails to act the part of Puritan well enough early in the play, attempts to take control of his embodied self at the end of the play: “By deliberately foregrounding his ‘notoriously abused’ body, he asks spectators to do two things: first, to acknowledge the shaming he endured since they… were privy to his every humiliation; and secondly, to invoke their own capacity for shame” (10). Hobgood ultimately concludes that Malvolio is condemned to the humoral intemperance of his own body and thus fails to elicit sympathy from the audience that was complicit in exposing and shaming that body.

The primacy of the audience for the Malvolio character is rightly emphasized in Hobgood’s argument. But rather than Malvolio’s shame, I wish to think about the audience’s role in interpreting the possession event, and to think about why the play includes a possession event at all. After Malvolio has confronted Olivia in his yellow stockings and cross-garters, she responds, “Why this is very midsummer madness” (3.4.52). Malvolio’s possession event is also simultaneously a treatment for madness: “Come, we’ll have him in a dark room and bound. My niece is already in the belief that he’s mad,” Sir Toby says (3.4.121-22). The question is, then, why not just madness? Why involve possession? It is not enough, I think, to suggest that it is for the benefit of the audience who will take pleasure in the anti-Puritan satire. That is likely part of the reason, but it is not the whole. As a humors character and hypocritical Puritan, Malvolio could be punished just as well through some other form of punishment, including the one most obviously available: treatment as a mad person.

I believe one key to the possession event lies in Malvolio’s speech just prior to the initial deployment of the rhetoric of possession:

I have limed her, but it is Jove’s doing, and Jove make me thankful. And when she went away now, ‘let this fellow be looked to.’ Fellow!—not ‘Malvolio,’ nor after my degree, but ‘fellow.’ Why, everything adheres
together that no dram of a scruple, no scruple of a scruple, no obstacle, no
credulous or unsafe circumstance—what can be said?—nothing that can
be can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes. Well, Jove,
not I, is the doer of this, and he is to be thanked. (3.4.68-76).

Malvolio’s simultaneous providentialism (“Jove… is the doer”) and anti-providentialism
(“nothing that can be can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes”) reveal
his character’s essential flaw. Malvolio, like many stage Puritans, is pompous and
arrogant; he believes he is godly, but he is an over-reacher who is all too certain of his
own place among the elect.

When antagonized by Maria, Sir Toby, and Fabian, Malvolio displays his
decidedly un-godly qualities: “My prayers, minx?” he says to Maria, who replies “No, I
warrant you, he will not hear of godliness” (3.4.109-10). Malvolio offers some vicious
parting words: “Go hang yourselves, all. You are idle shallow things, I am not of your
element. You shall know more hereafter” (3.4.111-12). This disdainful response exhibits
specific vices: ambition, lust for revenge, pride. This scene in the play serves to solidify
our judgment that Malvolio must be punished; however, it also invites at least two
different interpretations. First, Malvolio is a choleric man who expresses ire towards
Maria and Sir Toby, who are clearly antagonizing him. Second, Malvolio is a person
who seems genuinely possessed. The second reaction is indeed suggested by Sir Toby
and Fabian, who recognize how well Malvolio is acting the part: “His genius hath taken
the infection of the device, man,” Sir Toby exclaims (3.4.116-17).

Possession events like William Sommers’s became occasions for performing the
sins of others. Gibson writes,

Sommers used the platform that possession gave him to act out the sins of
Nottingham in dumbshow: these included brawling, quarrelling, fighting,
swearing, highway robbery, picking and cutting purses, burglary,
whoredom, male and female pride, hypocrisy, sluggishness in hearing the
Word, drunkenness, gluttony, dancing, dicing and the playing of cards,
killing and stealing. To Harsnett this was popish stageplaying. But to the
godly, it was the Word made flesh: what it needed now was
interpretation—hermeneutic marginalia like the Geneva bible, exegesis, commentary—to make it a fully godly text. (Possession 87)

When Sir Toby says, “Is’t possible?” after Malvolio utters his threat and leaves the stage (3.4.113), he is not simply expressing pleasure at seeing Malvolio incensed; he articulates wonder at how accurately Malvolio performs the very vices that, as a godly man, he would condemn. He performs, in other words, the role of the possessed. When the possession event is taken up again later in the play, possession and madness circulate and become intertwined, and Malvolio no longer performs the correct role. Malvolio has been “laid… in hideous darkness” (4.2.26-7) and bound like a madman. Feste as Sir Topas comes to exorcise Malvolio, but Malvolio, instead of denying that he is possessed, denies that he is mad. What I wish to cautiously suggest is that because Malvolio is not a real godly man, because he does not believe in providence, and because he cannot see that he himself has already deployed the signs of a possessed person, he cannot take up his role at the center of the possession event. Malvolio does not seem to understand the practice of possession. Legitimately godly people practiced and correctly interpreted possession events in their communities. Of course, Malvolio lacks such a community. But he is also too much invested in himself, in his own self-possession, for his body to be emptied out in order to be filled with other spirits. Malvolio is too much of Sir Toby’s and Maria’s element to become a vehicle for possession and subsequent grace.  

Van Dijkhuizen suggests that in Twelfth Night, Malvolio represents a “stern Puritan morality” and does not resemble the sort of Puritan figure lambasted in conformist Protestant propaganda. Feste as Sir Topas is meant to invoke Darrell, the exploitative exorcist who took advantage of the weak-minded Sommers (177-78). Citing Donna Hamilton, Van Dijkhuizen acknowledges the possibility that the scape-goating of Malvolio might also allude to Darrell’s ill treatment as a victim of state and church power. Twelfth Night “defends the theatre against anti-theatrical stereotypes which

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102 I mean to invoke Greenblatt again here. As Gary Taylor rightly notices, Greenblatt, in his essays on possession, conceives of “emptying out” as “what one religious institution does to its rival, or what the secularizing capitalist playhouse does to all religions. But ‘emptying out’ can itself be a religious experience, is arguably the most fundamental religious experience. The believer empties himself, as the desideratum for being filled” (“Divine [ ]sences” 29).
informed conformist writings against exorcism,” Van Dijkhuizen asserts (178). F. W. Brownlow does not discuss *Twelfth Night* at any length except to say, “Feste’s words… as he puts on the black Geneva gown to minister to the allegedly possessed Malvolio, ‘I would I were the first that ever dissembled in such a gown’ (4.2.5), can only have referred to Darrell” (60). Yet, in spite of their focus on the Harsnett / Darrell / Sommers connection to the possession event in the play, these scholars have overlooked the possible reading of Malvolio as a potentially possessed person who fails because of his ungodliness. When we compare the Malvolio possession scenes not with Harsnett’s attacks alone, but also with the beliefs of the people engaged in actual possession events, then this interpretation becomes visible. The significance of the audience, which, in this reading, transforms into a community of witnesses not unlike the godly people who read actual possession events, invites us to see the failed possession event in *Twelfth Night* not as an expression of skepticism, but instead as a moment in which the audience is prompted to critical awareness of its own crucial power to interpret and manipulate meaning.103

IV. “One touch from me soon sets the body forward”: Obsession in *The Witch of Edmonton*

Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s play is not typically discussed in terms of possession. The play is based on Henry Goodcole’s pamphlet *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer*, and was performed in the same year that Goodcole’s pamphlet was written. Often read as a critique and demystification of witchcraft, *The Witch of Edmonton* offers a sympathetic view of the so-called “witch” as a poor woman who suffers because of the breakdown of social values. As mentioned in chapter one, the play reveals how beggars

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103 This reading of *Twelfth Night*’s possession event does not take place at the exclusion of others. Certainly, Malvolio’s character is complex, and the possession event inspires a range of reactions among modern audiences, just as it likely did among early modern audiences. What is clear is that the event lies at the center of the play and that it demands that the audience be critically aware, that it pass judgment both on Malvolio himself as well as on the possession event.
are transformed into “witches,” showing a clear alignment with the views contained in Reginald Scot’s work. Its emphasis is on social and economic relations, and its portrayal of the central “witch,” Elizabeth Sawyer, is sympathetic, even, at times, harrowing, as she is beaten by her neighbors and mocked. She is given her own moments to inveigh against the sins of society, and her relationship with Tom the dog is bittersweet. In all, *The Witch of Edmonton* is a marvelous early modern witch play.

Though the play seems aligned with Reginald Scot’s demystification of the social construction of the witch, it does not display the skepticism about the devil or the power of the demonic to influence humans that Scot’s work does. *The Witch of Edmonton* raises questions about human agency and demonic power, and the worldview espoused is a grimly Protestant one. The devil may create misfortune; he acts as God’s hangman, tempting humans into committing transgressions. But the devil seems also to provoke humans into wrong-doing where such a thought had not occurred to them. Innocent characters die. Tom the devil-dog derives some pleasure from relationships with humans, it seems, but he also enjoys making them suffer. “These are my delights, my pleasures, fool,” he barks to Cuddy Banks at the end of the play (5.157). He is a classic devil without a cause: “No pleasure but meanness,” as Flannery O’Connor’s Misfit says, or, like Milton’s Satan, “To do ought good never will be our task, / But ever to do ill our sole delight” (*Paradise Lost* 1.159-60).

Some Renaissance demonologists would say that *The Witch of Edmonton* stages obsession, not possession, because Frank Thorney is influenced by external, not internal, demonic forces (Thomas 569-70; Van Dijkhuizen 115). Obsession occurred when malignant forces assailed the human subject from without, tempting or compelling the human to act, but not inhabiting the body itself. Article 72 of the canon laws adopted in 1604 forbids attempts at exorcising victims suffering from either possession or obsession (Sands 117). In *The Witch of Edmonton*, when Tom rubs against Frank’s leg, the devil does not depart from Tom’s body, but through this physical contact, the idea of murder is transferred from the dog to Frank. The force is external, but it similarly enables a view of Frank as being “possessed” or compelled by the devil to act in a way that he would not, were it not for the diabolical contact.
The power of the devil over the human subject appears ambiguous, however; the interpretation would depend (as so many dramatic scenes do) on the staging. The moment occurs prior to Frank’s murder of his wife Susan (to whom he is married bigamously, unbeknownst to her). Tom the dog enters and says, “Now for an early mischief and a sudden. / The mind’s about it now. One touch from me / Soon sets the body forward” (3.3.1-3). Frank and Susan enter, and the dog rubs against Frank, whereupon the latter says, aside, “Thank you for that. Then I’ll ease all at once. / ‘Tis done now, what I ne’er thought on” (3.3.15-16). The dog observes the murder, and then helps Frank tie himself to a tree in order to make the scene appear as though highwaymen were responsible. David Nicol believes that the line “The mind’s about it now” must be read as the dog referring to Frank’s mind, suggesting that Tom can read Frank’s murderous thoughts which he then endeavors to solidify. By this reading, the line would conflict with Frank’s own line that he “ne’er thought on” the notion of murder until the dog rubbed against him (9). But such a conflict is unnecessary. The dog says “The mind’s about it now” before Frank and Susan enter; thus, I take “the mind” to refer to the dog’s own mind. In other words, Tom has an appetite “for an early mischief and a sudden.” This is important because it changes the interpretation of events dramatically. If the murder is Tom’s idea and Tom’s alone, then we can read Frank as obsessed by the devil; the idea of murder is planted by Tom, the murder is carried out. Elizabeth Sawyer is ultimately blamed for the murder, and she takes credit for the idea, even though we never see her give the dog orders, nor do we see her ask him whether the idea was carried out as planned. Tom’s treachery implicates Elizabeth, but the idea seems to have been his alone.

This is a bleak view of the devil’s power to control human subjects. Not only does the devil arbitrarily torment humans for fun, but also he may do so by setting humans about killing or injuring other humans. Here, there is no “possession event,” but instead an inner transformation undergone by the human, at the mere touch of the demonic dog. The audience may believe that the dog is responsible or that Frank harbored thoughts that the dog then developed further, but if we take the words and stage directions as they appear in the text, the suggestion is that it is the dog who has the idea. Demonic forces do not temporarily inhabit the body so that a community of godly might
interpret and write that text. The presence of the demonic is not ultimately a sign of imminent grace. *The Witch of Edmonton*, then, offers an unusual view of possession—or obsession—when compared with other stage representations. What takes place is not bewitchment, because Elizabeth Sawyer did not, as far as we can tell, command the dog to bewitch Frank Thorney. The malefactor is the devil himself. While the play promotes skepticism about witchcraft, it does no such thing in relation to demonic forces. Recall that the play was performed in 1621. *The Boy of Bilson* possession account appeared one year later, and in this same year, Edward Fairfax’s apology for possession appeared. The play appears long after the end of the Harsnett/Darrell possession controversy, and bears few signs of it. But it takes place at a time when many historians suggest that, if anything, skepticism towards both witchcraft and possession was increasing. Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s play serves as a reminder, however, that skepticism towards one supernatural discourse or set of beliefs does not entail skepticism towards all, and that the power of the devil can take many forms.
Let me begin with some thoughts both about this study as a whole and about the place of chapter five within this study. As the current chapter represents in many ways a considerable departure, it requires some initial situating, and, rather than end with a “conclusion,” which always feels awkward to me, it seems more appropriate to reflect for a moment upon the aims and themes of this study here.

This chapter is a departure from the previous ones, though for reasons that I hope will be clear, I believe it also has an important place in this study. Not only does this chapter come back to Thomas Middleton and to a consideration of Middleton’s efforts at demystification, thus connecting it to the first chapter, but here, I turn to skepticism as a response, not to magical beliefs alone, but to magical beliefs as they appeared alongside religious beliefs and practical knowledge. Though magic, religion, and material practicality sit comfortably together in the almanac proper, their co-existence was not perceived so happily by some, including Middleton. Mock-almanacs, as we shall see, highlight the fact that, in almanacs, the practical, religious, and magical share space; in mock-almanacs, such peaceful co-existence is transformed into a collision, and the reader is placed squarely in the center. In the previous chapters, I have considered magic in relation to the production of culture. Chapter one elucidates how Middleton’s satirical pamphlet *The Black Book* reveals the rogue and the witch to be cultural constructions forwarded by the machinery of emergent capitalism. In chapter two, I show two representations in which women practitioners of magic appropriate and refigure the typically masculine identity of the magus in order to earn a living. In chapter one, magic is resorted to by impoverished subjects who are out of work; in chapter two, magic *is* work. Chapters three and four are broadly focused on possession: chapter three considers possession events and public formation and looks closely at Anna Trapnel’s experiences with divine possession and publicness. Comparing Milton to Trapnel shows that gender and social and political privilege do not imply greater freedom to prophesy and pour forth, at least not during the Interregnum. In the previous chapter, I suggested that
possession events may be represented satirically or skeptically in theaters, but that, nevertheless, alongside ostensible skepticism, other interpretations, including ones that bespeak credulity, were available, even promoted. Performances of possession, on stage and off, did not “kill belief.” Yet, skepticism looms, not just in chapter four, but throughout this whole study. In book twelve of *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are guided out of Eden by Michael and other angels:

> The Cherbim descended; on the ground  
> Gliding meteorous, as Ev’ning Mist  
> Ris’n from a River o’re the marish glides,  
> And gathers ground fast at the Labourers heel  
> Homeward returning. (12.628-32)

Thus I imagine skepticism in relation to these various representations, practitioners, and beliefs of “that inimitable art”: ominous, billowing over boggy ground, nipping at the quickening heels of our magical subjects. But wait. Perhaps it is not the “instruments of darkness” that are pursued; perhaps it is they who do the pursuing. Perhaps I am thinking of Milton, but I am imagining a horror movie. I see not a practitioner of magic fleeing, but a skeptic getting his come-uppance at the merciless hands of the Mummy or the Werewolf, amidst enveloping “fog” from dry ice. Magic and skepticism: which is pursued; which does the pursuing?

In early modern England, the direction of the chase varied and sometimes it was at a standstill. Skepticism in this milieu generally seems to have been ever-present but never obvious. In relation to early modern witch beliefs, Katharine Maus points out that the question is not “What made witch beliefs possible?” but rather, “Why could (some) early modern people *disbelieve* in witches?” (327). Yet, even if Reginald Scot’s skeptical text did not represent the contemporary worldview, his *Discoverie* clearly made a considerable impact. Where it did not create skepticism, it at least raised the possibility and elicited responses from the producers of culture: playwrights including Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, Rowley, Dekker, and Ford; and pamphleteers—Bower, for example, recalls something he learned from Scot’s *Discoverie* when he is examining Anne Bodenham. In this case, knowledge from the skeptical text was put to use by the
believer. James’s response to the Discoverie participated in introducing, if it was not single-handedly responsible for introducing, continental witchcraft beliefs into English culture. In a real ways, Scot’s skeptical text made a lasting impact in both purveying skepticism and in provoking a shift in English beliefs. Seventy years after his Discoverie was originally published, his name and ideas still had currency, as the 1653 Bower pamphlet shows.  

Skepticism appears in a variety of the texts I have discussed, in fact: from Scot, to Middleton’s Black Book, to The Prophetess with Maximinus’s derogatory and satirical remarks which clearly invoke popular skeptical discourse; from The Alchemist’s fraudulent magicians, to Trapnel’s dissenters and the “rude spirits” who sneak into the chamber where her possession event is taking place, to Harnsett and the possession controversy. Expressions of skepticism in early modern culture occurred often in relation to magic. The current chapter examines a specific expression of skepticism—that is, the mock-almanac—in relation to almanacs proper and in relation to the cultural presence of skepticism more broadly. As I suggest in chapter one, Middleton’s skepticism is thoroughgoing; as thoroughgoing as Reginald Scot’s. Like Scot’s, Middleton’s skepticism is probably connected to his Protestant faith. Both Middleton and Scot apply satire in order to demystify the social and economic “base” underlying the ideologies of witchcraft and roguery. This is an example of what I call “popular skepticism”—a not unproblematic term, but one which nevertheless is useful in defining this skepticism against “learned,” “classical,” “ancient,” or “high” skepticism. Though Middleton almost certainly was exposed to and influenced by the presence of classical skepticism in early modern culture, it is popular skepticism, not classical, that more often appears in his texts, and particularly in his satirical pamphlets and mock-almanacs.

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What is an early modern almanac, but a collection of various forms of knowledge? What does the almanac do, but assure readers that there is an identifiable

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104 Bower writes that “there came into [his] thoughts a Story which [he] had long before read in Mr. Scot’s Discoverie of Witchcraft” (20). He recalled Scot’s mention that one way of finding out a witch was to bring the accused into the presence of the suffering victim (in this case, Anne Stiles).

105 The ESTC shows five editions of Scot’s Discoverie appearing between 1651 and 1665.
and predictable order of things? The early modern almanac thus performs a function similar to that of religious and magical beliefs in general. Almanacs lay at the crossroads of magic, religion, and skeptical practicality, in fact. Unlike bibles or great books of magic like the apocryphal *Key of Solomon*, almanacs were small, available (there was no cap on print-runs; like bibles, almanacs were exempt [Thomas 348]), affordable (at the going-rate of 2d.), and user-friendly. They contained practical knowledge and advice, but they were also vehicles for astrological predictions and lists of good and bad days. Just as within individual subjects might reside diverse beliefs and attitudes which, when isolated and categorized, would seem to conflict with or even to exclude each other, but which present no apparent problems for the subject possessing them; so, within almanacs, there existed the practical, material stuff of everyday life alongside the starry prognostications. Of course, for many readers, this was not a problem. Why should it be? Most early modern English people were in the habit of dealing with the practicalities of everyday life, of course, and many of them also espoused or tacitly maintained magical beliefs and exhibited magical thinking. Being subject to the everydayness of everyday life does not lead to skepticism.

That practical materialism, magical beliefs, religious beliefs, and skepticism towards some beliefs might dwell in one person or in one text might go without saying. We are accustomed to locating a variety of attitudes in texts; as literary critics, ours is the job of seeing in literary works aesthetic intricacies, diverse ideological agendas, subversive motifs, radical critiques. As good skeptics, we tend to withhold judgment—the feminist reading is as useful as the Marxist one—even if we do tend to privilege readings that reflect our own social values. But how do we approach non-literary texts? How do we approach, for example, “genre fiction” (a term that bespeaks a certain prejudice)? How do we approach the non-literary texts or “genre fiction” of almanacs and mock-almanacs? One answer is, we don’t. The almanac has been studied as a cultural artifact by historians and scholars of print culture, and the mock-almanac receives some mention within such works.¹⁰⁶ For scholars of early modern literature and culture, neither the almanac proper nor the mock-almanac has received much attention. An interesting challenge arises here, however, because, as some mock-almanacs were

¹⁰⁶ See Eustace Bousanquet, Capp, and F. P. Wilson.
written by writers of literature and drama, they are clearly the more attractive texts to study, in comparison to almanacs written by Edward Pond, Thomas Bretnor, Richard Allestree, and others—people who were almanac compilers, not literary writers. The temptation is to perceive the mock-almanacs of Middleton or Dekker as literature disguised as “genre fiction” and to sequester it from the genre it participates in and mocks.

In attending to the popular skepticism of Middleton’s mock-almanacs (and mockeries of almanacs in his dramatic works), I also explore the almanac itself, and the relationship of the early modern almanac-reader to the text. In addition, I situate this discussion of popular skepticism in the broader dialogue surrounding skepticism in the Renaissance. I suggest that whereas many scholars emphasize classical skepticism as seen in Shakespeare and Montaigne, to consider expressions of popular skepticism such as Middleton’s enables a more holistic view of skepticism in early modern culture. To the objection that almanacs do not represent magical beliefs and that the practice of consulting almanacs is not a magical one, I would say, first, that the popular astrology presented in the almanac was taken not as science, but as magic. Learned men and men of science increasingly shunned the lay astrology of the almanac. Bernard Capp observes, “almanacs set out doctrines which owed less to Renaissance magic than to popular superstition, or to magical systems long forgotten” (210-11). By magic, here, however, Capp means “high” magic, or the magic of male sorcerers, and by “superstition” he means “low” magic, the magic of uneducated, rural women and men, which certainly was indebted to “magical systems” that the purveyors of “high” magic had forgotten, or were trying to forget. A second response to the objection is that the skeptics who attacked almanacs did so because they saw in them objectionable magical beliefs. That was not all they saw, and not all they attacked, but it was part of it. Finally, it may be less problematic if we think of almanacs not in terms of readers’ magical beliefs but rather in terms of magical thinking—the subconscious magical “habits of thought” that played a determining role in how early modern subjects apprehended the world.

I. “The almanac of my true nature”
One of Middleton’s earliest prose works, *The Penniless Parliament of Threadbare Poets* (1601) predicts, “it shall be lawful for almanac-makers to tell more lies than true tales” (320-21). Practically two decades later, Middleton satirizes almanac-readers’ slavish adherence to the almanac’s prognostications and declarations of “good” and “bad” days in 1619’s *Masque of Heroes*. The character “Doctor Almanac” explains,

> The farmer will not cast his seed i’ th’ ground before he looks at Bretnor; there he finds Some words which he hugs happily, as ‘Ply the box’, ‘Make hay betimes’, ‘It falls into thy mouth’. A punctual lady will not paint, forsooth, Upon his critical days, ‘twill not hold well, Nor a nice city-wedlock eat fresh herring Nor periwinkles, Although she long for both, if the word be that day ‘Gape after gudgeons’, or some fishing phrase. A scrivener’s wife will not entreat the money-master That lies i’ th’ house and gets her husband’s children To furnish a poor gentleman’s extremes If she find ‘Nihil in a bag’ that morning; And so of thousand follies, these suffice To show you Good, Bad, and Indifferent Days (*Masque of Heroes* 241-256)

Throughout his career, Middleton engages, invokes, appropriates, and satirizes what was perhaps the most widely-read form in early modern England: the almanac. Middleton’s mockery of almanacs, while meant to entertain, is also an expression of skepticism.

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Emphasizing the reading practices of audiences, Middleton’s mock-almanacs, especially the brilliant *Owl’s Almanac*, show readers to themselves. The work of demystification that much of his corpus, from the early satirical prose works including *The Black Book*, to the city comedies and the tragedies, performs, is also displayed here in Middleton’s mockery of almanacs and prognostications. The mock-almanacs and Middleton’s satirical engagement of almanacs in his dramatic works instruct or serve as a model for readers; they endeavor to fashion readers and audiences into skeptics and smart readers like Middleton himself.

This chapter thus explores a form (the mock-almanac) and a cultural attitude (popular skepticism) that have been generally overlooked. Whereas classical skepticism has been the subject of several recent discussions wherein it is most often linked to Shakespeare and Montaigne, popular skepticism has seen no such rise in popularity. Studies of classical skepticism trace the role of skeptical philosophy in early modern culture and locate articulations of that philosophy in Renaissance drama, and particularly in Shakespeare’s tragedies. Though in some cases, other expressions of skepticism are attended to,\(^\text{108}\) in general, the “high” skepticism of Shakespeare’s tragedies is emphasized at the expense of the “low” skepticism of other authors, genres, and forms.

The popular skepticism of mock-almanacs reacts against the forms of knowledge contained in the almanac. These forms were many: between the outer-leaves of the almanac existed evidence of both materialist practicality—advice and wisdom about husbandry, going to market, bodily health, and more—and credulity, faith in astrology, and magical beliefs. The almanac proper contains both with no apparent sense of contradiction, but the mock-almanac locates and highlights, indeed, exists, because of that contradiction. Mock-almanacs espouse doubt at the wisdom and foreknowledge of the almanac-compiler; they reject the notion that fate may be read in the numinous scrolls of the heavens; they resist the construction of human subjects as passive, vulnerable, bound to the maps of their lives that were written in the stars at their birth. Mock-almanacs, like the objects they satirize, are also decidedly material, ephemeral objects;

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\(^{108}\) William Hamlin’s thorough study is careful not to elide unlearned or popular skepticism; he notices expressions of skepticism articulated by people who had not read or been exposed to the work or ideas of Sextus Empiricus.
they express an attitude of skeptical materialism in part because they are themselves skeptical materials.

To look at Middleton’s mockery of almanacs enables a discussion of skepticism that is not couched in terms of “the decline of magic” or the victory of Enlightenment. In its very specificity, looking at a particular author, form, and attitude, this chapter avoids thinking about Middleton as a “harbinger of Enlightenment” and locates early modern skepticism in previously unexplored territory. I believe that Middleton was invested in revealing the material conditions of life and in elucidating the machinery that kept those conditions hidden. But while Middleton exposes and inveighs against contemporary ills and the vicious nature of daily life in London, he is also intently focused on his craft. Middleton’s creative joy may be seen in many of his works, but it is perhaps most visible in his prose, and, of all his prose works, certainly *The Owl’s Almanac*—despite or interestingly because of its rigorous adherence to the almanac form—is one of the most innovative.

II. “High” and “low,” classical and popular, Shakespeare and Middleton

These binaries are, of course, false: the high and the low blur into one another, the reception and interpretation of the classical and the popular are informed by each another, Shakespeare and Middleton were aware of and expressed both high and low, classical and popular. Yet, these binaries are promoted by modern scholarship on skepticism in early modern culture. Consider the following titles: *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare’s England* (2005), *Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism* (2002), “The Time is out of Joint”: *Skepticism in Shakespeare’s England* (2004), *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (2007), and *Nobler in the Mind: The Stoic-skeptic Dialectic in English Renaissance Tragedy* (1998). These titles suggest a current interest in the emergence of skeptical philosophy and epistemology in “Shakespeare’s England.” Each of the titles invokes Shakespeare, and each of the discussions is focused on classical skepticism. These works, some more than others, are valuable contributions to the ongoing dialogue about attitudes circulating in early modern English culture, but I find the emphasis on the

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109 These monographs are by, respectively, William Hamlin, Millicent Bell, Benjamin Bertram, Anita Gilman Sherman, and Geoffrey Aggeler.
classical and learned to be taking place sometimes at the expense of the contemporary and popular. In addition, if some of the authors discuss drama besides Shakespeare’s, the latter often still maintains a privileged place in both title and discussion. Shakespeare, or Hamlet, along with Montaigne, epitomizes Renaissance skepticism.

The focus on Montaigne is, however, not without merit. Anita Gilman Sherman calls Montaigne “the paradigmatic Renaissance skeptic” (xiii). Montaigne was heavily influenced by Sextus Empiricus and his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Through his *Essais*, Montaigne disseminated the ideals of Pyrrhonism. In tracing the cultural and textual transmission of skepticism through Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, William Hamlin, while foregrounding the significant role of Montaigne, also observes, “Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists certainly had the potential to be sceptical without reading Montaigne, and Montaigne had the same potential without reading Sextus or Cicero” (8). Indeed, it was very likely because skeptical attitudes were already present in England that the work of Sextus was embraced and translated into English in 1590 (8). Hamlin’s study acknowledges the popular ferment of skeptical attitudes that took place in proximity to the dissemination of classical skeptical texts. Skepticism may have had a greater potential to be embraced in early modern Europe, Hamlin posits, because

Unlike Stoicism, Epicureanism and other philosophical movements that reach maturity during the Hellenistic era, scepticism is less a school of thought than a temper of mind: a set of characteristic mental attitudes and practices. It offers no body of dogma; its most habitual targets are the dogmatic claims of others. But scepticism shares one major trait with its Hellenistic rivals. Like them, it was perceived in early modern Europe as part of an immense classical inheritance that also included Hellenic philosophy and the intellectual contributions of the pre-Socratics. (5)

The milieu of doubt and dissent fashioned in large part by the Reformation was a particularly habitable environment for anti-dogmatic philosophy in particular, and for doubting and questioning habits of mind in general.

Classical skepticism, as defined in Sextus Empiricus’s work, suggested that people apprehend conflicting or opposing positions or views with equipollence (*isosthenia*). Rather than taking up one position or declaring one to be “right” and
another “wrong,” the skeptic suspends judgment (Sherman 1). *Epoche*, the suspension of judgment, or “the deliberate withholding of assent or dissent” (Hamlin 5), leads to the desired state of *ataraxia*, or tranquility and freedom from anxiety. Hamlin suggests that Montaigne was not convinced that *epoche* necessarily enables or produces *ataraxia*: “he subjects a basic sceptical assumption to continued sceptical scrutiny” (6).

Texts like Scot’s that perceived magical beliefs and practices with suspicion do not reflect *isosthenia* or *epoche*. Scot’s *Discoverie* does not suspend judgment. His methods are demystification through direct argument and through satire and mockery. Hamlin notes that Sydney Anglo compares Scot to Montaigne in Anglo’s essay about Scot’s “skepticism and Sadduceeism,” and that Scot’s own status as a learned man who referenced “more than 200 authorities” from the classical and ancient past demonstrates his familiarity with skeptical ideals. Though he had not read Sextus or Pyrrho, he was familiar with Cicero, who conveyed skeptical ideals, and with Bodin, who disputed them (Hamlin 30). Anglo concludes that “Scot banished magic of every sort from his conception of human affairs; and were it not for his leap of faith in proclaiming an unshakeable acceptance of the Word of God on the very basis of the miracles contained therein, his philosophical position might aptly, if anachronistically, be described as thoroughly positivist” (Anglo 134-35). Scot’s tract is, however, precipitated not by his righteous anger at persecutors of women but instead at his vehement antipathy for all things smacking of Papist idolatry. Magic came from the Catholic church, which represented Antichrist; magic and Catholicism therefore needed to be routed out. Scot’s text is, in part, a response to the demonological treatise of the Catholic Bodin, who was familiar with Sextus and Pyrrhonism and who inveighs against skeptics in his *De la demonomanie des sorciers* (1580). In the preface, Bodin writes, “As for the arguments that one can make to the contrary, I hope that everyone will be satisfied by the following book. In the meantime we shall leave these master doubters, who doubt whether the sun is bright, or ice is cold, or fire is hot, and when one asks them if they really know their names, they reply they have to think about it” (44). Scot fashions himself as a “master doubter” who calls into question the dogmatic credulity of Bodin’s treatise.110

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110 Hamlin similarly comments that Scot “might well have been more repulsed by the dogmatic Docteurs, with whom Bodin finds common ground, than by the Doubteurs descended from Socrates” (31).
The point here is to note that in Scot’s *Discoverie* strains of classical and popular skepticism are intertwined. Scot is a good case to consider, because he helps us to clarify the differences between classical and popular skepticism. Classical skepticism espouses an attitude of general uncertainty. It questions the foundations of epistemology and reflects the philosophy outlined by Sextus. Popular skepticism, which might be characterized by a similar attitude of questioning and doubt, might also, instead of suspending judgment, cast judgment in order to disrupt epistemology and expose cracks in dogma. One way of characterizing the difference between classical and popular skepticism, then, is to suggest that classical skepticism calls into question belief and certainty in general, whereas popular skepticism may call into question a specific set of beliefs while leaving others, and their epistemological foundations, intact. Popular skepticism might exist and be articulated at the popular level, by unlearned people, in reaction to dubious or objectionable beliefs or practices encountered in their daily lives. Classical skepticism was the province of the learned, though its ideals eventually spread through the culture at large.

An author or text could be a vehicle for both classical and popular skeptical attitudes, as for example, Scot’s text espouses a general thoroughgoing attitude of questioning and doubt, while also attacking a specific set of beliefs (in witchcraft and the devil) and leaving other beliefs alone (beliefs in God, Protestantism, the truth of the Bible). As we shall see, Middleton’s *Owl’s Almanac* similarly brings the reader to a place of general uncertainty (a questioning of belief in general, along the lines of classical skepticism) while also specifically mocking the credulity of almanac-readers (attacking specific beliefs, a reflection of popular skepticism). The popular and classical probably blur much more frequently than they remain distinct. In cautiously suggesting this distinction, I mean not to suggest that we always identify expressions of skepticism as either classical or popular, but rather to point out that alongside the skepticism of Sextus, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Hamlet, another sort of skepticism found expression in early modern England.

How might we situate Middleton in this history of skepticism and in the dialogue between classical and popular skepticism? First, that Middleton attended Oxford may suggest a familiarity with classical skepticism and with Sextus Empiricus’s work.
Elucidating the transmission of Sextus, Hamlin emphasizes the presence of *The Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and its ideals at Cambridge and Oxford in the late sixteenth century. Merton College at Oxford had procured a 1562 edition of Sextus in 1591; Christ Church pupils read Sextus in the 1580s and ‘90s. John Rainolds, who graduated from Corpus Christi college, delivered orations on skeptical questions, “one of which was, ‘Do the senses deceive?’” and Rainolds’s sustained interest in questions of epistemology is displayed in his lectures in the 1570s (Hamlin 47-48). Rainolds matriculated from Corpus Christi in 1569 and returned there in the late 1590s, but during part of the interim he was at Queen’s College, where Middleton studied. This connection may be crucial. As Gary Taylor notes, “the man who more than any other had shaped the personality of Queen’s College since 1586 was John Rainolds, leader of the Puritan party in Oxford, and, arguably, in all of England” (“Lives” 34). Though he had left Queen’s for Corpus Christi perhaps just prior to Middleton’s arrival in Oxford, Rainolds’s “influence on Queen’s, and the students and fellows he had attracted, long remained” (34). If Rainolds was both a Puritan and a skeptic, Middleton’s time spent at a school strongly influenced by him may have had an important shaping effect on the writer.

Another significant point of contact between Middleton and classical skepticism may have been by way of Thomas Nashe. In chapter one, I delineated several connections between Nashe and Middleton. Nashe was one of Middleton’s greatest contemporary influences. In 1591, Nashe mentions the English translation of Sextus in his prefatory epistle to Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, and he invokes passages from Sextus in *Summer’s Last Will and Testament, Pierce Penniless His Supplication*, and *The Unfortunate Traveller*. It seems likely that Middleton would have noticed.

I believe that we can assume that Middleton was familiar with the ideals of classical skepticism. But Middleton’s skepticism more frequently appears not as an expression of Pyrrhonist ideals but rather as opposition to specific beliefs. Unlike Shakespeare or Montaigne, Middleton’s works do not typically display *epoche*; they do

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111 See page 14.
112 See Hamlin (48-9). Hamlin is particularly interested in Nashe’s mention of the 1590 English translation because of what it reveals about the translation itself and about Sextus’s cultural presence prior to and after the translation (49-54).
not strive for ataraxia. Middleton emphasizes the viscerality and vice of his culture, and his aims are less to dispel certainty and belief in general than to show readers the foolishness of particular beliefs and to illustrate how such beliefs are injurious in that they hide the material reality of life. Modern scholars who discuss early modern skepticism and Shakespearean tragedy apprehend tragic drama, and Shakespeare’s tragic drama, as the singularly effective site for conveying ideals of classical skepticism. Limiting the discussion to tragedy, however, or even to tragedy and poetry, is, well, limiting. Middleton’s skepticism and materialism are on display in a variety of his works, in every genre, arguably, and most visibly in his prose works. At stake in locating Middleton’s skepticism in relation to almanac readers is the notion that sceptical attitudes in early modern culture emerged, were expressed, and spread not just through or because of Sextus, Montaigne, and Shakespeare. Elsewhere, Middleton, Scot, and others espoused sceptical ideals in forms that were equally, if not more, topical and relevant in their cultural moment. Our picture of early modern skepticism is incomplete if we focus only on Shakespeare’s doubting Dane and the prominence of Pyrrhonism.

III. Almanacs and early modern readers

Almanacs were extraordinarily popular in early modern England. One historian estimates that the number of almanacs printed and sold in the seventeenth century was between three and four million copies, but Keith Thomas believes these numbers represent “distinct under-estimate[s]” (349). Almanacs are composite texts in which are included calendars, record books, medicinal advice books, astrological predictions, portentous accounts of plagues and dearths, chronicles of history ancient and recent, references for cycles of the moon, and lists of good and bad days. Almanacs are self-avowedly ephemeral objects. Seventeenth-century almanacs served for one year, although earlier almanacs, like the one published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1507 served for up to seven years. Specific to a time, early modern almanacs were also specific to a place, as Alison Chapman points out; almanacs privilege the local time and place, and give a specific milieu a meaningfulness that early modern Protestantism would in theory remove (1260). Almanacs were themselves spaces in which readers engaged the text and participated in refiguring the text itself as they inscribed their opinions, exclamations,
reminders, memories, and more in the margins and in the blank pages in between leaves of the printed pages. W. C.’s 1566 “almanac” printed by Thomas Purfoote, entitled A Blancke and perpetuall almanac, was primarily a set of lined pages upon which merchants might record “what debtes they have to pay or receive” or in which other people may write down “notes of any actes, deedes, or things that passeth from time to time.” As Adam Smyth explains in a recent article, almanacs are an overlooked site in which early modern “life-writing” took place.

Two extant copies exhibit such writing. A copy of Pond’s almanac from 1612 contains notes about payments, with the names of people paid and the amounts, as well as deaths and burials, with lines drawn from the notes to the relevant dates. The Pond reader seems to use the almanac strictly as a record book and calendar. The owner of the copy of Richard Allestree’s 1632 almanac uses the book similarly, but this reader keeps extremely detailed accounts of moneys coming in or going out, including not just pounds, but also shillings and pennies, even when the amount is, for example, “1-00-0.” The second page of the 1632 Allestree is blank; the reader has written a list, with items and numbers. In the pages of the calendar, sometimes the reader has written only “£50.” Notably, Allestree’s almanac has even more blank space than the Pond edition. In the calendar pages, there are completely blank leaves interspersed—between each month’s calendar and moon cycle is a page with both sides blank. Allestree’s almanac would have been called a “blank,” as opposed to a “sort” which had no blank leaves; as such, it expresses awareness that almanacs function as record books, and it gives readers what they want: space to write in. In May the Allestree reader writes about going to the market. The reader makes notes about items and amounts either bought or sold. In June the reader notes an amount received, and the date. July has another list of either amounts paid or received. This reader is careful sometimes to cross out sections of text, perhaps to let herself know that the debt is no longer owed.

Almanacs as record books and diaries, and specifically as spaces for keeping financial records exhibit a clear practical function.113 The Pond and Allestree readers

113 Several almanacs were printed with titles indicating that they should be used specifically for keeping financial records. For example, several editions of The treasurers almanacke, or the money-master appeared between 1626 and 1631 (STC 2410-24214); this “almanac” may have been little more than a table
may be interested in the prognostications, in the chronology of the Kings and Queens of England, in the parts of the body and the celestial bodies that govern them, in historically important dates ranging from Eve’s fall until the present, in the best days for purging or blood-letting, in rules of husbandry and more. I am not suggesting that keeping financial records means that these readers were not interested in the other parts of the book. In fact, in listing just these parts of the book (and there were more) I hope to illustrate the vast expanse of human knowledge the modest ephemeral almanac attempted to contain. Some almanacs aspired to be the reference book their readers would turn to—between the almanac and the bible, an early modern reader need reach for nothing else. Adam Smyth writes, “Almanacs were diminutive volumes, but they made claims to a kind of totality of scope: as such they represent that Renaissance interest in epitomizing vastness into as small a form as possible—that interest, to use Barabas’s words, in conveying ‘infinite riches in a little room’” (202).

Almanacs’ practical matter, such as calendars, husbandry advice, and dates of fairs and markets, stands alongside its fanciful or magical contents. The reader, on his way to the calendar and blank leaves to note the date on which his wife was cured of her illness, comes across the zodiacal man, bits of doggerel verse, and brief epistles to the reader. If he looks past the calendar, he finds the prognostication, the astrological prediction for the year to come, with dates of eclipses and the good and bad days. Some almanac-readers may have approached the prognostications with a degree of skepticism all along—despite their immense popularity, there is no indication that everyone who read almanacs believed their predictions or obediently followed their advice. Certainly, mockery of almanacs was a tradition established early in the Renaissance and which continued throughout our time period. Where the capacious almanac endeavors to hold all necessary information, the skeptical reader mocks the attempts at foreknowledge and points out, from year to year, how predictions were incorrect. Whether some readers actually slavishly followed the almanac’s advice to the letter or not, the almanac itself, as well as its burlesque cousin, invites an amusing vision of a reader who does: and that is the vision that crops up in numerous satirical texts over the course of the early modern

showing interest rates. The money monger, or, the usurers almanacke of 1626 (STC 18010) performs a similar function.
period. Smyth writes, “in early modern England, the almanac reader and annotator was a resonant figure: he or she was, in fact, ceaselessly ridiculed as provincial, uneducated, and hopelessly aspirational… Mock almanacs—that is, printed texts that parodied the almanac form—took particular delight in lampooning gullible annotating readers. Poor Robin includes mock reader notes printed in the margins”—as does Middleton’s Owl’s Almanac, which appeared over a half-century earlier than Poor Robin. In discussing mock-almanacs with mock-marginalia, Capp calls Owl “a pioneer in this field” (232). Though unique, as we shall see, Owl, like Middleton’s other mockeries of almanacs, participates in a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century trend in satire: the mockery of almanac readers. From Shakespeare’s rude mechanicals, to Middleton’s Weatherwise, readers of almanacs are mocked with regularity, as are their reading—and writing—practices.

IV. “It shall be exceeding good this year”: Middleton’s mockery of almanacs

Parodies of almanacs and prognostications appeared in the sixteenth century; according to Bernard Capp, the first, A Merry Prognostication, appeared in 1544. It satirized the almanac’s “empty but solemn predictions.” In 1591, a series of almanac parodies appeared in which satirical predictions of the obvious as well as social satire and critique were combined (Capp 33). “The mock-almanac, as well as the almanac itself, was a creation of the book-trade” Paul Yachnin writes (Plato Introduction 195). When Middleton produced Penniless Parliament in 1601 and Plato’s Cap in 1604, he was writing in an established tradition, and for an established market of readers. Middleton’s Penniless Parliament, Plato’s Cap, No Wit/Help Like a Woman’s (alternatively titled The Almanac) in 1611, The Owl’s Almanacke in 1618, and The Masque of Heroes all satirize almanacs, and almanacs receive derogatory mention in other Middleton works as well: Yorkshire Tragedy, The Puritan Widow, The Roaring Girl, Anything for a Quiet Life, and A Fair Quarrel. In a range of genres and forms—from prose pamphlet, to comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy, and masque—Middleton’s treatment of almanacs is keenly and wittily derisive.

In Plato’s Cap, Middleton writes: “each ale brewer will pay the Jew of Malta and put but a little malt in the ale” (180-81). Brewers will cheat their customers by making
the beer weaker. In invoking Marlowe’s play, Middleton not only puns on “malt,” but also associates the brewers’ cheating tricks with the biting practices of usurious Jews; brewers are both like the Jew of Malta in cheating their customers, and victims of the Jew of Malta, which is why they cheat their customers. *Plato’s Cap* displays much of the same figurative play and sly punning that appears in *The Black Book*, and it also exhibits, if less explicitly, similar social and economic concerns. As Paul Yacnin explains, *Plato’s Cap* follows the generic conventions of the mock-almanac while simultaneously displaying an originality not typically seen in such texts. Part of that originality is owing to Middleton’s expressions of social criticism. “I hope there will be small hurt done by fire this year, because faggots, billets, and charcoal bear such a price that no poor snake is able to purchase them, and the most danger for fire lies in their cottages because for the most part they are low, old, and rotten” (216-20). The “poor snakes” are subject to the perils of the “fiery” conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, but “as for rich men, they could build up their houses again” (220-21). Middleton’s mock-prognostication subtly expresses outrage at the social and economic disparities between rich and poor. And his text makes a broader point as well: why do you need to read Bretnor or Pond, he asks. It is clear what will happen: usurers will continue to exact high rates of interest, tailors will continue to cheat their clients by charging for more fabric than will actually be used, single women will continue to become pregnant, the poor will grow poorer, and so forth. “The usual humour of mock-almanacs depends on prophecies of the obvious,” Yacnin writes (196), and Middleton obviously follows convention in “prognosticating” what everyone already knows. But his “mock” prophecies simultaneously call attention to the realities that almanacs proper eschew. Middleton tacitly suggests that if Bretnor, Pond, or Allestree would prognosticate more accurately, based on what they see in the world around them, rather than focusing on the stars, then perhaps their almanacs would be more useful and more credible.

In *No Wit / Help Like a Woman’s; or the Almanac*, Middleton dramatizes a fool whose every move hinges on the advice of his almanac, and Weatherwise’s language has been infiltrated by the rhetoric of the almanac—practically everything he says refers to, puns on, or otherwise invokes almanacs: “I was ever yet at full moon in good fellowship, and so you shall find if you look into the almanac of my true nature” (6.23-5).
Weatherwise reveals his foolishness repeatedly in mistaking the almanac’s contents for truths and wisdom, but also in mistaking the almanac itself as a cultural sign of knowledge. For example, in admiring Beveril, he suggests that such a fine person must be a reader of almanacs:

Is this he? By my faith, one may pick a gentleman out of his calves and a scholar out on’s cheeks; one may see by his looks what’s in him. I warrant you there has ne’er a new almanac come out these dozen years but he has studied it over and over. (7.180-84)

“What’s in” Beveril, it seems to Weatherwise, is the same thing that’s in Weatherwise: wisdom from almanacs, apparent in his “scholar’s” cheeks. But Beveril truly is a scholar, while Weatherwise gains his knowledge from his almanac. Middleton mocks almanac-readers like Weatherwise not only because they are gullible fools, however, but also because they are hypocrites. They pretend to be guided in all things by their almanacs, but they are really scheming and endeavoring to make their own fates, to defy the stars, as much as anyone else is. Weatherwise is also greedy and selfish—if he were just a little bit smarter, he would be a truly pernicious character instead of just a fool.

Weatherwise’s function in No Wit is multifarious: through him, Middleton mocks the faithful who follow almanacs and who mistakenly believe that what almanacs contain is knowledge; Weatherwise serves as comic relief, as the protagonist of the play’s co-plot, and as the purveyor of stage spectacle, first at his elaborate banquet, and more significantly, at the masque performed by the widow’s suitors. There, he “comes down, hanging by a cloud, with a coat made like an almanac, all the twelve moons set in it, and the four quarters, Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn, with change of weathers, rain, lightning, and tempest, etc.” (9.62.7-11). Weatherwise’s technicolor dreamcoat must have stolen the show, at least temporarily. It also displays what an almanac is, in the eyes of the skeptic: foolishness dressed up in celestial signs, storms, and seasons.

Penniless Parliament, Plato’s Cap, No Wit/Help Like a Woman’s, and Masque of Heroes all explicitly mock almanacs and their readers. But it is Middleton’s Owl’s Almanac that stands out as a singular model of the mock-almanac. More than the other texts, Owl highlights both the conventions of the almanac proper as well as almanac-readers’ practices, including the practice of writing in the margins and blank spaces.
V. Fashioning skeptical readers

_The Owl’s Almanac_, first of all, has a unique title-page woodcut. The Owl is in his scholar’s robes, at his desk, inscribing the signs of the zodiac in a book. The image invokes and bears a resemblance to the woodcut frontispiece to the 1616 edition of Marlowe’s _Doctor Faustus_, as John Astington notes (238-9). Great books appear on a shelf in the top left corner of the image, a clock appears in the top center of the image and a window in the top right. The floor is black and white checkerboard. Is the Owl a Faustian over-reacher, aiming to know the secrets of the stars, bequeathing his soul in the manner of a deed of gift just to give us, lucky readers, the forbidden knowledge he will attain? Is the woodcut a commentary on the almanac’s own presumption to impinge on divine Providence? Perhaps. It is also tongue-in-cheek; like the text itself, the woodcut, too, must have been “Calculated as well for the meridian mirth of London as any other part of Great Britain” (3-5). These lines from the title page acknowledge the specificity of time and place that distinguished many almanacs.\(^1\)

_Owl_, like typical almanacs, is divided into numerous parts: it contains first of all a prefatory epistle, followed by a table of contents, then an epistle from the Owl to the Raven (from Middleton to Dekker, who wrote _The Raven’s Almanac_ in 1609). Then we are given the terms, the number of years ago certain historical events occurred beginning with “the first lie” (which Eve told Adam) (292), an anecdote about “the beginning and ending of the year as also of the world” (366-67), the tides, an astrological and diurnal “computation,” some doggerel verse, a description of a moon-clock, a description of zodiacal man, as well as a unique narrative connecting zodiacal man with Prometheus (describing the signs of the zodiac torturing Prometheus by attacking specific parts of the anatomy), a calendar, the “disposition of the planets for this year,” astrological predictions, “rules for health and profit,” the seasons and diseases commonly occurring during each, “General diseases to reign this year,” floods, dearths, and then a “brief and merry prognostication, presaging good fortunes to a set of fundamental trades,” from the Mercers to the Painters, and ending with the fairs and highways in England, and the good and bad days. _Owl_ is a

\(^1\) See Chapmen. Most almanac title pages indicate the longitude and latitude or the city for which they have been “calculated.”
longer pamphlet than *Plato’s Cap* or *Penniless Parliament*, and it is thorough and precise in its inclusion of these various sections.

*Owl* is most extraordinary, however, in its inclusion of mock-marginalia and in the interplay between the marginalia and the text itself. The mock-marginalia humorously mimic the notes readers penned in the blanks and margins of almanacs proper; the marginal notes in *Owl* serve as a guide through the text identifying for the mock-reader the contents of each section, as though the table of contents and section headings were not enough. The notes are also attempts at aphoristic wisdom: “Chandlers make ill husbands” was written after learning that chandlers are responsible for providing the light by which wayward husbands play cards all night (2140). “A true maiden’s blush, a colour hard to be found,” accompanies the section on Dyers. Intermingled are exclamations—“O cruel crab” (803-4) appears alongside the section on Cancer—and pithy descriptions: “Terrible doings” is the laconic comment on the savage punishment of Prometheus (644-45).

Though *Owl* mocks its mock-reader by displaying such silly marginalia, it is also critical of a broader audience and of social practices, sometimes graphically so:

> Infinite numbers… of sheep, calves, and oxen shall this year die so that people will be in danger to be better fed than taught. The blood of these innocents will dye red a shambles, and most merciless cutting of throats shall there be in Eastcheap. A thousand lambs shall be carried to the stocks and three times that number lose their lives at Smithfield Bars, some of them in that butcherous massacre being driven up into Whitecross street. (1428-1437)

Though this is a sarcastic passage, its language—of lambs, the slaughter of innocents, blood, and merciless cutting of throats—is evocative and pathetic. Here, *Owl*’s reader comments, “Tragedies at none of the playhouses.” The meaning is, for me, uncertain.

Does the mock-reader believe that such immense slaughter of “infinite numbers” of livestock bespeaks an appetite caused by comedy? Are tragedies for leaner times? Or does he agree that *this* is the tragedy? Though the reader’s terse phrase is ambiguous, what is at least illustrated in this passage is that Middleton’s mock-almanac shades in and out of “meridian mirth,” social satire, mockery of the foolish reader, and pointed social
commentary—and sometimes it performs several of these things at once. The passage above draws on graphic language that signifies in religious terms—is this a desanctification of religious symbolism for the purposes of humor? Is this a genuine expression of sympathy for animals, an expression of early animal rights activism that deploys religious language to make a point? Is it meant to criticize the excesses of feasting in general? The instability and fluidity of the text’s various humors position the reader in the place of the skeptic, and here, the critique of specific beliefs dissipates into a general state of uncertainty and doubt, and then reels back again. *Owl,* more than Middleton’s other mockeries of almanacs, expresses a radical skepticism. This skepticism inheres in the interplay between the mock-commentary, the conventions of the mock-almanac, the conventions of the almanac proper, and the manner in which all occasionally give way to moments of pure critique.

The project of *Owl* is complex. Through the mock-reader’s mock marginalia, Middleton positions a mirror before his readers. He acknowledges that almanac-readers write in their texts, but he encourages readers to become more critical of what it is they write. *Owl* highlights the role readers play in shaping the text of the almanac; *Owl* itself would be a dramatically different text if the mock-marginalia were missing. And so with the real “life-writing” inscribed into true almanacs. Middleton’s mock-almanac illustrates the paradoxical relationship between the reader and the almanac: on the one hand, readers are passive subjects to whom fate happens; on the other, readers express agency as they comment on or even contradict statements made in their almanacs.

Middleton emphasizes the reader in all of his various engagements with the almanac. “There is a great difference between reading and reading well,” he writes in *Plato’s Cap,* “for those that read well have a good tongue of their own and spoil nothing in the spelling, and to such I cast up my cap” (29-32). Further, he pokes fun: “From thence the sun travels into Gemini, not into Germany (as some mechanic-readers will read Germany for Gemini)” (96-7). Weatherwise is himself a kind of “mechanic-reader”—self admittedly beholden to almanacs, he adjures his fellow-suitors not to dismiss the books and the wisdom they contain so quickly:

Well, take your courses, gentlemen, without ‘em [almanacs], and see what will come on’t. You may wander like masterless men; there’s ne’er a
planet will care a halfpenny for you. If they look after you, I’ll be hanged, when you scorn to bestow two pence to look after them. (7.138-42)

Weatherwise suggests that heavenly bodies and earthly ones have a reciprocal relationship: that humans who pay attention to the heavenly bodies are cared for by the latter, and those who don’t, aren’t. Of course, Weatherwise is “hanged” later in the masque scene—when he descends like Air in his almanac cloak—and his foolish credulity is never shown to be anything but foolish.

Owl’s reader is foolish as well. In imagining a mock-reader who writes foolish mock-marginalia, Middleton creates a critical distance between the reader and his or her own almanac. Do I write such ridiculous things? the reader may wonder, after reading Owl. In fact, Owl in effect removes the safety of privacy and candidness that accompanies personal almanac annotating and creates a sense of publicness by putting “private” remarks on display. The “life-writing” in Owl also envisions the reader as author. The mock-reader parodies the practices of real readers, but Owl also acknowledges the ways in which readers shape texts. Owl cleverly highlights the fact that almanacs depend for their meaning and their very survival upon readers—not the other way around, contrary to Weatherwise’s beliefs.

Adam Smyth points out the “blanks” such as the Blancke and perpetuall almanac, “came some time after the practice of annotating seems to have become established… [almanac-compilers] were responding to, reinforcing, but not initiating this practice. This in turn provides a suggestive model for the reader-text-printer dynamic: the printed almanac, rather than simply prescribing reading modes through its material form (although it did do this), reorganized its material form in response to new modes of reading” (222). Smyth’s discussion of “life-writing” in almanacs highlights the practices of active readers, like the readers of Pond and Allestree, who use their texts, rather than, as it were, being used by them. As Stephen Dobranski demonstrates, the notion of active reading and the idea that in the act of reading, a reader transformed a text, developed during the Renaissance:

active labor … constituted reading during the seventeenth century.

Readers were conditioned to participate in their books—whether through conventions of decoding, studying, lecturing, or socializing—so that
interpretation required, above all, readers’ active engagement in determining an unfixed meaning. Again and again, we find accounts of readers using their books—interacting with them, both to improve their own quality of life and to make the most of authors’ ideas. (48)

Readers of almanacs did just this: they used their books by interpolating their life experiences into the margins, and keeping records and accounts.

Middleton’s *Owl* acknowledges the active reader, even while satirizing him. As Middleton’s mock-almanac promotes skepticism towards the “knowledge” and foreknowledge contained in the almanac, it also suggests that the almanac’s usefulness comes not from the text itself and its obvious or superstitious contents, but from the reader and what the reader does with the text. While Middleton mocks the reader, whether it is the mock-reader of *Owl* or Weatherwise, in *Owl* he also forwards a model for engagement, the same model already illustrated by the reading and writing practices of many almanac readers: the almanac is for use and consumption, and Middleton himself put it to use. Mocking almanacs throughout his career, Middleton finally creates his own in 1618. The text give us Middleton as *bricoleur*—making use of the ephemeral text and the materials of London itself in assembling his own mock-almanac. The mockery, while pervasive, also occasionally disperses and reveals a celebratory spirit and an instructive model for other readers and writers.

Middleton did not believe in magic. The attitudes displayed in his oeuvre suggest that Middleton’s skepticism was thoroughgoing. That skepticism often had as its aim the unveiling of the material conditions of everyday life. Like Reginald Scot’s, Middleton’s skepticism and materialism were most likely linked to his religious beliefs. Middleton’s mockeries of almanacs, particularly *The Owl’s Almanac*, endeavor to fashion skeptical readers, and they represent a manner of textual consumption, a making use, that emphasizes both the materiality of the text itself and the material reality in which that text exists. The magical beliefs propounded by almanacs, and foolish readers’ blind obedience of almanacs’ prescriptions, fuel Middleton’s creative attacks.

Never did the stars stuff an almanac with more prodigious births of nature than this year is to bring forth. Sins of men grow thicker than the hair-
bushes on the head, and having filled bodies (as by the former hospital bed roll appears) with maladies, mark how the very element of water (as if heaven had drunk up a second deluge to drown all) spreads abroad his dankish and showery wings. (*Owl* 1381-89)

Inveighing against the sins of men, suggesting that those sins and not the stars cause the floods and inundations, even in his anti-magical ire, Middleton also expresses sympathy for humans who are subject to diseases and who languish under the shadow of water’s “dankish and showery wings.”
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