

**Verena Theile and Andrew D. McCarthy (eds). *Staging the Superstitions of Early Modern Europe*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. xxiii, 284.**

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The goals of this collection (part of Ashgate's series 'Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama') are ambitious. In their introduction the editors discuss their desire for 'a history that informs literary inquiries and vice versa' (10), a modification of cultural theory's methodology and 'a conscious move from thick to thin description' (11). The topic to be addressed in this way is 'how systems of belief shape normalcy [sic] and ... why we call certain perceptions superstitious when they appear perfectly normal, acceptable, and even logical to others' (4). Although these goals are not fully realized in many of the essays which follow, the collection in general pays attention to the religious and political contexts within which literary texts are written and drama is staged or, in the editors' words, the 'interplay among history, literature and theater' (18). This interdisciplinary focus is reflected by the mixture of historians and literary scholars who contribute to the volume. As a whole this collection is somewhat less cohesive than many others published about early modern magic, witchcraft, and religion, but thematic and methodological cohesiveness is rarely a primary purpose for essay collections and this volume contains some excellent work.

Theile and McCarthy's compilation includes a 'Foreword', their introduction, and ten essays divided into three groups. The first, subtitled 'Religion, Reformation, and the History of Fear', deals with materials from the sixteenth century, a period too often neglected in discussions of the occult in favor of the more spectacular magic and witchcraft texts of the seventeenth century. An essay on Lutheran religious writings about the devil and sorcery, another on Barnebe Riche's polemical pamphlet *The True Report of a Late Practise, Enterprised by a Papist* (1582), and a third mapping the Faust legend as it evolves in the sixteenth century, comprise this section. The second group, 'Witchcraft on Trial', contains two essays on the Lancashire witches, one on *Macbeth*, and a slight but interesting piece on the joint stool's function in *Arden of Faversham* and *Macbeth*. The third section, 'Stage Dissections', includes an essay on *The Tempest*, one on dreams in the plays of John Lyly, and a fascinating study of how 'travelers' tales' from early modern Europe influence the magical and supernatural content of London stage plays.

The piece that comes closest to meeting the goals articulated in the introduction is the short foreword by historian Darren Oldridge. Perhaps too brief to have been included as an essay, it discusses night as it must have been experienced in the early modern world, its impenetrable darkness, cold, and mystery which modern readers cannot truly fathom. Given these 'otherworldly perils of the night' (xix), the multiplicity of 'superstitions', fears, and physical and moral dangers to which night gives birth seems rational. Using both historical and literary texts to document the context he convincingly evokes, Oldridge makes understandable both early modern desire for magical protection and early modern devout prayers for spiritual support.

Also noteworthy is Peter Morton's discussion of the Lutheran response to magic and demons in the first full essay. By examining Lutheran attitudes toward both the devil and the sorcerer, he is able to argue that the devil concerned Lutheran religious writers less than the sorcerer/magician. A human who attempted magic, with or without the assistance of the devil, necessarily rejected the comfort and protection offered by faith in Christ. Relying instead upon his own abilities, he thus became an exemplar of the dangerous sin of pride.

Verena Theile's discussion of Faust materials, most particularly the contrast between Hermann Wilken's view of Faust (in *Christliche Bedenken und Erinnerung von Zauberey*) and Marlowe's stage character, picks up similar themes. Like Morton, she makes clear that in this period the devil is an acknowledged presence. Thus, the central question about the demonic deals not with the existence of the devil but instead with 'the level of his interference in the human world' (60) and how individuals choose to react to his presence.

Meg F. Pearson's 'Vision on Trial in *The Late Lancashire Witches*' outlines two different understandings of sight: in the classical view, the eye both emits beams and receives beams back and is involved in interpretation; but the new 'scientific' view treats the eye as merely the passive, objective recipient of visual images. Focusing on these two ways of seeing, she examines Heywood and Brome's play's relationship with its audience and evokes as well the real-life crowds who gazed at the real women of Lancashire who were on trial. 'The complicated nature of the play's relationship with vision alters the simple ethics of spectatorship ... [T]he capacity for clear vision and clearer interpretations is undermined and deflated' (127). Like a number of the other contributors to this collection, Pearson helps us to understand scepticism as one of a 'constellation of responses' (a phrase I borrow from

Adam Kitzes' article on Riche's pamphlet, 57) that early modern audiences and readers might have to occult activities.

As mentioned above, M.A. Katritzky's 'Travelers' Tales: Magic and Superstition on Early Modern European and London Stages' offers information about European folk influences on stage magic. The essay focuses on how travel writers transmitted folk superstitions and practices, especially those involving impotence but also beheading and wounding, to England where they received new life on the English stage.

Two additional essays offer particularly original insights, although I think each pushes its argument too far. Liberty Stanavage, in "'Such a Sinner of his Memory': Prospero, Bruno, and the Failures of Neo-Platonic Memory Magic', argues what her title suggests, reading Prospero as a man who tries to force his own memories on other characters. He ultimately fails because he himself does not remember with complete accuracy and does not realize that his 'triumph' has therefore been a failure. Her choice of early modern memory theatre as a lens through which to view the play is insightful but as I look through that lens I find it yields a more nuanced vision of Prospero than Stanavage permits. 'The Medicalization of "Midnight Hags": Perverting Post-Menopausal and Political Motherhood in *Macbeth*', by Hilda H. Ma, reads Lady Macbeth as prematurely post-menopausal, desirous of ridding herself of her fertility in order to become more masculine and powerful. As an approach to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth this medicalized reading is suggestive. However, Ma extends this reading to view Lady Macbeth as a figure for Queen Elizabeth in the last decades of her rule, presenting Elizabeth as post-menopausal, witch-like, and ineffective as seen from the perspective of a playwright writing for James's court. I was not convinced. Other readers may be.

As a whole, the collection offers a wide variety of informative and suggestive approaches to the topics it treats. The quality of the essays varies, as it does in most collections, but the volume gives its readers a heightened understanding of why magic, and superstition in general, had such a hold on many early modern citizens, while simultaneously showing how sceptical others may have been about its efficacy as a route to power or as a means of holding back the terrors of the night.