



# Societas Magica Newsletter

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## Ritual Magic and the Creation of Illusions

*The two articles included in this issue focus on different aspects of the relations between ritual magic, illusion, and staged magic. Robert Goulding analyzes areas of ambiguity in the manuscript accounts of experiments with lamps, flames and mirrors from a historical perspective, while Loren Pankratz reflects, from the perspective of psychology, on how belief systems create illusions--referencing a seventeenth-century work by Bernard le Bovier Fontenelle on the use of illusions in the Greek oracles. Both articles illuminate the ways that created illusions have been received and reconceived within different realms of experience, such as religion, technology and secular beliefs. We are grateful to Kevin Ogle, École Nationale de Chimie de Paris, who first suggested the idea for this issue.*

### Real, Apparent and Illusory Necromancy: Lamp Experiments and Historical Perceptions of Experimental Knowledge

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Medieval experimental texts or collections of “secrets” provide a rich abundance of source material that can shed light on the array of historical connections between ritual magic and table magic. Their compilers were interested in gathering the irreducible “facts of experience,” especially those facts which excited marvel or seemed at least paradoxical. In his *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, William Eamon has described the social and intellectual setting of these texts, from antiquity to the early-modern period; and he shows how their method (if it can be called that) informed the emerging experimental science of the seventeenth century, with its emphasis on the primacy of experience and its fascination with the exotic and the counterintuitive.<sup>1</sup>

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The *contents* of these books, however, and the ways in which they were composed, have received less attention. The making of a “book of experiments” was a complex process, involving compilation from other experimental texts, incorporation of new material from other sources and imaginative elaboration and combination of this raw material. With few exceptions, those who compiled such books did not have first-hand knowledge of all – or perhaps any – of the claimed “experiences” they had assembled. Yet the compilers of experiments did not simply copy out material verbatim from other sources; they made important choices about the kind of material they would include and the context in which to place an experiment found in another collection.<sup>2</sup> Examining the ways in which compilers have used and reused a single type of secret may illuminate the variety within the supposedly single genre of books of secrets.

Those experiments which involve burning a lamp in order to bring about a change in perception are excellent for this purpose. In the first place, such experiments are ubiquitous, as anyone who has examined the experimental literature of any pre-modern period will attest. Since first stumbling upon one of these, I have found dozens of texts containing such illusions (in at least forty distinct forms) dating from antiquity to the eighteenth century, and even, quite remarkably, recorded in anthropological literature as a belief attested by illiterate Southern Indian villagers.<sup>3</sup> Experiments involving illusory lamps are also of interest because they straddle the divide between actually repeatable (and scientifically explicable)

phenomena and entirely “magical” experiments.<sup>4</sup> In this brief paper, I can only sketch out the broad lines of the development of this genre of experiments, focusing in particular on how the contexts into which experiments were adopted altered their form and content.

In his *Natural History*, Pliny records several curious illusions ascribed to the neo-Pythagorean philosopher Anaxilaus of Larissa.<sup>5</sup> If the discharge of a mare after intercourse is burnt in a lamp, those who are present will appear to have the heads of horses – and the same thing can be done with donkeys.<sup>6</sup> Cuttle-fish ink, poured into a lamp, makes people appear to be Ethiopians;<sup>7</sup> and sulphur, dissolved in wine and heated over a hot coal, imparts a deathly pallor to those at dinner parties (*in conviviis*).<sup>8</sup> The last example suggests the context in which these strange illuminations had a home: tricks to entertain banqueters. Indeed, we know from other sources that Anaxilaus wrote a work entitled *Paignia*, or *Funny tricks*, a title given precisely to this genre of symposial entertainment.<sup>9</sup>

But here we are faced with a problem. Why include such tricks in a handbook of dinner-time pranks, when they clearly were incapable of working as advertised? It is *possible* that the trick with sulphur might have worked: if the substance had been burnt (rather than heated, as the experiment requires), the blue flame of the sulphur may well have imparted a deathly pallor to the diners. The other experiments – especially the one involving the imposition of animal heads – appear to verge on the magical in their use of sympathetic substances and their effect: transformation into

an animal was, after all, the best-known and most feared skill of the ancient magician.

Moreover, the very nature of the genre of *paignia* is complicated. Other, Christian writers refer to such tricks not as simple entertainments, but as *deceptions* designed to persuade that the practitioner has *real* magical powers.<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus, for instance, relates that one heresiarch won over his followers by turning wine into a blood with a concealed pellet of dye, a trick (says Irenaeus) “lifted from the *Paignia* of Anaxilaus.”<sup>11</sup> Hippolytus records dozens of tricks from a single handbook for fraudulent magicians, showing them how they can do everything from drawing down the moon into a room (using concealed reflective basins), to producing disembodied voices by whispering through the dried windpipe of a goose; the church father refers to such behavior as *paizein*, “playing,” the root of the word *paignia*.<sup>12</sup>

It is possible, then, that the experiments Pliny recorded had a less innocent purpose: to convince the diners that the bearer of the lamp had *real* magical powers, which could transform men into beasts, or invert the natural order in another way by changing Romans into Ethiopians. Again, we face the problem that such tricks “did not work”; surely a fraudulent magician would ensure that the method for achieving apparent magical results would “work” and not rely on magical principles, as the horse-lamp seems to do. Yet we have to be careful about making such an easy and, perhaps, naïve distinction. Hippolytus’s manual, for instance, is devoted to fraudulent tricks of conjurers; yet the very same part of

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the text explains that a trickster can summon an earthquake at will – by burning the dung of a mongoose. Clearly the distinction between magic that works and magic that doesn't – and between *real* magic and its fraudulent imitation – was not as well-defined for ancient authors as it is for us.

But if we wish to stick to the common-sense assumption that symposium tricks should actually work as advertised, a more subtle interpretation of Anaxilaus's lamp experiments presents itself: that they were magical explanations provided to the audience (and even available in a book for reading before or after the symposium), which accompanied tricks actually effected by purely natural means. That is, an illusion of magical transformation was explained by the action of the lamp but was achieved by some kind of trickery.

A possible source for uncovering the real technology behind these magical tricks is the *Catoptrica* of the Hellenistic scientist and engineer Heron of Alexandria. This book is largely devoted to mirror illusions; the most ingenious involves a clever arrangement of mirrors that presents the image of a god or goddess when one looks in the mirror, expecting to see oneself.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this was the culmination of Anaxilaus's symposium trick: each diner looked in the specially-prepared mirror to observe his own transformation into an ass. The marvelous lamp, then, would be no more than a prop, misdirecting the audience from the real source of the illusion. As we shall see, the final, naturalizing version of this experiment quite

explicitly uses Heron's catoptrical techniques to bring about Anaxilaus's marvelous effects.

Anaxilaus's experiments were adopted and transformed by the compilers of several late-antique medico-magical texts. The best-known of these, the *Kiranides*, while retaining vestiges of the parlor-trick origins of Anaxilaus's illusions, replaced his benign ingredients with the secretions and internal organs characteristic of animal-based medicine. In one of the "generic attractions" so common in experimental texts, the compiler borrowed animal substances (gall, eyes) which had strong connections in medical practice with the treatment of defects of the eyes, redeploying them to alter vision, rather than improve it. At the same time, he emphasized the horrified reaction of the diners to their altered perceptions, beginning the process of separating the illusions from Anaxilaus's original, ludic intentions.

These innovations in both form and content were taken up and elaborated by Arabic authors, the principle source for medieval Europe's knowledge of lamp experiments. Several texts (all of which were translated into Latin) rework and recontextualize the experiments in important ways. These works include the *Picatrix*, the *Book of Fires* by "Marcus the Greek," and several technical works ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus. Here, I will concentrate on the book which became the single most important source for later medieval authors: the *Liber vacce* or *Book of the Cow*, compiled in a Sabaeen cultural context in the ninth century, and circulating in Western Europe by the end of the twelfth century. The

first half of this book – the subject of recent work by David Pingree, William Newman and Sophie Page – is devoted to enormously complicated operations with animals, some of them of appalling cruelty.<sup>14</sup> The second half of the text was (I believe) composed separately but attached to the first book at an early date. More than twenty lamp experiments are recorded in this second book, products of a complex process of assimilation, transformation and elaboration.

First, the use of recondite animal materials with medical significance is intensified, even over the experiments in the *Kyranides*. Moreover, the purpose of several of the experiments has been colored by medical descriptions of the symptoms of melancholic madness described by the second-century physician Rufus of Ephesus, and translated in several Arabic medical texts. In the *Liber vacce*, there are experiments to make the victims see their companions as "fearful things," or "as Satan"; Rufus and his Arabic followers record that melancholics may see their brothers and parents as "terrible monsters." One bizarre recipe claims that it will conjure up the vision of a large black man holding a stick who will terrorize all the men in the house; melancholics (according to Rufus) may see black men who are trying to kill them. Another recipe will make men think that their bodies are enormous – precisely a delusion shared by melancholics; and there are several other examples I could give.<sup>15</sup>

One last point about the *Liber vacce* is significant for the later reception of the material. The second book consists almost entirely of lamp



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experiments; but they are framed by a handful of experiments having to do with lamps and fires in general: how to hold fire in your hand, how to make a lamp which burns under water, and so forth. If the second book of the *Liber vacce* were to be separated from the disturbing and overtly magical material in the first book (with which it clearly has an affinity and common origin), it might be possible to read the book as a collection of experiences to do with fire; experiences which are, moreover, wholly natural. This was, indeed, the interpretation that came to be applied in the most widely read version of the book in Western Europe.

The *Liber vacce* as a whole had a very limited manuscript circulation in Latin translation; however, the second book did circulate separately in a different translation, forming the larger part of pseudo-Albertus Magnus's *De mirabilibus mundi*. This text is itself part of the so-called *Liber aggregationis*, which survives in scores of manuscripts

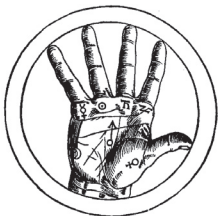
from the late thirteenth century and went through dozens of printed editions in Latin and the vernacular. This is the principal route by which the lamp experiments of the *Liber vacce* – and, indeed, lamp experiments in general – reached Western readers of the middle ages and Renaissance.

Pseudo-Albertus's preface to the *De mirabilibus* promised that the marvels he would unfold were, in some way, capable of entirely naturalistic explanation (by the application of actives to passives, or the action of the mind). In fact, the author did not provide explanations of any of the experiments in the collection. But the author must have believed that the lamp experiments, which form the single largest class of experiments in his book, were open to just such rationalization.

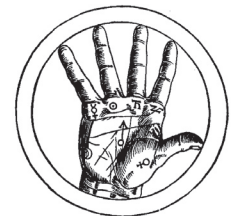
As I have suggested, the pyrotechnic framing of the *Liber vacce* may have convinced him that illusory lamps were examples of natural magic. But he did not have to make this inference by himself. Some fifty years earlier, William of Au-

vergne actually began his influential discussion of "natural magic" with the example of illusory lamps.<sup>16</sup> Some claim that it is possible, he says, to make a lamp which conjures up a vision of snakes crawling in the room (there are two such lamps in the *Liber vacce*). This illusion results from nothing more than the uncertain, smoky light flickering on the straw scattered on the floor. The lamp which makes men appear to have asses' heads has a similarly natural effect. After all, a tiny drop of seminal fluid can create a whole donkey; can we doubt that it can produce the *appearance* of a donkey? These are the only lamps which William describes, as compared with the two dozen or more which would appear in the hugely popular pseudo-Albertus. Yet it is significant that later *theorists* of magic cite William more frequently than pseudo-Albert, and concur with him that the lamps are harmless natural effects. (Even the authors of the 1487 *Malleus maleficarum* (I.9) permitted such lamps as mere optical illusions, relying second-hand on William's arguments).

## The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.



We are looking for short essays (1500 to 2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We are especially interested in writing which engages magic in tension or dialogue with other rhetorical and ritual constructions: magic and the law, medicine and magic, magic and modernity, magic and the secularized world.



We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed. Proposals for essays, smaller pieces, or notes on topics of potential interest to members of the Societas Magica will be welcome.

At the moment we are especially interested in writing which looks at periods other than medieval, but most topics are acceptable as long as they involve fresh research.

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To return to an earlier point, when we consider the popularity of these strange lamps we are left with a curious paradox. Lamp experiments proliferate, drawing in heterogeneous material and appearing in very different settings. Yet there is hardly any discussion of the *efficacy* of the lamps. Where there is, the few cases which might work (for William of Auvergne, the snake lamp, and for several other authors, the sulphur lamp) – these stand in for *all* the lamps and guarantee their success. There is no serious question raised by any author over the efficacy of the lamps. A genre which started out as an illusion, or perhaps a magician's technique of misdirection, becomes by the modern period an entirely literary phenomenon – but one which no one doubts is actually practicable.<sup>17</sup>

The Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher, in his *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* of 1646, was one of the last scholarly writers to discuss the lamps. Kircher had no doubt that the lamps worked; the constant testimony of so many writers left little room for doubt. At the same time, however, he rejected the common argument that the effects were natural. He could not recognize any physical principle which might explain the action of at least the more exotic lamps, such as that which produced the ass-head illusion (or, as Kircher termed it, the “onoparastatic lamp”). Thus the illusions must be produced by demons; and he urged young men to avoid testing out even the most harmless-sounding of the lamps, for fear of damning themselves inadvertently.<sup>18</sup> But Kircher, whose own stock-in-trade was illusion and the playful manipulation of nature,

could hardly contain his fascination for the *effects* which the lamps could achieve, even as he deplored their *means*. He therefore devoted several chapters of his *Ars magna* to reproducing optically and mechanically precisely the illusions which the lamps themselves were supposed to create. He explains how to “make the room seem to be hung with beautiful tapestries” and how to “decorate the entire room with every type of precious stone” or with all the stars in the sky, marvels which he produces by means of arrays of variously cut prisms.<sup>19</sup> All the men in the room can be made to appear green, he says, and he believes one of della Porta's illusory lamps (simply a green lamp with a green wick) might actually effect this naturally; but a much better way, he thinks, is to put a flask filled with green-tinted water in the window or, still better, to construct a double window filled with the coloured water.<sup>20</sup>

Later, Kircher attempts to emulate the most famous, and oldest, of the experiments: to make a man appear with the head of an ass. Near the very end of the *Ars magna lucis*, Kircher describes a series of “metamorphoses,” by which men can be transformed into animals. Most of these are adapted from the optical tricks found in della Porta's *Magia naturalis*: for instance, the use of distorted mirrors to give one's face the appearance of a particular animal. Kircher does not explicitly mention magic lamps here, but one of his original “metamorphoses” recalls them quite unmistakably – in fact, directly alludes to the very earliest lamp experiment of all, Anaxilaus's symposium trick. To place an animal's head on a human body, Kircher constructs a simple

machine (depicted on p. 783 of the *Ars magna lucis*) which consists of a large octagonal prism (about the height of a person, if Kircher's drawing is to scale), each side of which is painted with a figure. A crank on the side allows the prism to be turned, so that any one of the eight figures can be chosen to be visible on top. The prism is concealed behind a large screen, with a carefully angled mirror suspended high on the wall above it. The victim of the illusion looks into the wall-mounted mirror, expecting to see his own face, and instead sees the one the operator has chosen. Visible in the diagram are the head of an ass, a monstrous face and a childlike, smiley sun. This is, of course, simply an elaboration of the catoptrical trick first described by Heron of Alexandria, by which a mirror is made to reflect an unexpected image.

The animal heads, notes Kircher, should be painted with human necks, in order to make the illusion absolutely convincing. An even more monstrous variation is possible, which solidifies the connection to the marvelous lamps of antiquity Kircher writes:

This all begins to approach deceptions (*praestigia*), if you make a solid head of some animal, covered with its own hair, and whose glass eyes are moved by strings or some other artifice, and its mouth, also moved by a string, now opens, now closes. If you enclose this likeness in the machine, in such a way that no light falls in the room except where it strikes the likeness ... you will have performed something which the human mind can scarcely believe.<sup>21</sup>

The word *praestigia*, “tricks,

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deceptions” is exactly the word he had used of the demonic illusions projected by the magical lamps of Anaxilaus and Albertus Magnus.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the instruction to ensure a single source of illumination recalls so many lamp experiments which state that the marvels can only be seen if “no other light is present.” Kircher’s conclusion evokes the necromantic lamps even more strongly:

If someone were to make a death head from some material, empty within, its eyes hollow, and so too its nose and the gaping grin of its mouth, and then rubbed all of these concavities with a strip of paper soaked in oil, and were then to put it [inside the machine] and take away the lamp: then, without doubt, he will see an incredible spectacle – one which cannot be described.<sup>23</sup>

He seems here to allude to one of the lamps in pseudo-Albertus (“to put a death’s head on every man in the room”). And again he recalls the typical instruction which accompanied the magical illusion, to remove any other, ordinary lamp. The “paper soaked in oil” with which he prepares the death’s head may even be a sly reference to the wick of the lamp he hoped to emulate mechanically and optically.

In constructing his marvelous illusions, Kircher was quite knowingly returning to the spirit of Anaxilaus’s lamps: the *appearance* of sorcery without *participation* in magic (though differing from him, of course, in what he considered to be magical). But he was also, quite unwittingly, bringing us full circle to what may have been Anaxilaus’s actual optical *method*, in which the

lamps were little more than mystifying props, and the astonishing illusions were achieved not through the flickering light of the lamp, but by smoke and mirrors.

## Notes

1 William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (1994).

2 For an analysis of the choices made by a compiler of a medieval book of secrets, see Robert Goulding, “Deceiving the Senses in the Thirteenth Century: Trickery and Illusion in the Secretum Philosophorum” in *Magic and the Classical Tradition*, ed. Charles S. F. Burnett and William F. Ryan, Warburg Institute Colloquia 7, Warburg Institute, London (2006), pp. 135-162.

3 Edgar Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India*, T. Fisher Unwin, London (1912), pp. 97-9.

4 This paper was originally presented in a Societas Magica session in Kalamazoo, that was devoted to “Magic that Works, Magic that Doesn’t.” Lamp experiments occupy both categories in a problematic way, as I discuss below.

5 On Anaxilaus and his and others’ *paignia*, see Matthew W. Dickie, “The learned magician and the collection and transmission of magical lore” in *The world of ancient magic*, ed. David R. Jordan, Hugo Montgomery, and Einar Thomassen, Papers from the first International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4-8 May 1997, Bergen (1999), pp. 163-93. A collection of the surviving fragments of Anaxilaus’s work is found in Max Wellmann, “Die *PHYSIKA* des Bolos Demokritos und der Magier Anaxilaos aus Larissa,” *Abhandlungen der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Philosophische-historische Klasse 7* (1928), pp. 77-80.

6 Pliny, *Natural History* 28.181.

7 Pliny, *Natural History* 32.141

8 Pliny, *Natural History* 35.175.

9 For other symposium *paignia*, see *PGM* VII.167-85. There is a lamp illusion very similar to Anaxilaus’s horse and donkey lamp at *PGM* XIb.1-5.

10 These examples are taken from Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and magicians in the Greco-Roman world*, Routledge, London (2001), p. 173.

11 Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I.13.

12 Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* IV.32. See Dickie, *Magic and magicians in the Greco-Roman world*, p. 219.

13 Hero [Heron] Alexandrinus, *Mechanica et catoptrica*, in *Opera quae supersunt omnia* II.1, Teubner, Leipzig (1900). L. Nix and W. Schmidt, (eds). *Catoptrica* is at pp. 316-65. See *Catoptrica*, XVIII (p. 358). Another trick attributed to Anaxilaus has the effect of making one’s wife appear to herself to have the head of an ass. (Wellmann, “Die *PHYSIKA* des Bolos Demokritos und der Magier Anaxilaos aus Larissa,” p. 80). The ostensible method is to rub the mirror with ass’s tears; but the effect is quite identical to the trick which Hero performs simply with plane mirrors. Hippolytus records that mirrors were often used by unscrupulous magicians, particularly in their fraudulent set-piece of “drawing down the moon.”

14 David E. Pingree, “Plato’s Hermetic Book of the Cow” in *Il neoplatonismo nel rinascimento*, ed. Pietro Prini, pp. 133-45, Istituto della enciclopedia italiana (1993); Pingree, “From Hermes to Jabir and the Book of the Cow” in *Magic and the Classical Tradition*, ed. Charles S. F. Burnett and William F. Ryan, Warburg Institute Colloquia 7, Warburg Institute, London (2006), pp. 19-28; William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2004), pp. 177-81; Sophie Page, *Magic at St Augustine’s, Canterbury, in the late*



*middle ages*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Warburg Institute, University of London (2000), Chapter 3: “The Magical Use of Monstrous Creations.”

15 See Manfred Ullmann, *Islamic Medicine*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh (1978), pp. 74-5. An Arabic text recording these symptoms: Ishaq ibn ‘Imran, *Maqala fi l-malihuliya (Abhandlung über die Melancholie)*, Helmut Buske Verlag, Hamburg (1977), pp. 120-123. It should also be noted that most ancient and Arabic doctors thought that epilepsy developed out of melancholy – and many other experiments of the *Liber vacce* are intended explicitly to induce epilepsy.

16 William of Auvergne, *De universo*

II.3.22 (col. 1059 of his *Opera omnia*, Paris, 1674).

17 The only account, so far as I know, of someone trying one of the classical lamp experiments is in the seventeenth-century picaresque novel *Le page disgracié*, by Tristan l’Hermite (pp. 54-6 of the edition by Jacques Prévot (Paris, 1994). The hero attempts to make a lamp (from pseudo-Albertus) that makes bystanders appear to be corpses – with a farcical outcome, when his ancient, moribund tutor arrives to save him from the fire and is mistaken for an apparition. I am grateful to Eileen Reeves for this reference.

18 Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna lucis et umbrae, Ars magna lucis et umbrae in decem libros digesta*. Rome, 1646. Kircher’s discussion of the lamps is at

pp. 719 ff, in a section entitled “Whether (as Anaxilaus, Albertus and della Porta assert) a house can be made to appear to be filled with serpents, and whether men can be transformed into an animal by the lighting of a lamp, and by means of its illumination.”

19 Kircher, *Ars magna lucis*, pp. 717-8.

20 Kircher, *Ars magna lucis*, p. 719.

21 Kircher, *Ars magna lucis*, p. 784.

22 Cornelius Agrippa, in his *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*, also classifies the ancient lamp illusions as *praestigia* (sig. K1 of the Cologne, 1584 edition).

23 Kircher, *Ars magna lucis*, p. 784.

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## Smoke and Mirrors: Belief, Deception, and Controversies about Greek Oracles

*Loren Pankratz, Ph.D., was a Consultation Psychologist at the Portland VA Medical Center and a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Oregon Health Sciences University. A specialist in patients who deceive (including Munchausen syndrome and its variations), he now maintains an independent consulting practice, writes, and collects books that chronicle the history of deception and mistaken ideas. For over thirty years, his research has focused on difficult and deceptive patients.*

A few years ago, I noticed that most of the mothers referred to me for evaluation of Munchausen syndrome by proxy were falsely accused. A spate of recent television dramas has popularized this syndrome in which mothers create illnesses in their children as a way of gaining attention (by proxy) in the medical setting. Once a pediatrician or child protective worker views a mother through the lens of this exotic diagnosis, that mother can quickly become entangled in a destructive legal net with no apparent means of escape. I have proposed that a failure to rule out alternative explanations of the mother’s behavior has the potential to

be as harmful as the syndrome itself.<sup>1</sup> The smoke of a belief system can hide reality and distort perception as surely as those curved mirrors in a funhouse.

Munchausen syndrome by proxy was originally based on only two case studies.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent authors suggested possible “warning signs” that might help clinicians identify these mothers in a more timely way. It troubled me how easily these ambiguous warning signs were viewed as evidence for the evil intentions of mothers. Sometimes belief systems need to have their underlying assumptions challenged.

For example, in 1686 Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle published *The history of oracles*<sup>3</sup> in France. Fontenelle argued that the Greek oracles did not involve consorting with devils, and, further, that the oracles did not end at the birth of Christ, challenging historical facts as well as beliefs still active in the imagination of many in France at that time.

I know that historians often disdain using past events as commentary on current issues. However, I could not help but feel a kinship with Fontenelle’s attempt to address a belief

Loren Pankratz, Ph.D.

## Smoke and Mirrors cont'd

system going back as far as the church fathers. I understood Fontenelle's fight against a belief in demons because of my efforts to get people to stop automatically construing mothers as dangerously deceptive. But there is more here than the template I have laid upon this story.

## Oracles and Demons

Because his ideas were still contrary to much popular as well as learned belief, the responses to Fontenelle—at least those that I have found—are filled with bitter protest. It was widely believed that demons were necessary for the success of oracles. Thus, Beaumont insisted that priests would never be able to open sealed messages without the assistance of satanic forces.<sup>4</sup> Others found it inconceivable that Fontenelle could question the early church fathers.<sup>5</sup> St. Athanasius, for example, had said that making the sign of the cross caused the devils to “fly away affrightened,” ending the power of oracles. Similarly, St. Chrysostom said that the bones of St. Babylas had caused the oracle of Apollo at Daphne, a suburb of Antioch, to be struck dumb at once.<sup>6</sup>

Fontenelle reminded his readers that scriptures do not indicate whether demons speak through animated statues or not, so people were free to make up their own minds. He insisted that he

would be obliged to protect himself from deception if he were to hear a statue speak and not simply accept the idea that demons were the responsible agent. And, indeed, if one found a speaking tube within the statue,<sup>7</sup> then Cyprian's belief that demons lurk within these statues should be reconsidered. Likewise, secret rooms and passages, not demons, allowed priests access to questions left inside a locked room. And, yes, Fontenelle said that priests could surreptitiously open sealed envelopes without the assistance of devils.<sup>8</sup>

## Oracles, Demons, and the Delphi Chamber of Commerce Development Plan

Fontenelle went beyond the simple exposure of tricks to explain the larger process of consulting oracles. He provided a perceptive analysis of the interaction between consumer and provider of a needed service. The oracle of Delphi, for example, was a fair distance from major metropolitan areas, so the seeker had to invest considerable effort in his journey. His arrival would be an occasion for shock and awe when confronted by Delphi's natural beauty, the caves, the theater, the pictures of Hades on the temple walls, and more than 500 statues.<sup>9</sup>

Delphi had spas, healing centers, and, of course, the obligatory gift shops. The visitors' warm welcome was part

of a larger plan. Fontenelle pointed out that Delphi, because of its isolation, had only one economic basis: the oracle. Therefore, the cooperation of everyone was required to assure its reputation. Small talk at the market would be passed to the priest. Seekers could scarcely withhold their hopes and fears, goals and expectations. Thus, it was hardly necessary to open the sealed message of a skeptic if its content had already been blabbed to the innkeeper.

Moreover, the oracle employed spies in the major cities so as to be able to report back to Delphi the political winds, the aspirations of politicians, and the desires of the populace. Guides managed the portage of pilgrims to Delphi, but they also transported secrets. The Delphic oracle was an integral part of Greek cultural life, and as such it maintained enormous power over citizens in a wide geographic region. The city of Delphi established a program to fulfill those expectations by utilizing the latest technologies of legerdemain and industrial espionage to ensure its success.

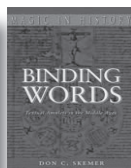
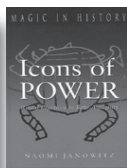
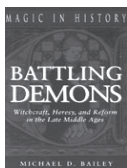
And for centuries, it worked.<sup>10</sup>

## Oracles as a Platform to Question Demonology

Fontenelle's naturalistic explanations eliminated the need for an appeal to demons. Instead of leaving this

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## Announcement

It has been decided by the press in collaboration with the editors that the Journal *Magic Ritual and Witchcraft* will not, as previously planned, go quarterly in 2007, but will remain semiannual for one more year. This means that Societas Magica dues rates for 2007 for those wishing to subscribe to the journal will remain \$35.00 as in 2006.

Those who have already paid at the higher rate for 2007 will be contacted regarding a refund for the excess payment.



## Smoke and Mirrors cont'd

point unstated, he made an indirect, but not subtle, attack on the reality of demons. For that reason, if for no other, his work deserves to be studied and remembered. Earlier skeptics, like Johann Weyer, had argued that there were no witches and, therefore, no bewitching. However, Weyer did not challenge the existence of demons.<sup>11</sup> And although Reginald Scot had offered naturalistic explanations of witchcraft in 1584,<sup>12</sup> Stuart Clark has said Scot's ideas "were far too subversive of prevailing intellectual patterns and habits of mind and it was more than a century before they began to gain currency."<sup>13</sup> King James I was so offended by Scot's non-theological explanation of witchcraft that he ordered the book to be burned and also expended considerable effort to publish a rebuttal.<sup>14</sup>

Fontenelle tackled the issues raised by Scot from a different angle. Fontenelle was careful not to deny specifically the existence of demons but instead stated that most situations in which apparent miracles were performed in the pagan world could be explained in other ways. He did not directly attack the Christian belief in

demons; however, he did venture to say that Christians were foolish to use Plato's ideas as a platform from which to declare that demons existed, because some of Plato's demons were characterized by love.<sup>15</sup> Since no decent Christian believed that demons could show love, Christians should not be so eager to believe in demons just because Plato said they existed. Fontenelle reminded his readers that Christians' credulity resulted in their endorsing false books and biographies. So what assurances do we have, asked Fontenelle, that the historians who discussed oracles were not prejudiced, credulous, misinformed, or negligent?<sup>16</sup> He made a strong case that his readers should give up the idea of demons.

## Deception and Belief

The spectrum of oracular trickery as described by Fontenelle has been revisited by many later writers. In the nineteenth century, Brewster<sup>17</sup> and Salvette<sup>18</sup> described an astonishing array of early mechanical contrivances and illusions that befuddled the masses. Complex pneumatic and hydraulic devices designed for "amazement and alarm" were used in early Greek ora-

cles and theaters.<sup>19</sup> Hopkins provided illustrations of miraculous lamps, vessels, altars, automata, and even a coin-activated vending machine used 100 years before Christ.<sup>20</sup> The ancient secrets of firewalking are sufficiently unknown so that modern charlatans can still use the same methods to astonish their followers.<sup>21</sup>

Sir David Brewster noted that "The prince, the priest, and the sage were leagued in a dark conspiracy to deceive and enslave their species."<sup>22</sup> Brewster, like Reginald Scot, understood that ingenious contrivances and cozenage can reinforce superstition and fear. And so can belief systems. Although the secularized world today does not support a belief in demons, we are sometimes still trapped in belief systems that encourage moral blame in the context of unusual occurrences. Witchcraft provided an explanation for events not otherwise understood, and Munchausen syndrome by proxy provides an understanding of why a child has unexplainable symptoms. It is possible for a mother to create an illness in her child, but other possibilities must be ruled out. Science and clinical medicine advance

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# Notes and Queries

## Witches on Top: Magic, Power, and Imagination in the Art of Early Modern Italy

Guy Tal

*A doctoral thesis under the supervision of Prof. Bruce Cole in the Department of the History of Art, Indiana University at Bloomington, July 2006. Currently Guy Tal is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Indiana University.*

This dissertation probes the dark side in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque art by examining images of witchcraft. While these images may seem to deviate from the humanist

and rationalist aura ascribed to early modern Italy, they represent a unique interpretive vector for enriching our understanding of the surprisingly interconnected worlds of humanism and witchcraft. Perceiving witchcraft as an intellectual topos rather than a frivolous wonder, artists embedded in the images allegories, metaphors, social concerns, and cultural experiences. The images constitute an original commentary on early modern thought about witchcraft, including the multifaceted stereotype of the witch and debates emerging from witchcraft discourses. At the same time, this study delves into the reciprocity between art and witchcraft. Art reinforces the act of seeing in witchcraft, while witchcraft enacts metaphors of artistic

## Smoke and Mirrors cont'd

when hypotheses are challenged and alternative possibilities are seriously considered. How are we to know, otherwise, that the mother is not merely overwhelmed by her fears or that her child does not have a still undiagnosed disorder?

Fontenelle's work demonstrates how a belief in demons encouraged an explanation for the workings of oracles. His work is immediately compelling because we have changed our conceptual framework. This historical movement reminds us of the importance of continually monitoring our own assumptions and challenging the confidence of our conclusions. There are mothers who wonder how they ever got into so much trouble just by being concerned about the health of their children. They find themselves not in a house of mirrors but the house of horrors.

### Notes

1 Pankratz L. Persistent problems with the Munchausen syndrome by proxy label. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, 2006; 34: 90-95.

2 Meadow R. Munchausen syndrome by proxy: The hinterland of child abuse. *Lancet*, 1977; 2: 343-345.

3 de Fontenelle, M. *The history of oracles in two dissertations*. Glasgow: R. Urie, 1753. Modern edition: Fontenelle, Bernard le Bovier de. *Histoire*

*des oracles*, ed. Louis Maigrion, Paris: Didier, 1908. References here are to the 1753 English translation.

4 Beaumont J. *Gleanings of antiquities*. London: J. Roberts, 1724

5 A Priest of the Church of England. *An answer to Mr. de Fontenelle's History of oracles*. London: Clements, 1709. Beaumont identified the anonymous Church of England priest as Father Baltus, a Dominican.

6 Middleton, C. *A free inquiry into the miraculous powers*. London: Manby and Cox, 1749, 3rd ed. p. 152.

7 Kircher's museum had displayed a "Delphic Oracle" statue that delivered messages through a speaking trumpet. See: Findlen P. *Possessing nature: Museums, collecting, and scientific culture in early modern Italy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 107.

8 Fontenelle (cited above, note 3) p. 75.

9 On the caves and statues, see Fontenelle, pp. 65 and 107 respectively. In addition, on natural beauty and theater, see Flaceliere R. *Greek oracles*. New York: Norton, 1965, p. 33, and plate 11. On pictures of Hades, see Luck G.

*Arcana Mundi: Magic and the occult in the Greek and Roman worlds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985, p. 188.

10 Fontenelle's discussion of the oracle in the economy in Delphi is scattered throughout his argument.

11 Weyer, Johann. *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiss libri sex*. (Basil, 1583), trans. John Shea. *Witches, devils, and doctors in the*

*Renaissance*. Tempe AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998.

12 Scot R. *The discoverie of witchcraft*. London: William Brome, 1584.

13 Clark S. *Thinking with demons: the idea of witchcraft in early modern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 212.

14 James I. *The workes of the most high and mightie prince, Iames*. London: Robert Barker and Iohn Bill, 1616, pp. 94-147.

15 Fontenelle, p. 33.

16 Fontenelle, p. 15.

17 Brewster D. *Letters on natural magic*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1839.

18 Salverte E. *The philosophy of magic prodigies and apparent miracles*. London: Richard Bentley, 1846.

19 Hero of Alexandria. *The pneumatics of Hero of Alexandria*. London: Charles Whittingham, 1851. See also, Ewbank T. *A descriptive and historical account of hydraulic and other machines for raising water*. New York: Bangs, Platt & Co., 1850.

20 Hopkins A. A. *Magic: Stage illusions and scientific diversions including trick photography*. New York: Munn, 1898.

21 Pankratz L. Fire walking and the persistence of charlatans. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 1988; 31: 291-298.

22 Brewster, p. 14.

## Witches on Top cont'd

creation. The images reflect witchcraft not only as a topos but also as a mode of representation characterized by inconstancy, deception, and hybridity.

Chapter 1 establishes the stereotypes of the magic practitioners—the old witch, the young sorceress, and the male necromancer—through Salvatore Rosa's series of four tondi. By employing visual sources, artistic concepts, and pictorial language, Rosa composed these stereotypes upon parameters of authority, expertise, and appearance. The two subsequent chap-

ters add a male victim to the domain of witches and place the witch on top of him. Chapter 2 focuses upon a provocatively sexual etching designed by Parmigianino of a witch riding on an enormous phallus. By linking the image to witchcraft discourses, I explore its cultural and social implications and its ambiguous tone of gravity and humor. The engraving *Lo stregozzo* by Marcantonio Raimondi or Agostino Veneziano examined in Chapter 3 also displays a witch dominating a subservient man, yet their relationship stimulates another layer of reading: a grid of metaphors that juxtaposes

art with witchcraft. This comparison emerges from the premise that both the artist and the witch rival nature by inventing new images, albeit a mere illusion. By depicting the witch and her demonic craft, the artist underlines his divine art and his dexterity in creating create images generated by his imagination. The power of the witch built in the three chapters evaporates in Chapter 4. It shows how artists like Alessandro Allori, Angelo Caroselli, and Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione express their refutation of the belief in witchcraft by portraying the mythological sorceress Circe in melancholy.