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Witchcraft, Demonic Possession and Exorcism The Problem of Evidence in Two Shakespearean Plays

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Abstract

Between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the crime of witchcraft was viewed with grave concern. A series of acts were passed with the aim of reinforcing the law; however, this did not mitigate the social alarm, but if anything, increased the number of denunciations, trials and convictions. Finding proof was complex, and this led to many doubts as to the genuineness of the phenomena and the reliability of justice. Many books, pamphlets and narratives regarding these issues were published, satisfying popular curiosity and triggering dramatic creativity. Considering these findings, the article investigates the impact of early criminography on the representation of witchcraft, demonic possession due to bewitching and exorcism in Shakespeare's plays. The focus is on the scenes of the dark room in *Twelfth Night* and the mock trial in *King Lear*, two examples of the theatricalization of the search for proof closely interwoven with religious, medical and political discourses that circulated in early modern England.

Keywords: *Criminography, Demonic Possession, Evidence, Shakespeare, Witchcraft*

1. Introduction

The passage from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century marked a period of turmoil for the English juridical system due to a substantial reform that involved the doctrine of evidence, an issue that came to the fore in the mid-sixteenth century (Darr 2011, 15). The lack of a set of rules on the admissibility of proof led people to question the reliability of justice, and this had a definite impact on the pursuit of witchcraft, a felony that was hard to prove and control. This increasing apprehension is testified by the fact that during the Tudor period a series of acts were passed strengthening the law that punished those people

who ‘use practice or exercise any Invocations or Conjuracions of evil and wicked Spirites ... or exercise any Witchcrafter Enchantment Charme or Sorcerie’ that might cause any kind of offence (The Witchcraft Act, 1563; 5 Eliz. I, c.16; reproduced in Newton and Bath 2008, 234).¹ This alarm was shared by James VI of Scotland, whose treatise *Daemonologie* appeared in 1597, and was twice reprinted after he acceded to the throne of England in 1603. Another *Witchcraft Act* was passed in 1604 (1 Jas I, c. 12), reinforcing the previous Elizabethan statutes from 1563, confirming the death penalty and excluding the benefit of clergy, which implied that there was no room for lenient punishment when there was a conviction (237).

Instead of preventing what was perceived as a crime, the strictness of the law increased the social alarm and more people than ever were suspected of practising sorcery. Furthermore, the difficulties in obtaining and interpreting the evidence, and the high degree of uncertainty in the trials, made witchcraft one of the most feared crimes, since not only did people dread being hurt or demonically possessed as a consequence of witchcraft, but also being accused of sorcery, because mere gossip in the neighbourhood could lead to a conviction. The concern to find witches meant that a mere coincidence could be regarded as reliable proof of guilt. A mumbled or whispered phrase was interpreted as the cause of the death of a cow or a child or inexplicable fits.

Curiosity about these phenomena also led to an increase in narratives regarding extraordinary stories reported through the accounts of witnesses, confessions and interrogations delivered before the courts of justice. This heterogeneous corpus of texts is not easy to categorize: their rhetoric appears to be gleaned from demonology treatises, including those circulating on the continent such as *Malleus Maleficarum* by the Dominican inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger, first published in 1487, and *De la Démonomanie des Sorciers* by the French philosopher and jurist Jean Bodin in 1580. As there are no formal legal records of these trials, these narratives are valuable historical sources for understanding how these crimes were conceived and proved before a judge (Alyagon Darr 2011, 19). Moreover, the Elizabethan playwrights represented on stage enthralling stories inspired by the most famous cases that circulated through various forms of early criminography. This article aims to investigate how Shakespeare theatricalised this wide array of religious, legal, medical and political discourses pivoting on witchcraft and possession, not only to indulge the audience’s curiosity but also to raise an issue that recurs in his plays: the unreliability of the juridical system and in particular of the evidentiary procedure. Indeed, the complexity of establishing the authenticity of these phenomena led to debate on the worrying weakness of the legal system in the field of evidence. After discussing the early modern conception of evidence, this article will focus on the scene of the dark room in *Twelfth Night* and that of the mock trial in *King Lear*, which fully convey the increasing scepticism about both these phenomena and the reliability of justice.

2. *The Question of Proof in the Field of Witchcraft: Not Only a Legal Issue*

In the early modern period, witchcraft was perceived as the most dangerous act of subversion against the body politic. The ‘organological’ concept of government survived in England, where the king was seen as the head of the body politic, visually represented by the crown (Kantorowicz 1997, 382). Royal power ‘strangely tormented’ (Brownlow 1993, 56; Almond

¹ <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000017915519&view=1up&cseq=536&q1=witchcraft>>, accessed 1 February 2021.

2004, 249) was hereditarily transmitted by divine right, and the order of the state was conceived as a hierarchical system based on rules rooted in natural law and the law of God. Hence, not only was a felony a transgression of the common law, but also an act of aggression against God, the law of nature and the monarch. In this idea of the state, modelled on principles of geometrical symmetries, the body of the condemned person, as Foucault points out, 'represents the symmetrical, inverted figure of the king' (1977, 29). While the monarch epitomised virtue and order, the criminal embodied vice and disorder (Ascari 2016, 85-87). The witch was the most feared among criminals because of the secret agreement with the devil: if the monarch was 'the lieutenant' of God, as King James I claims in *The True Laws of Free Monarchies* (1996, 56-57), the witch was Satan's emissary who aimed at subverting the order of the body politic. All this had an impact on the juridical and social plane since the authorities targeted the crime of witchcraft as the most threatening for the stability of the realm; furthermore, the discourses on this issue led people to live in such a state of terror that they checked any suspect behaviour.

Even though the evidentiary procedure was evolving into a more coherent set of rules, as far as witchcraft was concerned, the problem of proof persisted, as emerges from the Elizabethan and Jacobean statutes where the lawmakers 'leave it unclear whether witchcraft is essentially a mental, inward crime – consisting in the secret allegiance to the evil powers – or whether it is prosecuted because, like murder or theft, it ruins the lives and properties of others' (Maus 1991, 33). The crux lay in the fact that the crime of witchcraft was in the pact with the devil since, according to demonologists and theologians, it marked the witch's renunciation of God and submission to Satan (Sharpe 2000, 76). The harmful actions perpetrated by the felon were considered to be the symptoms of this felony, that is " 'overt acts' " that evidenced the secret criminal agreement (the expression is quoted by Maus 1991, 35). Moreover, there was the belief that the offences could be perpetrated secretly through an invisible power, even if the felon was absent from the crime scene (Darr 2011, 32). All this led to an ambiguous treatment of these cases in trials. In England, while the bench's task was " 'finding the law' " on the grounds of statutes and precedents, the jury had to " 'find fact' " (Maus 1991, 33): that is, to collect the necessary knowledge about the case that would contribute to reaching the verdict. In the case of witchcraft, it being impossible to have direct proof of the 'facts', the trial pivoted on the search for 'the symptom of the crime' (34) and then in discovering the 'inward truth' (42) hidden in the felon's mind through inductive reasoning. What were these 'overt acts' in the case of witchcraft? What could be considered a symptom? The mystery that surrounded this felony led people to be suspicious of a mumbled or a whispered word, which became in the court's eyes the cause of inexplicable diseases or mysterious and unpleasant events (Gibson 1999, 77). The alleged witch could be arrested on the basis of 'hearsay information, speculation, indication and even gossip', and the suspects could be brought before the judge by a constable or even by their neighbours (Darr 2011, 37). Witchcraft was associated with the 'female sphere': indeed, according to the records of the local assizes, women were often involved in fierce domestic arguments (Sharpe 2000, 68-69 and 2013, 110). The suspect was an easy target of defamation since the stereotyped image of the alleged witch was that of an old, poor, homeless, needy woman subject to moral censure who had generally already been labelled by the members of the community. This 'fame' broke out into persecution and finally into an indictment. In a nutshell, these women were depicted as unrespectable outcasts who acted maliciously either because involved in factional conflict with their neighbourhood, or with the mere intent to harm.

The high level of anxiety induced by the tightening of the law and the discourse on witchcraft led to an increase in accusations because any harmful event, from the death of a relative to that of an animal, could be seen as the consequence of a spell. The denial of charity,

such as food or a bowl of milk, or the refusal to trade, were believed to be motives for a witch's attack. If such arguments brought down the witch's curse, and if those people who had refused to give alms suffered a tragic event, this could be used as evidence of having been possessed by a wicked spirit (Gibson 1999, 84-90). The reconstruction of the story of the bewitching was based on a very loose chain of cause-effect links, because a mere sequence of coincidences could be considered as the causal nexus between the suspected witch and the harm done. Moreover, as emerges from early modern 'providential fictions', the discovery of evidence that led to the apprehension of a felon was often seen as resulting from a series of coincidences orchestrated by God (Ascari 2011, 114; see also Ascari 2007, 26-30).

During the trial, the judge's examination aimed firstly at evidencing the existence of the pact with the devil, which also marked the starting point from which to trace a coherent narrative of the crime (Gibson 1999, 15). The trial consisted of a preliminary stage that took place before the Justice of the Peace, who examined the alleged witch through oral inquiry and physical observation. Questions, such as 'How did you become a witch?' or 'From whom did you learn your witchcraft?' aimed to obtain a confession while searching for marks on the suspect's body aimed to prove collusion with the devil and an intimate relationship with 'evil and wicked spirits' personified in a familiar, often in the form of an animal, or imps (Darr 2011, 94). Particular attention was paid to factual proofs, also acquired through empirical tests and experiments, such as the swimming test or the scratching of the witch's body in the hope of obtaining relief for the bewitched victim of possession (152). However, even if proof was not found, mere suspicion sufficed to start the trial before the assize, where an additional examination then took place.

Confession was considered the most reliable evidence because the story was confirmed by the witch herself. Unlike on the continent, in England torture was formally illegal because it was considered to be against the common law. Nevertheless, it was used as a method of obtaining information for political repression; it was a sort of 'official terrorism', so, especially after the excommunication of Queen Elizabeth in 1570, Catholics were targeted. Furthermore, according to Hanson, torture was extended to other felonies during James I's reign (1991, 53). Hence, even if in cases of witchcraft torture was not officially applied, some other kind of pressure spurred the accused to confess to causing an offence through sorcery and this admission was considered lawful evidence for a death penalty. Michael Dalton's *The Country Justice*, a how-to manual for Justices of Peace published in 1618, gives much information on the procedure of the local assizes and intriguing insights into the mentality of early modern judges. Dalton explains that if the witch reacts to someone's accusation saying 'You should have let me alone then' or 'I have not hurt you as yet', she is implicitly confessing to having a harmful devilish power (1727, 514). He also specifies that 'Their own voluntary confession (which exceeds all other Evidence) of the Hurt they have done, or of the Giving of their Souls to the Devil, and of the Spirits which they have, how many, how they call them, and how they came by them' (515). Hence, in the case of *implicit* confession, the judge interpreted the words of the suspect with a high degree of discretion. If the witch voluntarily narrated her story, the court and the community were morally and legally satisfied, and there was no further investigation because it was implied that she was sincere and there was no risk of convicting an innocent person (Darr 2011, 52 and 198).

However, scepticism arose as to the reliability of the witches' voluntary confessions. Reginald Scot attempted to shed light on these phenomena in his treatise *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* published in 1584. He aimed at restoring the 'proper religious faith' and to demonstrate that demonic possession and witchcraft were mere fantasies due to a distorted use of language, or more properly to an error in interpreting the language of the Scriptures (Greenblatt 1994, 24-

25). As a matter of fact, the circulation of continental treatises such as *Malleus Maleficarum* and Bodin's *De la Démonomanie des Sorciers* introduced to England theories and practices that were not officially recognized, in particular regarding the search for the devil's mark on the witches' bodies, experiments and interrogations (Darr 2011, 95). It seems that Elizabeth I, influenced by Bodin, ordered the magistrate Brian Darcy to persecute all the witches of the realm (Almond 2011, 17-19). In this period England was shocked by several striking stories of demonic possession reported in impressive narratives. One of the most shocking cases of persecution was that in St Osyth village in 1582, narrated by Darcy in *A True and Just Recorde of the Information, Examination and Confession of all the Witches, taken at S. Oses in the Countie of Essex: Whereof some were Executed and other some Entreated according to the Determination of Lawe* (Almond 2011, 19). However, there are some doubts about the truthfulness of this trial since there are no reports on the punishment of the alleged witches (Gibson 2000, 73). Despite this, *A True and Just Report* is particularly interesting for being deeply imbued with Bodin's thoughts about confession. As Almond points out, Jean Bodin, suggested that 'one must however always promise impunity, and reduce the penalty of those who will confess without torture, and who will denounce their associates' (2011, 42). As emerges from *A True and Just Report*, Darcy asked the alleged witch Ursley Kempe to confess to having four spirits so as to obtain a lenient punishment: 'Note, it is to bee considered, that saide Ursley Kempe in this her confession hath uttered many things well approved and confessed to bee most true: And that shee was brought thereunto by hope of favour' (Gibson 2000, 88). This strategy was possibly applied in other cases in England so that the accused confessed with the hope of being released or of obtaining merciful treatment from the bench. Scot understood all the limits of these practices, which resulted in extorting a confession: 'these old women being daunted with authoritie, circumvented with guile, constrained by force, compelled by feare, inducted by error, and deceived by ignorance, doo fall into such credulitie, and so are brought unto these absurd confessions' (1886, 40). Hence, he believed that in these cases additional proof was necessary, because mere presumption did not suffice for conviction: 'In criminall cases or touching life, we must not absolutelie stand to the confession of the accused partie: but in these matters proofes must be brought more cleare than the light it selfe. And in this crime no bodie must be condemned upon presumptions' (54-55).

In summary, according to Scot, the voluntary confessions, even if given without torture, appeared more as the result of psychological pressure than as a conscious admission of guilt. The alleged witch was persuaded to answer questions formulated according to a standard pattern tailored to discourses on the crime of witchcraft. As a matter of fact, the stories of witches appear to be following a standard script: the accused, being compelled to answer insistent questions entrenched in early modern discourse on witchcraft, in the end confessed to being a witch as a result of a pact with the devil. As Gibson points out,

... a narrative pattern stressing motive satisfies the demands of the accuser, the legal system, and the pamphleteer and his reader. Both the accuser who, presumably freely, offered the story, and the legal system, which shaped it by questioning, needed a story which would be readily understood in examinations and informations by a jury, as showing a possible motive for the crime and thus a possible proof that it had occurred. (1999, 78)

Hence, the crime of witchcraft appears as a cultural construct of the authorities rooted in a liminal area where religious, medical, legal and political discourses overlapped. Considering that the centre of the English trial consisted in 'gathering and in interpreting evidence' (Maus 1991, 33), the body of the witch became the object of the public inquiry that, beginning from her

external appearance, aimed at discovering the secrets in her mind, and the voluntary confession too appeared to onlookers as the unequivocal exteriorisation of the inner truth.

3. *The Case of Demonic Possession Due to Bewitching*

As emerges from the Elizabethan and Stuart acts, conjuration, witchcraft and dealing with wicked spirits were considered to be the causes of various offences that are interestingly described in early modern criminography. Many of them concerned the fits provoked by demonic possession due to bewitching because it was widely believed that a witch could introduce a devilish spirit into the victim's body with a spell. These texts are particularly illuminating because they show that the story of the witch was interwoven with that of the alleged victim according to a stereotyped narrative pattern. All started with an inexplicable disease, a general sickness that increased in intensity with a series of weird phenomena such as swallowing, fits, and finally with vomiting of 'foreign objects', signally pins (Sharpe 2000, 44), which was believed to be one of the significant symptoms of possession. When the suffering grew, so did the number of curious onlookers who wanted to observe the convulsions and contortions of the possessed body. If none of the remedies adopted alleviated the sufferings, the case was classified as demonic possession or bewitching by sorcery, and the intervention of an exorcist was required. Moreover, the alleged victim was asked to speculate on the identity of the bewitcher since there was always the suspicion that possession was provoked by an enchantment perpetrated by sorcery more than by the direct intervention of Satan (Levack 1996, 1620; Sharpe 2000, 43; Almond 2004, 240-330). Hence, two different trials took place: the exorcism, held by the priest so as to cast away the devil from the body of the victim, and the trial held by a judge to punish the felon. However, considering that the fits were conceived as the proof of the crime of witchcraft, the body of the alleged possessed was examined by a commission of physicians who had to ascertain if the spasms were due to natural or supernatural causes.

As we can see in early criminography, the observation of the victim's body was held in the liminal zone where medical, religious and legal discourses merged. The diagnosis of the convulsions led to strenuous debates between the exorcists, the physicians and the judges who were involved in the trial as in the famous trial of Mary Glover that took place in 1602. Her story is narrated in *A True and Brief report, of the grievous vexation by Satan, of Mary Glover*, published in 1603 by John Swan, her exorcist who firmly believed that the fits were due to bewitching. In this narrative he reported that in Mary there 'succeeded a heaving or swelling in the belly, breast and throat' and that 'Her eyes were shut, her belly greatly swollen and after that, her breast swelling up, her throat swelling' (Almond 2004, 304 and 314). The girl was examined by a commission of physicians including Edward Jorden, who subsequently, spurred by this case, wrote in 1603 *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (Brownlow 1993, 63; Sharpe 2000, 151). This treatise is an interesting and illuminating resource that reveals early-modern medical knowledge in the field of hysteria and it is proof of an incipient awareness that some symptoms considered to be evidence of demonic possession were actually due to some kind of mental disease. In England, hysteria, or *passio hysterica*, was also named 'suffocation of the mother' or 'mother' because it was associated with the female body; moreover, one of the symptoms observed was a feeling of suffocation a 'choking in the throat' (Jorden 1603, 5) that inexpert physicians, as Jorden points out, mistook for demonic possession making 'Magicall and Metaphysical speculations' (4). Interestingly, according to Jorden, *passio hysterica* also leads to the deterioration of the mental faculties, which he calls 'animall faculties', that is all those skills 'whereby we do understand, judge, and remember things that are profitable or hurtfull unto us'

(D3v). He points out that these mental conditions can lead people to remember things that are not real and show symptoms that generally are observed in 'those fools which we call naturals, in mad men, in melancholike men, in those that are furious, in such as do dote, in such as are distracted through love, feare, grieve joye, anger, hatred &c.' (E1v). Mary Glover's case was one of the most controversial because, while Jorden diagnosed her disease as hysteria giving medical evidence in favour of the woman accused of having brought about the possession, the other physicians of the commission believed the convulsions had a supernatural cause and they were able to persuade the judge who finally convicted the accused witch (Sharpe 2000, 4 and 182-188; Almond 2004, 288).

There were many doubts on these cases of bewitching, partly because many people were found pretending to be the victim of enchantment for revenge, as in another striking and debated case, that of Anne Gunter. In 1605, the twenty-one-year old girl accused three women of sorcery but, because the examination during the trial at Abington did not prove the bewitchment, they were released. Edward Jorden, who was involved in this case too, believed that her fits were due neither to supernatural cause nor hysteria, but to fraud (Levack 1996, 1629-1630). However, her symptoms were so striking that she was received by King James I in 1605 in order to be observed, but on this occasion, she confessed to having been forced to perform the fits by her father to avenge himself on a rival family because of an old feud. In the end, both Ann and her father Brian Gunter were tried for fraud before the Star Chamber in February 1606 (Brownlow 1993, 65; Levack 1996, 1630; Sharpe 2000, 43-44). Nevertheless, many doubts still remain on Anne Gunter's case, especially if her father's manipulation was so significant, because the girl was mentally vulnerable (Sharpe 2000, 165).

These two stories are exemplary in showing the ambiguity that lingered around these phenomena and how the legal question could also become a medical case; they bear out Neumeier's argument that, in the early modern period the attention of the authorities shifted from religious and social to medical and legal discourses (2016, 33). The allegedly possessed and the witch appear to be kindred in being victims of a system aimed at controlling the order of the body politic. Reading the narratives, it emerges that both women might have been affected by some kind of disease or psychological fragility and that, pressed by the questions of the exorcist, the judges and the physicians, or manipulated by someone, finally deluded themselves that the devil possessed them or they were responsible for causing the sorcery. It seems that both of them unconsciously played a role, that of the possessed and that of the witch, following a script suggested by the texts that circulated on the issue at that time. The judge assembled a detailed account of the events that had occurred with a series of stereotyped questions addressed to the victim and the felon so as to create a coherent narrative to support the sentence; in the end the court's interest seems to be more the reconstruction of a credible story of witchcraft and bewitching suitable for satisfying people's religious and moral beliefs than the discovery of truth. In this overlapping of reality and imagination, the judicial procedure to find evidence for the truthfulness of these phenomena appears closer to the theatre than to a court of justice and both, the courtroom and the stage, seem to be kindred public arenas for investigating the most debated questions that afflicted early modern England.

4. *From Criminography to the Stage*

The ambiguity of these phenomena increased scepticism as to their cause and nature. It was hard to distinguish if they were due to natural or supernatural causes, if they were only theatrical representation or if the persons involved had deluded themselves that they were the protagonists

of a case of witchcraft. These accounts were so widespread as to become a point of reference not only for those who wanted to learn more of the issue but also for those who pretended to be bewitched or possessed by the devil to take advantage of popular credulity or to avenge themselves on someone (Shapiro 2016, 86). The case of Anne Gunter is a striking example of revenge orchestrated through the acquisition of information on the symptoms of demonic possession since, during the trial for fraud before the Star Chamber in 1606 Anne and her father confessed to having learned the details about the symptoms of possession from pamphlets, including such works as *The Most Strange and Admirable Discoverie of the Three Witches of Warboys: Arraigned, Conuicted, and Executed at the Last Assises at Huntington*, a text about the execution of three witches accused of bewitching the Throckmorton family of Warboys and other young people of the village, and *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, written by Samuel Harsnett, chaplain of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Sharpe 2000, 163; Shapiro 2016, 86-88).

The fraudulent cases of demonic possession and exorcism were seen as highly dangerous for the royal authority by the official Church of England, because they destabilised the order of the realm.² This question was not limited to religion but involved politics too because Elizabeth I was still fighting the Puritans, the most extreme party among the Protestants, and the Catholics. This religious and political feud was enflamed by a campaign against the credibility of both Catholics and Puritans, promoted by the Privy Council to safeguard the English monarch as head of the Anglican Church. Bancroft, who was Bishop of London and then Archbishop of Canterbury, and his chaplain Harsnett were the pivotal figures of this campaign, fought with combative pamphlets whose authorship was attributed to the cleric even though it was implied that the ghost co-author was the archbishop. The campaign reached its peak with the famous case of John Darrell, a puritan exorcist who was tried before the Ecclesiastical Court of High Commission and then imprisoned for fraudulent exorcism in 1599 (Brownlow 1993, 54). The question started when the significant number of demonic possessions resolved by Darrell's intervention raised the suspicion in Bancroft (Brownlow 1993, 337; Holmes 2008, 77).

The accusation was centred on the case of William Sommers, a young boy who in 1597 began to be "strangely tormented" (Brownlow 1993, 56; Almond 2004, 249), and was treated by Darrell. Then Sommers accused a woman of having bewitched him but, during the trial, pressured by the court, he confessed to having performed the symptoms on instructions from Darrell (Brownlow 1993, 58; Sharpe 2000, 148). As soon as the case ended in 1599, Harsnett, who was a member of the Ecclesiastical Court of High Commission, published the pamphlet *A Discovery of the Fraudulent Practises of John Darrell*, to stigmatise the falsity of Darrell's practices with ironic and satirical verve, revealing the tricks that he thought had been used to simulate demonic possession. Harsnett accused Darrell of "making religion pageant of Puppites", "a pure play" (Brownlow 1993, 59), a highly defamatory accusation since the Puritans looked on the theatre as 'the devil's playhouse' (Greenblatt 1988, 110). In 1603 Harsnett published another pamphlet, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, a report of a series of false exorcisms conducted by the Catholic priests at Denham in Buckinghamshire in 1586 that he had collected from the testimonies of those involved in the case (Greenblatt 1982; Sharpe 2000, 87). Despite the title, this pamphlet actually consisted of a second attack on Darrell. Harsnett, accusing the Catholics of fraud, attacked all the practices of dispossession and was once more indirectly criticizing his old rival (Brownlow 1993, 74). Harsnett, who saw Scot as a model to follow, points out that the strategies and tricks used by those who pretended to be possessed or

² After the split from the Church of Rome, Catholic rites were considered illegal. Even if only Protestant priests were allowed to practise exorcism, some rites were stigmatized as baseless too (Sharpe 2000, 156).

to have the power to cast out the devil, were the same as those used by actors, partly because the audience was composed of the same people who enjoyed the theatre and, according to Harsnett, they were willing to be duped (Brownlow 1993, 98). Hence, not only did the accuser seem to be like an actor performing a role, but so too did the exorcist.

Darrell's case is significant because it was at the centre of a serious question where religion, politics and legal discourses were interrelated enflaming the debate between the institutions and arousing social interest. Indeed, manifold narratives were published aimed at restoring Darrell credibility, such as *A Breife Narration of the possession, dispossession, and, repossession of William Sommers: and of some proceedings against Mr John Dorrell preacher, with answers to such objections as are made to prove the pretended counterfeiting of the said Sommers*, which is a collection of stories closely inspired by the legal record of the trial regarding the confessions of Sommers and the witness of his fits published in 1598. A detailed account of the trial before the High Commission is also reported in *The Triall of Maist. Dorrell*, published in 1599 probably by the same editors of *A Breife Narration* (Gibson 2006, 132). In this pamphlet war must be included *A True and Brief report, of the grievous vexation by Satan, of Mary Glover, the story of Mary Glover*, because the author, John Swan, was a Puritan exorcist involved in the Bancroft campaign against fraudulent practices of dispossession. Harsnett had addressed him in *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* as 'devil finders and devil-puffers or devil-prayers' (Brownlow 1993, 74), so with this crime narrative he wanted to restore both his and Darrell's credibility (Almond 2004, 304). Moreover, Darrell defended himself from Harsnett's accusation of fraud writing in 1600 his own narration of Sommers' case, *A Detection of that Sinnful Shamful, Lying, and Ridiculous Discovers, of Samuel Harshmet. Entitled A Discoverie of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrell* (Brownlow 1993, 70).

As many scholars have pointed out, Shakespeare was inspired by Harsnett's and Scot's pamphlets, but the widespread stories of witchcraft and false demonic possessions might have been a further source of inspiration for investigating on stage the crucial question of proof. In the early modern period, theatre was a medium of paramount importance, 'the privileged arena for the display of power and authority' (Fiorato 2016, 4), where the most debated issues were represented and questioned before a culturally heterogeneous audience. Playwrights' interest in witchcraft, demonic possession and exorcism mirrors a more general collective curiosity in these phenomena and testifies to how theatre actively participated with the other institutions in what Greenblatt has called 'the circulation of social energy', reshaping for the stage's sake the religious, medical and legal discourses on this issue embedded in early modern culture. However, the multifocal perspective displayed by the Shakespearean theatre challenged conventional beliefs and raised many doubts as to both the ontology of crime and the lawfulness of an evidentiary procedure focused on finding the inward truth in the felons' mind through their confession, their exterior appearance, their behaviour, and especially through the observation and arbitrary interpretation of the possessed person's fits or the marks on the witch's body. In this cultural context, characterized by a high degree of ambiguity, as Neumeier points out, the theatre 'resembles the courtroom presenting the case (often in conjunction with medical expertise) and turning the spectator into judge and jury, while at the same time drawing the attention to the limits of medical diagnosis and legal judgment, insisting on ambivalences and uncertainties and their monstrous embodiment' (Fiorato 2016, 33). The scene of the dark room in *Twelfth Night* and that of the mock trial in *King Lear*, are two striking examples of 'textual traces' of the 'collective exchanges' between theatre and courtroom in Renaissance England that show how authority was investigated and questioned (Greenblatt 1988, 7).

5. 'Pray God he be not bewitch'd'

Shakespeare was interested in the nature of power, law and justice, as emerges from various plays where he investigated these issues (Carpi 2003; Raffield and Watt 2008; Zurcher 2010). He had many contacts at the Inns of Court, and his company performed two plays in these powerful legal institutions: *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn in 1594 and *Twelfth Night* at the Middle Temple Inn in 1602. The first is one of the so called 'equity plays', because it deals with the question of equity, as do *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear* (Watt 2009, 195). *Twelfth Night* is not considered a typical legal play, but its meaning, nevertheless, is connected with the domain of the law. The fact that it was performed at the Middle Temple Inn during the Revels in 1602, suggests that it might have been conceived for an audience of common lawyers, people interested not only in enjoying the Christmas festivities but also in being entertained with witty questions about the law and the most recent legal cases (Raffield 2004, 87). The Inns of Court were engaged in organising representations because, as Fiorato points out, they 'were instrumental in the perception and acknowledgement of power and its incarnation, and contributed to the creation of an elitist political conscience through the symbols, the images, the forms and representations of the law' (2016, 3). So, it is no accident that in the scene of the dark room there is an apparent reference to the famous Darrell case seen through the sceptical lens of Harsnett's pamphlet, which had appeared only three years before, in 1599 (Greenblatt 1988, 115; Brownlow 1993, 107; Gibson 2006, 151-160). However, the dark room scene is more than an evocation of the Darrell trial, but arguably appears to be an indirect criticism of the juridical system as a whole, and in particular of the unreliability of the investigation into cases of demonic possession due to bewitching and exorcism. While Harsnett points out in his pamphlet that Darrell's exorcisms were theatrical performances, similarly Shakespeare seems to criticise with the same accusation the trials aimed at discovering the truthfulness of possessions and the practices of dispossession. Beneath this first layer lies an ironic criticism of the widespread concern for bewitching and for an overturning of the hierarchical order of the state. Considering that this play was performed during the Revels in the Middle Temple Inn, the scene might aim at emphasising the pivotal role of the common law and the institutions of the Inns in maintaining the order of the body politic from the subversion of the rising social classes. As a matter of fact, Maria's trick appears to be a play within the play orchestrated to punish Malvolio, who wants to appear morally irreproachable but who actually craves to change his social status by marrying Olivia. As Paul Raffield points out, according to the common law, social status was established by birth and by ancient custom; hence there was no room to change it by marriage. Therefore, in secretly craving to climb the social ladder, Malvolio has attempted to subvert the hierarchical order, breaking the ancient law, a behaviour that was seen by early modern common lawyers as a threat to 'the cosmic order' (2004, 96). In the light of this, it is not surprising that inspiration came from Darrell who was accused of having simulated the exorcisms in order to increase his authority and credibility as exorcist. He, like Malvolio, had broken the law and threatened the order of the state. Not only do many details suggest the playwright's knowledge of Harsnett's pamphlet, but also of Darrell's trial before the Court of High Commission and the cases of bewitching of William Sommers that had been reported in well-known narratives such as those collected in *A Breife Narration of the Possession* and *The Triall of Maist. Dorrell*, which had been written by the supporting party of the Puritan exorcists. One of the aspects parodied in the play concerns how flimsy was the reasoning that associated specific symptoms with demonic possession. According to the anonymous writer of *A Breife Narration*, Sommers 'began to be strangely tormented in body and so continued for

divers weeks to the great astonishment of the beholders and trouble of his friends. ... And he gave signs that he was possessed by a wicked spirit' (Almond 2004, 282). Those who witnessed Sommers's fits at first tried to understand if they were due to natural or supernatural causes but, considering that no remedy could reduce the suffering, they thought they were provoked by demonic possession due to bewitching and decided to call John Darrell, who was considered to be the most suitable person to cast away the devil because of his experience with the young (249).

Malvolio's story evokes this pattern that actually is the same as many narratives about bewitching. The trick of the false love letter from Olivia deludes him into trying to fulfil his dream, but after her refusal he shifts to the liminal zone where imagination and reality overlap and the rational faculties fade; a very similar condition to that experienced by those who were believed to be bewitched. As a matter of fact, Maria, soon after causing the trick, diagnoses that the steward's weird behaviour might be a symptom of bewitching. Her suspicion plays a functional role, in fact it is the cause for asking for the intervention of Feste, who feigns to be the curate Sir Topas, in the role of an exorcist. In the first part of the scene of the dark room, Feste echoes Darrell in exorcising Sommers, indeed he ironically interrogates Satan directly, pretending his wicked spirit is inhabiting Malvolio's body:

Feste. Out, hyperbolic fiend, how vexest thou this man! Talkest thou nothing but of ladies?

Sir Toby. Well said, Master Parson.

Malvolio. Sir Topas, never was man thus wronged. Good Sir Topas, do not think I am mad. They have laid me here in hideous darkness.

Feste. Fie, thou dishonest Satan! I call by the most modest terms, for I am one those gentle ones that will use the devil himself with courtesy. Sayst thou that House is dark?

Malvolio. As hell, Sir Topas. (4.2.25-35)

The word 'dark' is easily associated with hell or the devil in many narratives, as in *A Breife Narration* where, in an interesting description of Sommers's symptoms, Satan is named expressively 'Prince of Darkness' (Almond 2004, 285). Furthermore, 'dark' and 'darkness' refer not only to the fact that Malvolio, being closed up in a room, cannot see anything but he is also 'in the dark' because he does not know that he is the target of a revenge orchestrated by Maria and her accomplice Feste, so he continues not to understand why he is enclosed in the dark room.

Furthermore, the figure of Feste / Sir Topas seems to poke fun at Bancroft, who mistreated Darrell during the trial for fraud. In *The Triall of Maist. Dorrell* it emerges that the puritan exorcist underwent an interrogation led by the Archbishop of Canterbury without any chance of defending himself from the accusation of fraudulent practices. As Gibson points out, 'According to the author and editor of the *Triall*, the defendants and witnesses in Darrell's and More's cases were interrupted by commissioners, especially Whitgift and Bancroft, and shouted down in exactly this manner, so much so that Darrell was only allowed to speak once and was then cut off' (2006, 132). So, when Malvolio tries to defend himself proclaiming 'I say there was never man thus abused. I am no more mad than you are Make the trial of it in any constant question' (4.2.46-48), Feste, instead of making logical and significant questioning aimed at discovering if he is inhabited by wicked spirits or affected by madness, investigates his knowledge of the pagan doctrine of metempsychosis (4.2.310-311):

Feste. What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wildfowl?

Malvolio. That the soul of our grandma might haply inhabit a bird.

Feste. What think'st thou of his opinion?

Malvolio. I think nobly of the soul, and no way approve his opinion. (4.2.49-55)

In the end, Feste cuts off Malvolio too, as Darrell had been cut off by Bancroft, because he concludes the trial saying sharply: 'Fare thee well. Remain thou still in darkness' (4.2.56).

The question about metempsychosis, which is the transmigration of dead souls into other human bodies or animals, seems to be a mockery of the interrogations held by the judges in cases of suspicious demonic possession due to bewitching or false exorcism. From the narratives it can be inferred that the inquiries aimed at evidencing if a person was possessed by a spirit or had encounters with the devil or imps, or a familiar that inhabited the body of an animal. For example, in *A Breife Narration* it is reported that Satan appeared in the form of a mouse and intimidated Sommers, saying that if he had not allowed him to enter his body, he would have hanged him (Almond 2004, 241). So the interrogation of Malvolio might be a satire not only of the procedure of exorcism, but also of those judges who posed such abstruse questions, to which people, already suffering from the pressure due to the authority of the bench or from a weak psychological condition, could only answer by saying what the judge had suggested and wanted to hear.

Another striking phenomenon observed by the onlookers of demonic possession was the victim's skill in changing voice and/or in speaking without moving their lips. In *A Breife Narration* it is reported that Sommers 'spoke in a continuous speech, his mouth being wide open, his tongue drawn into the throat, neither lips nor jaws moving' and that 'Strange speeches [were] uttered by him in his fits in a strange voice' (285). In *Twelfth Night*, in order to mock Malvolio, who is imprisoned in the dark room, Feste, after wearing a gown and a fake beard, changes his voice so as to simulate Sir Topas, the curate. The audience in 1602 could see Robert Armin playing the role of Feste: he was an excellent actor, especially noted for his ability in using different voices (Wiles 1987, 136-137; Shakespeare 2008, 26). Feste's voice is crucial. Not only does it make this scene the most enjoyable part of the trick and the play, but it might also indirectly refer to the uncertainty in diagnosing the authenticity of the symptoms of demonic possession and to the ambiguous role of the exorcist. As a matter of fact, the mysterious and frightening voices that came out from the alleged victims of bewitching were considered as having a supernatural cause, even though there were many doubts that they might be due to a ventriloquist's performance. Moreover, Feste's voice and disguise might poke fun at the fact that exorcists were accused by sceptics of being accomplices to fraud in league with the person faking demonic possession, and that they were able to play a role adopting the same performing skills as those used by the actors on stage.

Subject to a crescendo of incoherent, but insistent questions, Malvolio is led into a state of complete bewilderment whose peak comes at the point in which Feste creates a sort of dialogue with himself so that Malvolio believes that behind the wall of the dark room there are two persons, Feste and Sir Topas:

Feste. Advise you what to say, the minister is here [*as Sir Topas*] Malvolio, Malvolio, thy wits the heavens restore. Endeavour thyself to sleep and leave thy vain bibble babble.

Malvolio. Sir Topas!

Feste [*as Sir Topas*] Maintain no words with him, good fellow. [*as himself*] Who, I, sir? Not I, sir! God b' wi' you, good Sir Topas. [*as Topas*] Marry, amen. [*as himself*] I will, sir, I will.

Malvolio. Fool, fool, fool, I say! (4.2.94-103)

The comic scene, permeated by an aura of uncertainty and unresolved ambiguity, mirrors the bewilderment experienced by those people involved in trials aimed at discovering the authenticity of exorcisms testing the symptoms of demonic possession due to bewitching. The words 'bibble babble' refer clearly to Darrell, who reported that Sommers, like others possessed, mocked

the Holy Bible in a similar way (Almond 2004, 24). Hence, Feste's performance seems to be a mockery both of exorcists and of those judges who led interrogations aimed at discovering the existence of the devil in an allegedly possessed body so as to discover the complicity of the exorcist in the fraud.

The reading of this scene in the light of criminography highlights that theatre actively participated in the debate on these phenomena, both on their truthfulness and their juridical treatment, displaying them as performances played using the same tricks adopted by actors on the stage. Underlying this, the scene seems indirectly to suggest that, while the play within the play orchestrated by Maria is clearly a performance played by Feste, who disguises his voice and appearance as an exorcist, many cases of demonic possession were frauds at the expense of the alleged witch who was condemned by an institution more involved in political and religious feuds than in handling properly the question of proof.

6. 'False justicer, why hast thou let her 'scape?'

Analysing the scene of the mock trial in *King Lear* through the lens of early criminography brings to the fore the fact that Shakespeare was inspired by the discourses on witchcraft as well as by the language and satiric style adopted by Harsnett and Scot in their pamphlets. It is my contention that his aim was to stigmatise the excessive anxiety regarding witches as the most dangerous threat for the stability of the realm but at the same time to highlight the flimsiness of the evidentiary procedure in proving the crime of witchcraft. Moreover, it seems that the excessive and controversial figure of Lear targets James I who proclaimed himself as an equitable and moderate ruler but also as a monarch 'above the law' (1996, 72) on the grounds of divine right. Considering that in the early modern period the body is a metaphor for representing the order of the state, *King Lear* appears to be the tragedy of a king who dissects his body politic in two and experiences the deterioration of his body natural. As Fiorato points out, 'the physical frailty of the body natural [of the king] is transcended by the ethereality of the body politic' (2016, 3); so Lear, in divesting himself of the powerful shelter of the body politic, appears weak and subject to a double-headed monstrous body politic personified by the two crowned heads of the two female bodies natural of Goneril and Regan. Lear actually commits a subversive act because he overturns the order of the microcosm hierarchically structured with the figure of the king at the pinnacle. The subversion is absolute because Lear not only, from being above the law, becomes subject to it, but also because he is under the law of two women, contrary to the principles of patriarchal society. Hence, Lear represents the *exemplum a contrario* of what a king should be, especially considering what James I had proclaimed in his first speech to Parliament in 1604, in explaining his political programme of uniting Scotland and England: 'What God hath conjoined then, let no man separate ... I am the Head, and it is my Body... I hope therefore no man will be so vnreasonable as to thinke ... that I being the Head, should haue a diuided monstrous Body' (Sommerville 1994, 136).³

Only when Regan and Goneril openly refuse to host his train does Lear become aware of his error, and this shocking epiphany drives him mad. In his imagination his daughters are 'unnatural hags' (2.2.467), criminals who, in the symmetrical order of the Elizabethan world, figure 'at the opposite pole' to the figure of the monarch (Foucault 1977, 29). The witch embodied a 'monstrous shape-shifter' that epitomised the early modern crisis, an image closely interrelated

³ See also <<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/commons-jrnl/vol1/pp142-149#h3-0003>>, accessed 1 February 2021.

to the increasing interest ‘in the legal body and its intersection with religious, political, social and medical/humoral bodies’ (Neumeier 2016, 31). Hence, the reference to witchcraft in the scene of the mock trial is a metaphor to represent that the most feared crime of all was hard to control and to punish, especially because of the impossibility of achieving reliable ocular proof. It seems that Shakespeare is also focusing on an ontological investigation of the concept of justice, because only two years before, in 1604, Parliament passed the *Witchcraft Act*, which reinforced the previous Elizabethan statutes, so it appears that Shakespeare metaphorized the witchcraft trial as an exemplary case to show that the strictness of the law without proper evidentiary procedure leads to an erroneous judgment.

The scene of the mock trial is the last stage of a series of events that follow and develop following a similar pattern to that reported in criminography. In this perspective, Lear’s words seem to be quotations from those judges who in the early modern period led arbitrary inquiries on witchcraft and searched for signs and marks on the bodies of the accused to prove a crime whose existence was doubted by many sceptics. The questions that arise on stage are interwoven with medical and legal discourses; in particular, they appear to be related to the ambiguity of the symptoms of possession, the search for the proof on the witch’s body and, to a wider extent, the lawfulness of the trial. The first point comes to the fore when Lear, after learning that his daughter Regan has refused Kent’s request, feels ill and makes a self-diagnosis: ‘O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / *Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow / Thy element’s below: Where is this daughter?’ (2.2.246-248). Lear’s mention of *hysterica passio* and the ‘mother’ has caused many debates in literary criticism, especially because this illness was associated with the female body. Considering that Shakespeare’s source was *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, this suggests that he probably knew the part of this treatise reporting ‘The confession of *Richard Mainy*. Gentleman, written by himselfe, and avouched upon his oath the sixt of June. 1602’. Harsentt had poked fun at this case, since he believed it to be another case of fraud, especially because Mainy wrote that the symptoms of the bewitching were ‘a spice of the *Mother*’ (Brownlow 1993, 401). Jordan, too, highlights in his *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease* that hysteria has symptoms similar to those shown by ‘fool’, ‘madman’, ‘melancholike men’ that were mistaken by inexpert physicians with demonic possession (1603, 18-19). Hence, Shakespeare might have been inspired by Mainy’s confession and medical discourse to express Lear’s ‘fundamental state of being in error’ and, as this disease was associated with the female body, he wanted to emphasise the fragility of his ‘body natural’ according to the early modern stereotypes (Peterson 2010, 61). From a political perspective, the reference to *hysterica passio* serves to underline the upside-down nature of the body politic that Lear has erroneously divided and the consequent deterioration of his body natural, his falling into a kind of madness that has the same symptoms as bewitching.

The other question mentioned in the scene concerns proof. In Lear’s mind, Goneril and Regan’s refusal to play host to him denotes a kind of wickedness that must be prosecuted before a court of justice, so he wants to see the trial and the evidence: ‘I’ll see their trial first. Bring in their evidence’ (3.6.35). For this purpose, in an ultimate attempt to exercise his royal power, Lear gathers around him a sort of puppet court of justice that he imagines prone to his will. According to Watt, the members of this fake court seem to echo the early modern judges: the Fool, called by Lear ‘yoke-fellow of equity’ (3.6.37), might represent the Lord Chancellor; Edgar, called ‘robed man of justice’ (3.6.36) and disguised as a poor madman, might stand for the Lord Chief of Justice, and Kent might represent the local judge (Watt 2009, 76). Lear’s accusation against Goneril is of having ‘kicked the poor King her father’ (3.6.47-48), a very vague one, but this is not surprising, considering that the suspicion of witchcraft was aimed at

resolving controversies that had nothing to do with the devil; very often the accusation was a means of avenging oneself on someone and this is so for Lear. These words also highlight that Goneril's wicked action was perceived as particularly harmful by Lear because against him as king and personification of the body politic, and against him as father, that is as body natural, subject to deterioration and disease.

This scene is one of the most striking and debated in Shakespeare's theatre as well as one of the most meaningful in expressing the unreliability of justice, partly because of this fake court but also because Goneril and Regan, the accused, are not on stage, but only seem to inhabit Lear's mind. However, despite their absence they are evoked with words that echo early modern discourse on witchcraft. People thought that witches could hide their presence or pretend to be in a place while they were far from home, and even commit crimes without being present (Maus 1991, 34). This belief is reported in *The Witches of Warboys*, which recounts that Alice Samuel was able to be present in a place with her spirit alone and to be visible only to those whom she had bewitched and invisible to all the others. The three children of the story who, being bewitched, could see her, were not considered as having hallucinations but 'a real not imaginary experience', so that Alice's appearance 'in the absence of her "physical" body would have been enough to condemn her for most readers' (Almond 2008, 26). With a striking similarity to this episode, Lear is the only one able to see his daughters in this mad trial, so it might also suggest that he is the victim of their sorcery. Moreover, when the Fool addresses Goneril saying 'Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool' (3.6.51) he is citing an object belonging to the semantic field of witchcraft and punishment whose meaning the audience could pick up (Caton 2013, 130-131). First, during the trial, the witch sat on a stool, and it was also believed that witches left some enchanted objects, such as a joint stool or a broom, behind them so as to pretend to be present in a place when they were somewhere else. Scot, too, refers to this presumed skill in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (Gulstad 1994, 497). So the reference to this piece of furniture might imply that Lear, like the children in the Throckmorton case, is a victim of bewitching and that he has a 'real' experience because he sees his daughter instead of a joint-stool, a phenomenon that was classified as 'spectral' evidence and considered valuable as proof (Levack 1996, 1619). These references to Lear's visions might allude to the subtle threshold between bewitchment and madness and so to highlight the misleadingness of the symptoms and the high degree of uncertainty of their diagnosis in a trial.

Furthermore, the Fool's request to Goneril to 'Cry you mercy' (3.6.51) might indirectly refer to the strategy used by Brian Darcy, influenced by Jean Bodin's treatise, of promising mercy in exchange for a confession, but also to a criticism of the lack of clemency in the witchcraft trials. As a matter of fact, in 1604 the *Witchcraft Act* further reinforced the Elizabethan statute, excluding the benefit of clergy, which was a legal means aimed at reducing the penalty initially reserved to the ecclesiastics and then extended also to laypeople. Considering that the Fool named by Lear 'yoke-fellow of equity' (3.6.37) might be an allusion to the Lord Chancellor, his words might address the Chancery Court where the law was applied according to the principle of equity, that is, in a more flexible and merciful way compared with the common law courts. These legal underlying meanings hidden in the folds of the text emphasise the proximity between the stage and the courtroom, fiction and reality, and directed the audience's attention to the question of the excessive strictness of the common law, a highly debated issue in those years (Carpi 2007 and Watt 2009).

The mock trial continues with the observation of Regan's exterior appearance with a clear evocation of what happened during the trial. As emerges from *The Country Iustice*, a witch's countenance and behaviour were considered as evidence of crimes. Dalton explains that, when

examining felons, the Justice of the Peace had to consider as evidence the ‘marks and the signs’, such as ‘The change of his countenance, his blushing, looking downwards, silence, trembling’ (1727, 547). Especially in the field of witchcraft trials, appearance was considered proof of the wicked inner nature, an exteriorisation of the ‘inward truth’. Reginald Scot stigmatised this belief, pointing out that it was only a presumption that sprang from the fact that during the trial the accused usually did not look directly at the judge: ‘Item, behaviour, looks, becks, and countenance of a woman, are sufficient signs, whereby to presume she is a witch: for always they look down to the ground and dare not look a man full in face’ (1886, 15). Moreover, the witches’ eyes were considered particularly harmful. There was the belief that ‘These can with their looks kill either man or beast’, as reported in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a belief stigmatised by Scot because of the lack of all this in the Bible (Almond 2011, 34-22). Lear’s words seem to be entrenched in these discourses:

Lear. And here’s another whose warped looks proclaim
 What store her heart is made on. Stop her there!
 Arms, arms, sword, fire, corruption in the place!
 False justicer, why hast thou let her ‘scape? (3.6.52-55)

The adjective ‘warped’, which suggests a person who has strange or unpleasant ideas, in this case refers to the fact that Regan is imagined twisting her eyes so as not to meet Lear’s; she is literally ‘looking down on’ him, showing disrespect for her father. Hence, Lear’s words might allude to the fact that exterior appearance, especially the countenance, was considered the exteriorisation of the ‘inward truth’, and so was considered as a visible proof of the felon’s wicked inner nature. Though Regan suddenly disappears from Lear’s view, he still insists: ‘Then let them anatomise Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?’ (3.6.73-75) The repetition of the verb ‘see’ at the beginning of the trial, ‘I’ll see their trial first. Bring in their evidence’ (3.6.35), and at the end ‘see what breeds about her heart’ (3.6.73-74), marks the need for a visible mark on Regan’s body suitable to evidence the causal nexus between her disrespectful behaviour and the pact with the devil. As previously said, because it was impossible to achieve a direct proof of the secret agreement, only an ‘“overt act”’ (see Maus 1991, 35) was sufficient to prove it. Hence, it seems possible that the stress on the sense of sight parodies the scrupulous search for marks on the suspected body and the compelling recourse to experiments and physicians’ expertise so as to gather proof of the alliance with the devil. In the play Regan’s disappearance prevents this corporeal investigation and mocks the impossibility of finding reliable proof, suggesting that witches and witchcraft do not exist except in a madman’s nightmare.

King Lear was performed before James I on St Stephen’s Day 1606, so the play might have been both a homage to the new monarch, who was interested and involved in witchcraft, and an admonition for a reformation of the juridical system and for moderation in ruling the realm. Hence, the scene of the mock trial seems to be an indirect criticism of both a law that was too strict and evidentiary procedure that was too loose, leaving to the judge and jury excessive discretion in the interpretation of the proof of a crime whose existence was extremely doubtful.

7. Conclusion

The scene of the dark room in *Twelfth Night* and that of the mock trial in *King Lear* are exemplary in showing the interrelation of witchcraft and demonic possession due to bewitching with early modern religious, medical, legal, and political discourses. The close reading of the plays through

the intertextual analysis of criminography brings to the fore the cultural network between institutions and especially the interconnection between courtroom and stage as kindred spaces of investigation. From the reports of trials, it emerges that the inquiries about witchcraft, the dubious cases of demonic possession, and the practices of exorcism developed according to a stereotyped pattern gleaned from the widespread texts of the time. It appears that the court's aim was focused more on satisfying the craving for punishing the most feared crime of witchcraft according to moral and social beliefs than on discovering the truthfulness of the accusations at the basis of the trial or the authenticity of the voluntary confessions given by the suspected witch under severe interrogation. Early criminography also highlights the intersections between witchcraft and other crimes that were stigmatized by the authorities as highly dangerous for the stability of the realm, such as fake demonic possession due to bewitching and fraudulent practices of exorcism. The spectacularization of the trial, whose core was the observation of the witch's body or the frightening symptoms of demonic possession, and the standardized inquiry, which followed a pattern very similar to a play script, show the proximity between courtroom and theatre. In both spaces, the representation of the truth appears to be the result of a form of creativity that originates from the liminal zone between reality and imagination.

All this seems to be mirrored in Shakespeare's plays. In particular, the scenes analysed in this article, which are theatricalizations of a fake exorcism and a mock trial, highlight the fictional aspect of the practices of dispossession and the spectacularization of justice in trials aimed at discovering witchcraft and fraudulent exorcism. Furthermore, they mirror the concern of royal authority as well as of the subjects of the realm at the prospect of overturning the order of the body politic caused by the frequency of these phenomena, which were so hard to control and punish because of the extreme unreliability of the evidentiary procedure aimed at discovering the presence of devilish spirits through inconsistent but obtrusive techniques of investigation.

In *Twelfth Night*, it is Malvolio's false puritan conduct and his desire to reverse his social status that is stigmatized with a merciless trick, while in *King Lear*, it is a king who provokes the disorder in his body politic. The chaos reaches its peak when, in the grip of madness, Lear tries to punish the wicked spirits of his daughters in a lawless mock trial that marks the complete annihilation of his body politic and body natural. However, an ambivalent tension emerges from these readings. If on the one hand witchcraft and the other interrelated crimes are depicted as threats against the body politic, this concern seems to be mingled with a sharp, ironic criticism of the religious, political and legal authorities that exercise their power using the same theatrical strategies as that used by actors in performing a play and appear unfit to handle the problem of proof in such dubious cases. The only result of the reinforcement of the law with the *Witchcraft Act* in 1604 was an increase in trials where the evidentiary procedure was conducted on the basis of a highly discretionary interpretation of exterior appearance and marks on the alleged witch's body and of the symptoms of the person allegedly possessed.

The findings of this study suggest that a close reading of Shakespearean plays through the lens of early criminography is a valuable approach through which to investigate the intersections between theatre and courtroom so that further research might be undertaken to deepen and widen the analysis on other legal questions.

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