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MAGIC ON THE EARLY ENGLISH STAGE

Magic on the Early English Stage investigates the performance of magical tricks, illusions, effects and their staged appearance in the medieval and early English theatre. Performers who created such magic were not known as conjurors, as we might refer to them today, but as jugglers. Records concerning jugglers on the medieval stage have been hitherto misunderstood or misapplied. These references to jugglers are re-examined in the light of discussions of 'feats of activity' that also include tumbling, vaulting and 'dancing on the rope'; appearances and disappearances of the 'Now you see it, now you don't' variety; and stage versions of these concepts; magic through sound in terms of ventriloquy and sound through pipes; mechanical images and puppets; and stage tricks. Information that has remained dormant since original publication is discussed in relation to jugglers such as Thomas Brandon, the King's Juggler, and William Vincent, alias 'Hocus Pocus'.

PHILIP BUTTERWORTH is Reader in Medieval Theatre at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre*, and has published widely in journals on the subject, including essays in *Medieval English Theatre*. He is currently working, with Joslin McKinney, on *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography*, to be published in 2007.

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For
S. A. B., J. R. B.,
I. N. and J. E. N.

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For the ende of this skil is not to doo simplely, but to stretche out imaginations euen vnto apperaunce, of whiche there shall afterwarde no sign appeare.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Henry Cornelius Agrippa of the Vanitie and vncertaintie of Artes and Sciences, Englished by Ja. San. Gent., Imprinted at London, by Henry Wykes dwelling in Fleete streat, at the signe of the blacke Elephant. ANNO. 1569*

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Foreword

Treatises on the history of what in Britain today is generally referred to as conjuring, and our American cousins prefer to term magic, usually begin with an account of Dedi's decapitation illusion performed in Egypt for King Cheops around 2600 BC, originally described in a papyrus discovered by Henry Westcar in the early nineteenth century. Sacerdotal temple mysteries of a similar era produced by the application of pneumatics, hydraulics and acoustics were subsequently explained by Hero of Alexandria in about AD 62, while the first authenticated reference to a sleight-of-hand trick, the Cups and Balls, dates from Seneca (3 BC–AD 65) at a time when it was already a very familiar feat.

Although it is evident that performances of magic for entertainment purposes existed long before the birth of Christ, there is a lacuna in the history of magic during the Dark Ages. Clearly, itinerant practitioners would be plying their craft during these largely unrecorded centuries, establishing a continuum with the earliest performers identified in the Middle Ages. Simultaneously the Christian Church was developing apace, and from this source the origin of much medieval drama may be attributed. The miraculous was an essential feature of the Church's teachings and thus the dramatisation of biblical lore required the presentation of magical effects, the nature of which has provided the stimulus for this present work by Philip Butterworth.

The first detailed explanation in the English language of how to perform conjuring tricks was Reginald Scot's *The Discouerie of witchcraft*, published in 1584. His aim was to demonstrate that the tricks of contemporary magicians were achieved by purely natural means and not by any diabolical influence, as part of his major crusade against the then prevalent belief in witchcraft. In divulging these methods his conscience was clearly pricked, 'being sorie that it falleth out to my lot, to laie open the secrets of this mysterie, to the hindrance of such poore men as live

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thereby'. Obviously the tricks he described, learned from Jean Cautares, a French conjurer then working in London, were not new at the time he described them and had been in the repertoire of performers for many years.

To Scot we are indebted for the names of some of the conjurors who were operating within the living memory of his sixteenth-century readers, but undoubtedly there were others. Yet who were they and where might their identities be ascertained? Philip Butterworth, in this pioneering research on magical effects portrayed in Early English drama, has simultaneously found some welcome answers to this question in his searches of county and city records, together with interesting information about their remuneration from treasurers' accounts, principally sourced from the *Records of Early English Drama* project of the University of Toronto. In doing so he has also been able to take us back in time closer to the seemingly impenetrable past of conjuring during the Dark Ages, and we are indebted to him for the invaluable references and annotations he provides.

For the student of magic history it is interesting to observe how the employment of magical effects in dramatic presentations characteristic of the medieval theatre, as related in this book, essentially disappeared after the seventeenth century. They were to be resurrected in the second half of the nineteenth century, not by dramatists, but by a scientist and also a magician. The scientist was John Henry Pepper, Director of the Royal Polytechnic Institution in Regent Street who, on Christmas Eve 1862, introduced the illusion that bears his name (though Henry Dircks was its inventor) in a representation of Charles Dickens' *The Haunted Man*. Its tremendous impact led to a number of plays being written during the following year purely as vehicles for this single illusion.

It may well have been the great success attendant on the Pepper's Ghost illusion dramas that influenced John Nevil Maskelyne at the outset of his magical career in 1865, leading him to pioneer a new genre of magical dramatic sketches to clothe the brilliant illusions he and his colleagues created at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London, from 1873 until 1905, and subsequently at St George's Hall. It was a lead that other famous illusionists of the early twentieth century were happy to follow, for Lafayette, Horace Goldin, Arnold de Biere and Servais le Roy all featured magical playlets in their shows.

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So this present book, by extending our knowledge of the interaction of magic and early drama, will be warmly welcomed by historians of conjuring and of drama alike and, indeed, by anyone who shares an interest in the theatrical fare that both instructed and entertained our forebears.

EDWIN A. DAWES
Historian, The Magic Circle

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Prefatory note

Although this work is rooted in the medieval theatre of England it contains a number of allusions to medieval theatre in Europe. Equally, there are many references made to sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century theatre in England. The scope of this range exists because of shared practical issues and insights provided by the later evidence that illuminate or explain earlier practice.

Also, in this investigation there are a number of techniques and solutions to performers' tricks, illusions and stage devices that have been cited from appropriately published evidence as a means of demonstrating how these effects were or might have been produced. Such citation does not necessarily provide evidence that these declared methods work or have worked. Their use in this book is to indicate the possible means by which tricks and illusions might have worked, but more importantly, to demonstrate the kinds of ingenuity, insight, lateral thinking and guile of the perpetrators. Even if a proposed solution to the means by which given tricks were performed does not work, or has not worked, it is not excluded for that reason.

References to the 'stage' in this book are concerned with both the physical stage and that performance space created by the ambit that surrounds the performer, whether he be actor or juggler.

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It will be obvious that I have had considerable support from a number of translators who have worked diligently and with good humour on my behalf. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Philip A. Shaw (Latin); Peter Meredith (Latin); Meg Twycross (Latin); Elsa Strietman (Dutch); Cécile Brabban (French); Brian Richardson and Arthur Pritchard (Italian). Any mistakes in their transcriptions are mine.

The editors of the journals *Medieval English Theatre*, *Theatre Notebook* and *European Medieval Drama* have permitted me to use large sections of the articles 'Magic through sound: illusion, deception and agreed pretence', 'Brandon, Feats and Hocus Pocus: jugglers three' and 'Substitution: theatrical sleight of hand in medieval plays' in Chapters 1, 5, and 7.

Eila Williams and John McGavin, who are currently working on *REED: Scotland*, have generously helped in checking material in the Advocates Library, Edinburgh. Elizabeth Baldwin and David Mills, who await publication of their Cheshire records for *REED*, have helpfully supplied material from their forthcoming edition. I would also like to thank Jo Mattingly for the hospitality that enabled me to check and transcribe Cornish material in Truro.

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Note on the text

Throughout the text, abbreviations in original manuscripts and early printed books have been expanded. Expansions are indicated by the use of italics.

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