Prospero’s Book

Mowat, Barbara A.

Shakespeare Quarterly, Volume 52, Number 1, Spring 2001, pp. 1-33 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/shq.2001.0016
Prospero's Book

BARBARA A. MOWAT

I BEGIN WITH AN ASSUMPTION ABOUT THE TEMPEST that opens onto a set of related questions. The assumption is that among the highly valued books that Prospero brought with him into exile is one book essential to his magic, the one that he goes offstage to consult before the series of spirit spectacles begins in Act 3, the same one that near the end of the play he promises to drown as he abjures his magic. Though Peter Greenaway, in his film Prospero's Books, did not include such a book among the twenty-four he decided were necessary for Prospero's survival,¹ the text indicates that Prospero not only has a magic robe and a magic staff (both of which are explicitly called for²), but, like Friar Bacon and Doctor Faustus and other stage magicians before him, he also has a magic book. Further, the play presents Prospero's always-offstage book as crucial to his rule over the island, the magical instrument that enables him to control the spirits who come from their confines when Prospero calls, who torment Caliban and keep him obedient, and who assume as needed the shapes of Greek mythological figures or vicious hunting dogs.

Granted, the play emphasizes Prospero's use of spirits much more than it does his dependence on a particular book for the power to so use them. By the time he says "I'll to my book, / For yet ere suppertime must I perform / Much business" (3.1.113–15), we know without a doubt that Prospero employs materialized spirits to carry out his commands. Not only have we witnessed his early dealings with Ariel; we have also observed Miranda's response to seeing Ferdinand: "What is 't? A spirit? . . . It carries a

¹ Noting that "Prospero's power is held in relationship to his books," Greenaway decided that Prospero's library should be made up of "[t]wenty-four volumes"—"bestiaries, a herbal, cosmographies, atlases, astronomy, a book of languages, a book of utopias, a book of Travellers' tales, a book of games . . . a pornography, a book of motion, a book of love, a book of colours and a book of Architecture and other Music" (Prospero's Books: A Film of Shakespeare's The Tempest [New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991], 9 and 12). For Greenaway, it was the combination of these volumes that "not only kept Prospero and Miranda alive, well and sane on their island but also made Prospero so powerful he could command the dead and make Neptune his servant" (12).

² See, e.g., the entrance direction for 5.1 ("Enter Prospero in his magic robes") and Prospero's lines at 5.1.60–63: "when I have required / Some heavenly music, which even now I do, / To work mine end upon their senses that / This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff . . . ." Quotations of Shakespeare follow the New Folger Library Shakespeare The Tempest ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1994).
brave form. But ’tis a spirit” (1.2.488–90). Her comment makes clear that to Miranda materialized spirits are a familiar sight. Prospero’s reply, “No, wench, it eats and sleeps and hath such senses / As we have, such” (ll. 491–92), is premised on Miranda’s knowing basic distinctions between the faculties of spirits and those of mortals. And in 2.2 we have heard Caliban in soliloquy describe the spirits Prospero employs:

His spirits hear me,
And yet I needs must curse. But they’ll nor pinch,
Fright me with urchin-shows, pitch me ’th’ mire,
Nor lead me like a firebrand in the dark
Out of my way, unless he bid ’em. But
For every trifle are they set upon me...
Here comes a spirit of his, and to torment me
For bringing wood in slowly.

(ll. 3–8, 15–16)

Prospero’s spirit magic is thus established early and unequivocally, long before we see groups of spirits actually appear. In contrast, not until Prospero’s exit line, “I’ll to my book,” at the end of 3.1 does the text point to a specific book connected with Prospero’s magic “business.” Further, in only one speech is Prospero’s control of spirits explicitly linked to his book, and that speech refers to his books in the plural:

Remember
First to possess his books, for without them
He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not
One spirit to command. They all do hate him
As rootedly as I. Burn but his books.

(3.2.100–104)

The use here of the plural seems to argue against the significance of any particular book—though surely it is relevant that the speech gives us Caliban’s interpretation of Prospero’s use of his library, and that Prospero himself, in later referring to the instruments that have made possible his magic, uses the singular form: “I’ll break my staff, / . . . And deeper than did ever plummet sound, / I’ll drown my book” (5.1.63, 65–66)—a promise he seems, by play’s end, to have kept, since he describes himself in the Epilogue as being in much the state that Caliban had earlier predicted, without one spirit to command.

Because the evidence in the play is tantalizing rather than solid, I would not want to argue on the basis of that evidence alone that Prospero’s island library contained a book for summoning and controlling spirits. I am comfortable making the argument, first, because, until the twentieth century, it was assumed that Prospero had such a book, and, second, because considerable external evidence exists for early modern conjurors having had such books and for the populace in general having
known about them. Keith Thomas, in his monumental *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, points out that "magic books were essential" for the village (and the London) cunning man or wise man (the numbers of whom were reportedly "comparable ... to [those of] the parochial clergy") who wished to conjure spirits. Furthermore, recent work in medieval and early modern ritual magic fully supports the assumption that a Prospero at whose command spirits materialize and later melt "into air, into thin air" (4.1.167), would have been expected to have access to a book enabling such power.

The first and most obvious question that Shakespeare scholars will ask is why, if the play suggests even equivocally that Prospero has a magic book for the control of spirits, is there so little scholarly curiosity about this book today? While part of the answer lies in the current focus on *The Tempest* as a colonialist document, the larger part can be found in the difficulty many have in taking Prospero's magic seriously. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars discussed Prospero's book within the context of historical anecdotes about necromancers and their books of magic, and they cited romances and plays featuring magicians and their books; they raised questions about "the real book which was presumed to invest the necromancer with his power," and they exchanged queries and possible answers about what Joseph Hunter called "a curious point in bibliography," namely, "what specifically the books of the Magicians were" and why "not one (as far as is known) has come down to our
times." But, as Robert West points out, whereas earlier scholars saw that in *The Tempest* "magic has standing in and for itself—has as much dramatic reality as Prospero's dukedom does, and of course far more prominence"—more recent scholars "incline to view the magic as comprehensive analogy or symbol that parallels or stands for some such abstraction as government, art, or science," a contention supported by Stephen Orgel's 1987 edition, which describes Prospero's magic as, on the one hand, "Royal science" and, on the other, as "theatre, illusionism." Where the magic is not considered "real," the magic book is easily ignored.

But even those twentieth-century scholars who tried to take the magic seriously tended to be silent about Prospero's book. Following the lead of Frances Yates, Walter Clyde Curry, and Frank Kermode in seeing Prospero's art as "holy magic," we (since I include myself here) no doubt imagined him consulting such printed books as those by Ficino, Iamblichus, or Cornelius Agrippa, this despite the fact that

---


9 Robert H. West, *Shakespeare & the Outer Mystery* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1968), 82–83. West actually places this shift in understanding of the magic at the end of the eighteenth century, but this error testifies primarily to the comparative unavailability of nineteenth-century commentary on Shakespeare. In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare editions began to move away from the full "variorum" accumulation of editorial commentary that extends through Malone, and the scholar without ready access to specialized rare-book libraries is limited (in the case of *The Tempest*) to the brief citations included in Furness's 1892 New Variorum edition of the play.

Orgel, describing Prospero's art as "Baconian science and Neoplatonic philosophy," notes that "Royal science represents one aspect of Prospero's magic. Another is less solemn: it is theatre, illusionism, the unserious delight implied in Prospero's characterization of his masque as 'Some vanity of mine art'" (*The Oxford Shakespeare The Tempest* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], 20–23, esp. 20–21). Orgel goes on, however, to comment on Prospero's magic in helpful ways, observing both the play's refusal to make "easy distinctions between white and black magic" and "the host of ambivalences and qualifications that are continually expressed about both the central figure and his art" (23).

10 In using the word *real*, I am paraphrasing West's comment about "present-day critics" of *The Tempest*, few of whom, he writes, "now trouble to consider that Ariel and his elves and Prospero's magic were literally intended" (80).


such books include little or nothing in the way of instructions for summoning and controlling spirits. This image of Prospero as a Renaissance magus (or, as he is sometimes problematically called, a “white magician”), coupled with the tendency to think in terms of printed books, have combined to encourage even those curious about Prospero’s magic to ignore (or fail to look for) the only books of any use to a conjuror—namely, manuscript books of magic. The books that Keith Thomas described as essential for a summoner of spirits were manuscript books “guarded with the utmost secrecy by their owners” and liable to destruction by Church and other officials and by conjurors when they renounced their magic practices.

PROSPERO’S BOOK describes such books as the theoretical works of ceremonial magic, setting them against the practical works. He writes that the literature of ceremonial magic is of two sorts: “treatises more or less academic, expounding the theory of magic; [and] manuals, not at all academic, detailing the modus operandi of magic” (The Invisible World: A Study of Pneumatology in Elizabethan Drama [Athens: U of Georgia P, 1939], 11; see also 6–7).

A sense of the availability of sixteenth-century printed editions of these theoretical works can be gathered from the holdings of the Folger Shakespeare Library, which has thirty-nine such books by Ficino, fifteen by Cornelius Agrippa, and seven by Iamblichus (including one copy of De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum [1516] owned and annotated by John Dee).

13 Cornelius Agrippa’s Three Books of Occult Philosophy (London, 1651) comes closest to instructing the reader in the summoning and binding of spirits, but the two chapters on this topic (chapters 32 and 33 of Book 3) are both brief and general, gesturing toward methods of conjuring rather than giving instructions. The theoretical bias of the Three Books is spelled out in the opening of the spurious Henry Cornelius Agrippa. His Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy . . . (trans. Robert Turner [London, 1655]), available in manuscript in the sixteenth century:

In our Books of Occult Philosophy, we have . . . copiously, declared the principles, grounds, and reasons of Magick it self . . . ; but . . . in those books they are treated of rather Theoretically then Practically . . . Therefore in this book, which we have composed and made as it were a Complement and Key of our other books of Occult Philosophy, and of all Magical Operations, we will give unto thee the documents of . . . Inexpugnable and Unresistable Magical Discipline, and the most pleasant and delectable experiments of the sacred Deities. So that as by the reading of our other books of Occult Philosophy, thou maist earnestly covet the knowledge of these things; even so with reading this book, thou shalt truly triumph.

(32–33)

14 On the designation “white magician,” see, e.g., David Bevington, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 1,526; and Hallett Smith, ed., The Tempest in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 1,606–38, esp. 1,606. This designation is problematic on the simplest level because, first, while in the literature of the period one finds the term white witch, one does not find, so far as I can determine, white magician; and, second, because, as West pointed out in 1968, questions about how Prospero controlled the spirits and about what kinds of spirits they were “besmirch a little [the play’s] Neo-Platonic ‘whiteness’” (Shakespeare & the Outer Mystery, 85). On the problematic nature of the whiteness of Prospero’s magic, see also Margreta de Grazia, “The Tempest: Gratuitous Movement or Action Without Kibes and Pinches,” Shakespeare Studies 14 (1981): 249–65, esp. 255; and Orgel, ed., 20–23.

15 Thomas, 229. Hunter gives an instance of an astronomer in sixteenth-century England who “burned all his books” after being accused of being a sorcerer. Hunter then writes, “It is a rule laid down in the Summa Angelica . . . that a necromancer is not to be considered purged, unless he has
Thomas thought that these books tended to remain in manuscript because of the risk inherent in printing them, "since for much of the period the conjuration of spirits was a capital offence." E. M. Butler and Grillot de Givry read the situation differently, with Butler writing that "the real deterrent" to publishing conjuring books "lies in the fact that printed texts are useless. They must be copied out by the [magician] himself with a consecrated pen on consecrated paper." For students of *The Tempest* the important point is that these conjuring books did not usually see print. Thus, while treatises that expound the theory of ceremonial or ritual magic are well known and have been linked to Prospero, the conjuring books, having remained generally inaccessible, are much less familiar. In this obscurity may lie the best single explanation for scholarly silence about Prospero's book.

As I noted earlier, recent scholarship about medieval and early modern ritual magic is rapidly changing the state of knowledge about manuscript magic books. In 1923, when Lynn Thorndike published volume 2 of his eight-volume *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, he was able to list and describe a few such books (including one that he had traced to the library of Ben Jonson); he found references to magic books in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century legal and protoscientific writings, and he wrote, with marked tentativeness, that these same works are apparently burned his books" (181n), to which J. O Halliwell responded: "To this, perhaps, is to be attributed the great rarity of those books of the magicians" (1:448). For instances of the burning of manuscript conjuring books, see, e.g., Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990): "The Dominican inquisitor ... reported ... that he had confiscated books such as the *Table of Solomon* ... from the magicians themselves, and after reading these books he had them burned in public. ... An inquisitor in Italy had a book with 'diabolical figures' reduced to ashes so that from it another copy can never be made" (156–57). See also E. M. Butler, *Ritual Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1949), 47–48.

16 Thomas, 229.
17 Butler, 48. Grillot de Givry makes the same argument: "Printed editions have no practical value. Tradition demands that a self-respecting sorcerer should possess the [book] in manuscript, written, as far as possible, in his own hand" (*Witchcraft, Magic & Alchemy*, trans. J. Courtenay Locke [London: George C. Harrap, 1931], 102). The special character of the magic book has been hinted at in *Tempest* criticism. Frank Kermode, whose influential Arden2 edition otherwise makes nothing of Prospero's magic book, includes, as a note to Prospero's insistence on "absolute purity" on his island, the statement that "The book, so highly valued by Prospero and Caliban, as well as the rod, occur in all demonology, popular and learned; they were required to be of virginal purity" (xlix).

PROSPERO’S BOOK

still extant in manuscripts in European libraries.”19 In his 1929 Witchcraft, Magic & Alchemy, de Givry included a chapter titled “The Books of the Sorcerers,” where he gives a valuable account of the “fairly considerable number” of “grimoires”—as the magic books are called in France and elsewhere20—housed in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris. He points out that in the early modern period “many noblemen possessed copies” of the grimoires, and “every physician and learned man had one hidden in some secret nook of his laboratory.”21 In 1959, when K. M. Briggs published her Anatomy of Puck, she could confidently write that “It is difficult to overestimate the number of magical manuscripts which must have been scattered about the country [of England] in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”22 She even notes in passing that one such manuscript in the Bodleian “would give a fair notion of what [Prospero’s book] was like.”23

By 1971 enough information was available for Keith Thomas to be able to provide a good general description of the manuscripts and of how they were used, directing the interested reader to several in the British and the Bodleian libraries.24 However, it was still possible in the 1970s for so renowned a scholar as G. R. Elton to write “I know of no such books surviving now”;25 more surprisingly, it was also


20 De Givry, 95–114, esp. 102. While the term grimoire was originally associated with French conjuring books of the sixteenth century and later, it is increasingly being used with reference to the entire body of manuscript conjuring books. See, e.g., The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft, ed. Rosemary Ellen Guiley (New York and Oxford: Facts on File, 1989), 144–45.

21 K. M. Briggs, The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare’s Contemporaries and Successors (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), 113. Butler refers to the many grimoires archived in “the great libraries” and suggests there might be “hundreds in private collections and in the possession of individuals all over Europe” (48).

22 Briggs describes Bodleian e Mus. 173, which includes directions “for making circles and consecrating the magician’s implements . . . , the names of spirits, and all the usual traffic of a magician,” and writes: “Prospero’s book would be a more learned one than this, and yet this would give a fair notion of what his was like” (115).

23 See Thomas, 229–30 and 236.

24 Elton’s comment about the “books of magic” which are alluded to in state papers from Cromwell’s time goes on to say: “but from [other records of the period] we learn that [the books of magic] told of such things as ‘finding out of treasure hid, . . . and consecrating of a crystal stone wherein a child shall look and see many things’” (Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation
possible for manuscript magic books to be completely ignored in studies where one would expect to find them discussed—in Wayne Shumaker’s 1972 *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, for example, and in Frances Yates’s 1979 *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. It will be harder to ignore them from now on, however. With such scholars as Richard Kieckhefer, Frank Klaassen, Nicholas Watson, and Claire Fanger turning the spotlight on magic manuscripts, students of early modern magic will be forced to include conjuring books in their discussions of occult theory and practice.

This new interest in conjuring books raises the next question about Prospero’s book—namely, if we grant the likelihood that Prospero has some version of a manuscript magic book, what are we to imagine that the book contains? We can move toward a tentative answer by looking first at the contents of actual magic books, though we will see later that Prospero’s putative book departs significantly from them. Generalizing about these manuscripts is difficult, since each differs so from every other. Klaassen notes this great variability as a distinguishing feature of manuscript conjuring books. While in other kinds of magic manuscripts—books of image magic, for example—scribes were rather meticulous in their transcriptions and were proud to cite their sources, with the conjuring books scribes freely altered, combined, added, and deleted material. As Klaassen writes, these books “have a fluid, largely anonymous content, the lineage of which would be very difficult to trace.”

Despite this fluidity, however, the grimoires share many recognizable characteristics. All of those that I have examined are, first of all, uniformly religious in tone, with the “master,” as he is called, summoning spirits only after supplicating God, enlisting God’s aid, and using God’s holy names as the major source of his power to conjure.

---


28 Klaassen, 20–21.

29 The manuscripts I refer to here include Folger MS Vb26 and the following manuscripts in the British Library, some of which include more than one grimoire: Sloane 2731, Sloane 3825, Sloane 3847, Sloane 3849, Sloane 3851, Sloane 3853, Sloane 3884, Sloane 3885, Additional 36674 (which contains several grimoires), Lansdowne 1202, and Lansdowne 1203.
There is no trace of Manichaeism in these books: God is supreme, ruling the fallen angels just as he rules everything else.\textsuperscript{30} (Marlowe’s depiction of conjuring in \textit{Doctor Faustus} makes this feature of the grimoires surprising, since Faustus can be seen as defying God in conjuring Mephistopheles.\textsuperscript{31}) Second, the grimoires are almost completely devoted to the materials, instructions, and language needed for conjuring. They are filled with pentagrams, magic circles, tables, and charts; with instructions for elaborate ritual preparations (fasting, consecration of tools, baths, suffumigations); and, most importantly, with prayers, invocations, conjurations, and formulas for binding and dismissing spirits. Very little space is given over to such mundane matters as the purpose for which the spirit is being summoned.\textsuperscript{32} Pages of conjurations, threats, and pleas may conclude with a single sentence: ”And when he is come, you may ask of him what you will.”\textsuperscript{33} Third, the books display unquestioning...
faith in the power of words and images to call forth and control spirits. Holy names are the most powerful of the conjuror’s tools, and the master again and again copies into his book the reassuring message to himself that the repetition of a particular conjuration thick with divine names will call forth the spirit even if the spirit is bound in chains—and if the spirit is so tightly bound that he absolutely cannot come, at the sound of these names he will at least send a messenger.³⁴

Within this larger context of shared common content among the grimoires, one finds interesting—and major—differences. Some documents are primarily in Latin; others, beginning in the sixteenth century, are primarily in French or English. Some manuscripts hew closely to the fiction that Solomon was the creator of the ur-grimoire, so that the names of God and the biblical anecdotes cited remain within Old Testament limits; but some, while continuing to claim Solomon as the author, depend heavily on New Testament and Roman Catholic language and stories. Some manuscripts—again, beginning in the sixteenth century—are based primarily on the Clavicula Salomonis (Key of Solomon), which emphasizes the master’s preparatory rituals; others are based instead on the Lemegeton (or Lesser Key of Solomon) with its extensive catalogue of principal spirits, their characteristics, their offices, and the legions of lesser spirits that they command (See Figure 2).³⁵

Because it is so hard to generalize about the structure or the content of conjuring books, I will focus briefly on two specific such books, both dating from the late-sixteenth century and both written primarily in English. The first—the only grimoire, so far as I know, that was published in England in the sixteenth century—appears, ironically, as Book 15 of Reginald Scot’s The Discouerie of witchcraft.³⁶ In Book 15 Scot

³⁴ See, e.g., “the booke of King Salomon called the Key of Knowledge” in British Library MS Additional 36674, fols. 5–63, esp. fol. 6v; and the Clavicula Salomonis in British Library MS Sloane 3847, fols. 2–66, esp. fol. 10v.

³⁵ For manuscripts in the Key of Solomon tradition, see, e.g., British Library MSS Sloane 3847, fols. 2–66; Additional 36674, fols. 5–22; Additional 10862; Lansdowne 1202; and Lansdowne 1203. See also The Key of Solomon the King (Clavicula Salomonis), ed. S.L.M. Mathers (London: Routledge, 1972). Mathers follows the Clavicula Salomonis in British Library MS Additional 10862, written in contracted Latin, and consults four other manuscripts, including Lansdowne 1202 and Lansdowne 1203, drawing on them for material not present in Additional 10862. For manuscripts based on the Lemegeton, see, e.g., British Library MSS Sloane 2731 and Sloane 3825. See also The Goetia, The Lesser Key of Solomon the King, Lemegeton, Book I, Clavicula Salomonis Regis, trans. Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, ed. Aleister Crowley and Hymenaeus Beta (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1995). Mathers draws on “several MS. Codices” for this edition of Book 1 of the Lemegeton (23).

³⁶ I say “ironically” because Scot’s The Discouerie of witchcraft . . . (London, 1584) is a powerful attack on witchcraft beliefs, and it is startling to find there a printed grimoire. Scot, of course, intersperses among the conjurations, circles, and pentangles harsh attacks on conjurors and on Roman Catholic rituals and priests. Book 15 of Scot’s Discouerie is actually represented onstage as a grimoire in J. C.’s 1619 The Two Merry Milkmaids, ed. G. Harold Metz (New York and London: Garland, 1979), 10–14. Addressed by a would-be conjuror as “gentle Booke” (1.1.27), it is used for summoning the spirit
Figure 1: Names with which to conjure (beginning with "the names with which Josue made the sun to stand still") and a list of "days most expedient to work any marvels end." Folger MS Vb26, page 61. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
turns away from his attack on witch-hunters in order to expose conjurors, who, he writes, “passe the degree of witches” in that conjurors “are no small fools, they go not to worke with a baggage tode or a cat, as witches doo; but with a kind of maiestie and with authoritie they call vp by name, and haue at their commandement seuentie and nine principall and princelie diuels.” In attacking these conjurors, who claim to “fetch diuels out of hell, and angels out of heauen,” who “take vpon them also the raising of tempests, and earthquakes,” Scot in effect creates a magic book of his own by combining two documents, a translation of Johan Weir’s *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum* and a magic manuscript Scot identifies marginally as the work of one T. R. written in faire letters of red & blacke vpó parchment, and made by him, Ann. 1570.

The second, Folger MS Vb26, is a book of more than two hundred folio-sized pages written almost entirely in a single late-sixteenth-century secretary hand. Like Scot’s Book 15, MS Vb26 includes a catalogue of spirits with their offices and legions of servants. (Since Scot’s catalogue is a translation of Weir’s *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum*, it essentially duplicates lists found in other replications of the Lemegeton. MS Vb26 reproduces the same form—that is, a list of “principall and princelie diuels,” with the description of the offices they perform, the shapes in which they appear to the conjuror, and the numbers of “diuels” who serve them—but the names of the spirits rarely duplicate those in lists based more closely on Lemegeton.) Where Scot’s “T. R.” manuscript is broadly Christian in its prayers and conjurations, MS Vb26 is fiercely Roman Catholic, including a full-page explication of the Roman Catholic faith “which except a man beleev[e] faithfully he cannot be saved.”

Both MS Vb26 and Scot’s “T. R.” text are typical grimoires in consisting primarily of prayers, conjurations, maledictions, magic circles, and charts; they differ from most grimoires in manifesting a great interest in the fairy world, a feature that

---

Asmody. In this first scene a pretend Asmody appears; later in the play the real spirit Asmody gives the ring of invisibility to the conjuror whose book this is. (At 1.1.32–75 *The Two Merry Milkmaids* quotes Book 15, chapters 2, 3, 4, 10, and 12 of Scot’s *Discouerie*.) I am grateful to Leslie Thomson for directing me to this play.

37 Scot, sig. 2F5r.
38 Scot, sigs. 2F5r and 2G5r. *Weir’s Pseudomonarchia Daemonum* was printed in the 1577 edition of his *De praestiguis daemonum*. (Basel, 1577) as sigs. 2N1r–2O2r. I am grateful to Georgianna Ziegler (Louis B. Thalheimer Head of Reference at the Folger Shakespeare Library) for her help in locating this elusive document.
39 The date of 8 May 1577 is included a quarter of the way through the book (on page 51), and the date 1583 appears about halfway through (on page 105). It seems not impossible to me that the writer worked on the construction of the book for at least a decade. I am grateful to both Laetitia Yeandle and Heather Wolfe (Curator of Manuscripts Emerita and Curator of Manuscripts at the Folger Shakespeare Library, respectively) for their generous assistance.
40 Folger MS Vb26, page 28.
Figure 2: “Diuels or spirites,” their physical images, functions, and the numbers they command. For Oberion, or Oberyon, see number 81. Folger MS Vb28, page 80. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
Butler singles out as characteristic of English conjuring books.\(^{41}\) Scot’s “T. R.,” for example, includes conjurations for the fairy Sibylia and her fairy sisters.\(^{42}\) MS Vb26 includes Micob, queen of the fairies, and her court of fairy sisters (Lillia, Restilia, Fata, Falla, Afria or Africa, Julya, and Venalla),\(^{43}\) but, more importantly, its final section (pages 165–200), which consists of lengthy conjurations for and pictures of specific spirits (Bilgall, Assassiell, Bethalhar, Annabath, Ascariell, Satan, Baron, Romulon, Mosacus, and Oberion), concludes with an extensive conjuration of Oberion, who is described in the manuscript more than once as “king of the fairies.”\(^{44}\) The manuscript’s presentation of Oberion, though not directly connected to *The Tempest*, is worth pausing over, both because it allows us to focus on a few specific pages of a conjuring book, and because Oberion, as presented in MS Vb26, has a fascinating dual background in romance literature and early modern history, demonstrating, among other things, how porous that particular boundary was.

When Oberion first appears as one of the eighty-two spirits catalogued in MS Vb26’s “Offices of Spirites,” he is described as follows:

> he appeareth like a kinge with a crowne one his heade. he is under the governemente of the [sun] and [moon], he teacheth a man knowledge in phisicke and he sheweth the nature of stones herbes and trees and of all mettall. he is a great and mighty kinge and he is kinge of the fayries. he causeth a man to be Invissible. he showeth where hiding tresurer is and how to obtain the saime. he telleth of thinges present past and to come: and if he be bounde to a man he will carry or bring treasuer out of the sea...\(^{45}\)

In this description the clause “he is kinge of the fayries” ties Oberion to the Oberon who came into English poetry and drama through Lord Berners’s early-sixteenth-century translation of the French prose romance *Huon of Bordeaux*, which in turn traces back to a thirteenth-century *chanson de geste*. Oberon begins his romance life as an exquisitely beautiful dwarf king-of-fairyland with great beneficent magic power; he becomes by the 1590s the Oberon of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and, by 1611, the hero of Jonson’s masque.\(^{46}\) The drawing of Oberion in MS Vb26

\(^{41}\) See Butler, 251–52.
\(^{42}\) See Scot, sig. 2H3v.
\(^{43}\) “These 7 sisters is for to shewe and teache a man the nature of hearbes and to instruct a man in phisicke. Also they will bringe a man the ringe of Invissibillity, they are under Micob the queene of fayryes” (Folger MS Vb26, page 81 [Fig. 3]).
\(^{44}\) One suspects that the Folger Shakespeare Library purchased MS Vb26 because of this section on Oberion, who is identified in the Folger catalogue record as “Oberon.”
\(^{45}\) Folger MS Vb26, page 80 (Fig. 2).
Figure 3: A second list “Of Spirrittes,” beginning with Baal, and prefaced by a description of Mycob, “queene of the fayres,” who “is of the same office that Oberyon is of.” Folger MS Vb26, page 81. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
Figure 4: “Invocationem Oberyon.” Folger MS Vb26, page 192. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
Figure 5: Oberyon and his counselors. Folger MS Vb26, page 185. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
suggests, in the spirit’s vaguely Eastern turban/crown, features of the early Oberon, whose kingdom lay in the Orient (see Figure 5 and cover).

But the Oberion of MS Vb26, though in part Oberon, is also a spirit of another sort with a quite different history. Oberion appears, for example, in 1444 in the court record of a man pilloried in England for summoning a “wycked spyryte the whyche was callyd Oberycom”; 47 and the Archiepiscopal Register of York tells us that, in 1510, a “certain demon, Oberion” (along with “four others, whereof Storax was one”) was conjured by a group in search of a demon-guarded treasure, the group including the former lord mayor of Halifax and the Church canon who owned the magic book used for the conjuration. 48

Oberion reappears in 1529 at another group conjuration, this one again an attempt to summon spirits with knowledge of buried treasure. The story of the conjuration is told in a letter to Cardinal Wolsey from a Sir William Stapleton, who wrote to Wolsey because the duke of Norfolk had pressed Stapleton to tell him (and I quote Stapleton) “whether I ever heard that your Grace had any spirit or nay.” 49 Stapleton writes, “I said I never knew no such thing,” but he then confesses that he had told the duke about an earlier incident in which Wolsey had been linked to a spirit called Oberion. In the story Stapleton told Norfolk (and now repeats in the letter to Wolsey), a certain parson of Lesingham, in company with a Sir John of Leiston and others, used a powerful magic book along with a plate they had obtained from Sir Thomas More to call up [three spirits] Andrew Malchus, Oberion, and Inchubus.” Stapleton writes, “And when they were all raised, Oberion would in no wise speak. And then the parson of Lesingham did demand of Andrew Malchus . . . why Oberyon would not speak to them.” And Andrew Malchus, bound to the parson from an earlier conjuration, replied that Oberion would not speak because Oberion served Cardinal Wolsey exclusively—or, in Stapleton’s words, “And Andrew Malchus made answer, for because [Oberion] was bound unto the lord Cardinal.” 50

47 Quoted here from Briggs, 114.
48 Quoted here from Kittredge, 208 and 519n. Storax appears in Folger MS Vb26 as one of the four “counselors” of Oberion. His name is included on page 185 (Fig. 5) with Oberion’s picture, and he is himself conjured on page 195 as one of the “4 angels and great counselors” invoked as intermediaries with their “lord Oberion.”
49 All quotations of Stapleton’s letter to Wolsey follow the transcription printed in Briggs as an appendix (255–61).
50 Kittredge, who discusses this story, hazards the guess that “Andrew Malchus” is a transmogrification of the name of Adram(m)eleh, one of the gods to whom the Sepharvites burnt their children in fire (2 Kings, xvii, 31) (210; see also 110 and 208–10). I would offer as another possibility for the origin of “Andrew Malchus” the name of the spirit “Andromalius,” which appears in the Lemegeton (e.g., in the manuscript published by S.L.M. Mather as The Goetia, and in British Library Sloane MS 3825, where he is described as being able to discover treasure that is hidden” [fol. 126]), as well as in British Library Sloane 3829, where he is summoned in an “experiment for finding out stolen or hidden things” (fol. 17).
This story of Oberion and Cardinal Wolsey not only provides the Oberion of MS Vb26 with a fascinating history, but it also serves as a reminder that early modern England is more strange than we often allow ourselves to think. A "lord Cardinal" Wolsey suspected by the duke of Norfolk of trafficking in spirits and a "Sir Thomas More, knight," involved with magic plates made for the calling up of spirits seem far removed from the early modern world that many students of Shakespeare think we know. But this alienness is, in broad outlines, replicated in, for example, the language of Richard Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, where one reads about the “huge, mightie, and royall armyes” of angels bound to “workes of ministeriall imployment” on behalf of mankind, as well as about the ranks of fallen angels that labor “by all meanes . . . to effect an universall rebellion against [God’s] lawes”—the same “wicked Spirites the Heathens honoured in stead of Gods.” Such language makes it clear that, although he would doubtless be appalled to hear his name mentioned in any discussion of conjuring, Hooker in fact posits on behalf of the established Church a spirit world similar to that supposed by conjurors of spirits.

My point is that, in terms of their underlying theology, grimoires such as MS Vb26 or Scot’s “T. R.” were not in their own time completely eccentric or irrational or necessarily evil—though they might well have been described as such by disapproving preachers and theologians. While the belief that a human being can call up demons and have them answer questions about buried treasure was far from orthodox, the grimoires’ foundational premise that demons exist and that they have power was, in fact, accepted theology: in sixteenth-century England to express doubts about the existence of demons was to invite the accusation of atheism. Further, the assumption that certain words and names have power, like the belief

---

Footnotes:
53 See Thomas, 476. As late as 1659, Meric Casaubon, in his introduction to the diaries of John Dee’s conversations with angels, again and again asserted the necessity of belief in demons, saying at one point, “upon due consideration of the premises . . . I cannot satisfi me self how any Learned man, sober and rational, can entertain such an opinion (simply and seriously) That there be no Divels nor Spirits”; and he gives as his reason for publishing Dee’s diaries his desire to convince “Atheists and such as do not believe that there be any Divels or spirits” (A True and Faithful Relation of What passed for many Yeers Between Dr. John Dee (A Mathematician of Great Fame in Eliz. and King James their Reignes) and Some Spirits [London, 1659], sigs. A1r–IIr, esp. signs. [B4r] and [F13r]).
that praying to angels is efficacious, was not only central to the work of the grimoires but underlay much of the ritual and many of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church (as Reginald Scot delighted in pointing out); and, to Puritan thinking, even the Anglican liturgy was still so dependent on incantatory prayer as to seem "nothing but an impure mass of conjuring and charming battologies."

Further, the line between the miracles sought by the master in MS Vb26 and those described in the Judeo-Christian Bible is more blurred than not. In fact, the master—in MS Vb26 and other grimoires—uses biblical miracles as models to encourage God to repeat His past interventions. On page 15 of MS Vb26 (Figure 6), for instance, the master, urging God to behave as in the past, reminds God of His driving evil spirits into swine, of Moses' calling of the plagues onto Egypt, of God's dividing the Red Sea, of Joshua's commanding of the sun and moon to stand still, and of Elijah's calling down of fire and Elisha's miraculous summoning of bears. (In the miracles of the fire and the bears, he conflates Elijah and Elisha into a single "Helias": "let all such spirits which I shall call or commaunde to come or avoid from anie place be . . . as obedient to obey my will and commaundement as the beares and her were by thy will ready to obay the commaundement of Helias." In each case the master beseeches God to "let all such spirits that I shall call be as obedient unto me" as the spirits or the plagues or the fire were to Adonay or Moses or Helias. And often the spirits invoked have good biblical credentials. The master begs for the assistance of "thy holy mighty and blessed Aungells Michaell, Gabriell, Anaell, Raphael, Eassell, Sachiell, and Samaell, or some one of them, to be present with me in this my worke and busines, which I undertake to doe in thy name and power." He then goes on to ask that

as thy holy and blessed Aungell Raphael was guid to younge Tobias, in his Journey, against the monstrous Fish and devouringe spirit Asmodeus, and as the same Asmodeus was constrained bound and avoided by thy will, and the power of thy mighty Aungells, see my god Eloy, Eloy, Eloy, let all such N as shall be unto me given, may be forced to come and obey me and to fulfill my will and commaundemente faithfully and truly to the uttermost of their powers.

As these prayers indicate, for the grimoire masters the age of miracles had not ceased, and what was done by God and his prophets and by Jesus and his Apostles could still be done if God would only hear the prayers of the grimoire master and give him power over clean and unclean spirits.

54 Ady, in commenting on the conjurors' success in making people "believe they do things really by vertue of words," traces this practice to "the Popish rout" from whom the conjurors learned it (63).

55 Quoted here from Thomas, 62. See also The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1590–1591, ed. Leland H. Carlson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 94; and Thomas Jackson, A Treatise containing the originall of unbeliefe . . . (London, 1625), 236.
Figure 6: Lines 33–53 of Folger MS Vb26, page 15. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
Figure 7: “To knowe yf A man or woman be sicke whether he or shee shall lyve or dye.” Folger MS Vb26, page 65. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection
Figure 8: Page 15, the first extant page of Folger MS Vb26. The initials of the astrologer R.C. Smith, who owned the manuscript in the nineteenth century, appear in the margin. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
The connections between the grimoires and Hooker on the one hand and the grimoires and the Bible on the other suggest that, if we are even to describe the grimoires accurately, we must be conscious of the context in which they were written and used. From the viewpoint of post-Enlightenment rationalism, they are, as Briggs describes them, an “impious . . . elaborate rigmarole.”56 But, as Alasdair MacIntyre famously wrote, “To say that a belief is rational is to talk about how it stands in relation to other beliefs.”57 Stuart Clark, using this statement as the starting point for his investigation of European witchcraft, has demonstrated that the body of ideas about witches that dominated Europe for three hundred years did make a “kind of sense,” and that this sense, as he suspected, “lay in its coherence with ideas about other things.”58 Clark explores this set of ideas in his brilliant study of early modern printed books about witchcraft, Thinking with Demons. To study the grimoires with a rigor in any way equal to Clark’s would require extensive investigation of, for example, such theological matters as the range of early modern beliefs about demons and angels, about miracles past and present, about Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory; it would require an examination of such cultural phenomena as the clergy’s professional antipathy to the village cunning man, the interest of medical doctors in the grimoires, and (in England) the impact of secularization on the emotional and spiritual needs of the populace. And it would require a tracing of the course of Hermetic/Neoplatonic astral magic and Cabalistic mysticism—along with alchemical, astrological, and sympathetic magics—as they found their way into the early modern intellectual world and into the grimoires. Like the printed books that Clark studied, the magic manuscripts cannot be isolated from the culture that created them without seriously obscuring and distorting them.

Conversely, the more attention we pay to the grimoires, the richer understanding we are likely to have of early modern culture as a whole. As Clark wrote, “the best places to gain historical access to a strange culture are those where its meanings seem most opaque.”59 Clark found his point of entry into the “strange culture” of early modern Europe through the period’s published writings against witchcraft; I suggest that the grimoires offer equally promising historical access to the culture that produced the plays of Shakespeare.

56 Briggs, 113.
58 Clark, vii–x, esp. viii.
59 Clark, ix.
In the meantime, given what we know about actual conjuring books, what are we, as readers and audiences of *The Tempest*, to think about the book that Prospero presumably uses? I suggest, first of all, that we should recognize that the book both is and is not a grimoire. As an instrument that provides Prospero with instructions for calling spirits from their confines, it represents a book not unfamiliar to any of the hundreds of Jacobean men and women who consulted a village cunning man or a London astrologer-cum-wizard. As such, it shows us why the usual categorizing of the play’s magic as “white magic” for Prospero and “black magic” for Sycorax is inadequate. I cannot hope within the space of this essay to spell out the complicated early modern interconnections among the ancient (and recovered) “learned or holy magic,” the newly vigorous natural magic, and the various forms of conjuring and witch-related magics inherited from the medieval world. I can, however, at least suggest that Prospero’s book leads us neither to Neoplatonic/Cabalistic magic nor to witchcraft, the two kinds of magic that are most often described in *The Tempest*. Instead, his book as grimoire takes us to a tremendously important third category, that of “magician” or “necromancer.” As Edward Peters has shown, the magician (who predates magus and witch) was the dominant magic figure in England and on the Continent until Satanism and Neoplatonic theurgy arose. We know little about magicians, Peters writes, because they “have either been discussed under the broad heading of learned magic or as an undifferentiated part of the category of witches.” In the sixteenth century, though, attention was focused primarily on the two categories of magician and witch, as we can see in the writings of James I, George Gifford, and Johan Weir, all of whom ignored both the magus and the practitioner of natural magic.

---

60 The most famous of such London astrologer-cum-wizards is Simon Forman, whose holograph manuscript for calling the spirit Assasell is one of the four magic manuscripts owned by Gabriel Harvey now collected in British Library MS Additional 36674. The manuscript opens with a prayer “revealed by King Solomon anno Domini 1567 die 20 Februarii.” For a fine study of Forman, see Barbara Howard Traister’s *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2001). Traister includes a chapter titled “Forman’s Occultism” (97–119) that focuses on manuscripts in the Bodleian Library.

61 As Edward Peters has shown, these are also the two categories of magic on which most scholarly attention has focused; see *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1978), xii–xiii, esp. xii.

62 Peters, xii.

63 James I writes: “There are principallie two sortes, where-unto all the partes of that unhappie arte are redacted; wherof the one is called Magie or Necromancie, the other Sorcerie or Witch-craft” (*Daemonologie*, sig. B4v); for Gifford, magicians were the Devil’s “other sort of Witches, whome the people call cunning men and wise women” (*A Dialogue concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* [London, 1593], sig. [A3v]). Weir’s purpose in his *De praestigiis daemonum*, he writes, is “to distinguish the infamous magician from the witch and the poisoner” (98).
Reginald Scot, who blurs the distinction between the magus and the magician by attributing some of the trappings of the magus to the conjuror, sets this composite figure (who works "with a kind of majestie, and with authoritie") in clear opposition to the witch (who works "with a baggage tode or a cat").

Whether in the legends about those archmagicians Solomon and Virgil or in the stories and legal records about the cunning men and wise men (popular versions of the magician), the connection to conjuring books is omnipresent. As Solomon and Virgil derived their power over demons or spirits from their books, so, according to James I, Weir, and others, did early modern magicians find in their books the language for controlling spirits. Through charms, herbs, astrology, and the conjuring of spirits, the early modern magicians set out to solve a variety of problems for their clients, attracting to themselves enormous hostility from the Church. Especially in their countering of witchcraft—through "unwitching," exorcising, and identifying and exposing witches—magicians, writes Clark, were "considered by their clerical mentors to be as much, perhaps more, of a threat than the witch who inflicted the original injury." The significant point here is that, for an early-seventeenth-century audience of *The Tempest*, Prospero's references to his "book" and Caliban's allusions to Prospero as a "magician" and a "sorcerer" would, by placing Prospero in the category of "magician" or "white witch," have constructed him as a natural enemy of Sycorax. This possibility encourages a fresh look at the play in terms of Prospero's connections back to the Virgil and Solomon magician figures.

64 Scot, sig. 2F5r.
65 Peters includes the famous story of Virgil's magic book on pages 54–55. See also Michael Hattaway, "Paradoxes of Solomon: Learning in the English Renaissance," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29 (1968): 499–502, esp. 504–6; Moncure Daniel Conway, *Solomon and Solomonic Literature* (Chicago: Open Court; London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1899), 236–43; and John Webster Spargo, *Virgil the Necromancer: Studies in Virgilian Legends* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1934). Margaret Tudor-Clayton argues that Virgil's "magic" was sympathetic, natural magic, and that Prospero's is modeled on this benign Virgilian form (*Jonson, Shakespeare and Early Modern Virgil* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998], 8–9). It is hard, though, to read *Virgilius*, the sixteenth-century "romance" about Virgil as a magician, as Tudor-Clayton does. On pages 3–4 of *Virgilius*, for example, Virgilius is shown getting his books of necromancy from a devil he releases from imprisonment, and, on page 7, Virgilius looks "in his boke of negromancye where in he was very parfeyte" (*Virgilius* [London, 1812]). This is not, I would argue, the picture of a magician as "natural philosopher," as Tudor-Clayton insists.
66 See James I, *Daemonology*, 16; Weir, *De praestigiis daemonum*, 110–12.
67 See Clark, 457–71, esp. 461–64; and Macfarlane, 67, 126, and 129.
68 Clark, 459. For an account of the services performed by cunning men, see Gifford, sig. F2r. See also Richard Bernard, who lists the services of "white witches" in countering witchcraft but goes on to argue that this healing, which cannot be done by natural means, must be itself devilish (A Guide to Grandjury Men . . . [London, 1629], 126–30).
69 Macfarlane explicitly refers to local magicians as "the enemy" of the witch (126).
and out to the users of grimoires in Shakespeare’s own day, and it may be especially fruitful in terms of the magician/witch enmity that manifests in Prospero’s antipathy to (even the memory of) Sycorax.  

At the same time, however, Prospero’s book is not a grimoire—or at least so it seems today. While further research by historians of magic may alter this conclusion, the contents of Prospero’s book, as reflected in his language and actions, must be imagined as departing in significant ways from extant grimoires. Prospero’s relationship with the spirit-world has an insouciance and arrogance that would have baffled the master who constructed MS Vb26. The language of the grimoires for calling spirits and licensing them to depart conveys at every point a full awareness that the spirits are unspeakably powerful, dangerous, and other. The master takes his life in his hands in summoning a spirit who may do him terrible damage or who may refuse to depart when told to do so. The MS Vb26 master thus hedges his summoning of Oberion, for example, with dozens of restrictions and qualifications. Oberion is to show himself “in faire forme and shape,” “without anie delaye or advantage takinge” at any of the master’s words, “without anie feare or hurte” to the master or to “anie other creature,” and so forth.

Prospero, in contrast, says blithely to Ariel, “Go bring the rabble, / O’er whom I give thee power, here to this place. / Incite them to quick motion” (4.1.40–42). His dismissal of the spirits is equally abrupt. Where the grimoires give the master appropriate language to handle the terrifying moment at which the spirit is to be dismissed—“Go vnto the place . . . where thy Lord GOD hath appointed thee . . . without damage or hurt of me, or of anie creature”—Prospero simply orders, “Avoid. No more,” and the spirits “heavily vanish” (4.1.158, 158sd).

Even more astonishing to the writer of MS Vb26 would have been the nature of the spirits summoned and used by Prospero. The spirits conjured in the grimoires are a strange mixture of Old Testament pagan gods, Christian angels, Cabalistic demons, biblical devils, and Babylonian monsters. Prospero’s are quite other, as we learn in 5.1 when he pronounces the famous soliloquy that concludes with his abjuration of magic (ll. 42–66). The first eighteen lines of the speech repeat the general form of a conjuration in language largely borrowed from Golding’s translation of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, where Medea invokes the “Elues of Hilles, of Brookes, of Woods alone, / Of standing Lakes, and of the Night. . . . ” When Ben Jonson imi-
tated this speech in 1609 for the witch’s invocation in The Masque of Queens, he replaced Medea’s unnamed, undifferentiated nature spirits with “Fiends and Furies.../ You, that (to arme us) have yourselves disarrm’d / And to our powers resign’d your whips and brands.”74 In having his witches summon fiends and furies, Jonson removes the invocation from the Ovidian world and places it in the demonic world of the witch.

Shakespeare, in contrast, retains the language—and the spirits—that he found in Medea’s invocation. The list of magic powers that Prospero echoes from Ovid—power to create storms and earthquakes, to control thunder and lightning, to raise the dead—are more or less consistent with those sought by the master in the grimoires; the spirits, though, are not. Prospero’s invocation of elves “whose pastime / Is to make midnight mushrumps,” of “demi-puppets that / By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make” (ll. 47–48, 45–46), places the magician, and therefore his book, within the Ovidian, the poetic, the fictional. That the speech is, as Jonathan Bate points out, an improvisation on and translation of “witchcraft’s great set-piece,”75 imitated not only by Jonson and Shakespeare but also by Thomas Heywood in The Brazen Age, means that the speech was probably instantly recognizable as fictional invocation.

In the same way, Prospero’s use of his magic book to create spectacle is closer to the counterfactual world of fiction than to most grimoires. As a creator of such “vanities” as Greek-mythological masques and spirit dances with “mocks and mows” (4.1.44, 101sd), Prospero is reminiscent not so much of the grimoire master as of Elizabethan fictional depictions of such masters.76 Robert Reed has remarked that “Prospero’s ability to produce spirits in fantastic shapes or in the likeness of Grecian goddesses” traces back to the practice of fictional sorcerers, and he sees Prospero as, in fact, providing a terminus to an “era of unparalleled popularity of sorcerers on the stage.”77 Barbara Traister, too, writes that, in the decades preceding the appearance of Prospero, the magician as “creator and director of spectacle, pageant, and masque” was a “stock formula” in the romance epic and on the London stage.78 And, just as within the world of epic, romance, and drama Prospero has multiple forebears and fellows, so

74 Ben Jonson, The Masque of Queens, celebrated from the House of Fame... at Whitehall (London, 1609), sigs. C2v–C3r.
75 Bate also comments importantly on Shakespeare’s interesting placement of the lines borrowed from Ovid—not at the beginning of the play, before the magically created storm, but near the end and in conjunction with the rejection of magic; see Jonathan Bate, Shakespeare and Ovid (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 252.
76 However, see note 32, above.
77 Robert Reed, The Occult on the Tudor and Stuart Stage (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1965), 125 and 88.
his magic book has multiple counterparts. Traister points out that in Spenser and Ariosto, for instance, magicians have "legions of sprights" at their command and all the magicians "are dependent on books for their magic" — as, I might add, are the conjuror in 2 Henry VI, the hero of Friar Bacon, Pope Alexander in Barnabe Barnes’s The Devil’s Charter, and many of the other stage magicians who precede Prospero.

Prospero’s book, then, seems to be simultaneously a grimoire and a stage-prop (or romance-prop) grimoire, just as Prospero himself is simultaneously (or perhaps alternately) a serious master of spirits and a stage-or-romance wizard who also reminds us (as I’ve argued elsewhere) of a Renaissance magus and a Jacobean street magician. But just as The Tempest is more than a play about a magician, so Prospero’s book, within the play’s larger context of epic sea journeys and contemporary Mediterranean/Atlantic voyages, has an additional resonance that at first seems quite other than that carried by the grimoires. That resonance attaches to it in terms of the larger power of the book *per se*.

It is this resonance that Stephen Greenblatt locates when he reads Caliban’s words “Remember first to possess his books” as having essentially nothing to do with magic but instead as representing a moment in the battle between the lettered European and the unlettered islander. Prospero’s book in this reading represents a source not of magical potency but of the power of the “Civil” over those who, lacking “letters and Writing,” are, in Samuel Purchas’s words, “esteemed British, Savage, Barbarous.” Peter Greenaway, like Greenblatt, sees the book as an image of Prospero’s (nonmagical) power and has Caliban tear out and scatter the leaves of Prospero’s books not because the books are magic but because they represent Prospero’s learnedness, his “cultural baggage,” his “litterall advantage.”

But both Greenaway and Greenblatt, acknowledging the power that inhabits the book (especially in the eyes of the nonliterate), go on to suggest, if indirectly, a connection between the book as the agent of “civilization” and as the source of supernatural potency. Greenaway has Caliban’s line “I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer” (3.2.46–47) delivered on a beach littered with buried columns, heads of statues, “urns, busts, reliefs, tombs.” As the line is spoken, “Caliban waves his hand at the objects of a far-off, foreign, unknown (to him) civilization,” and “antique scrolls, papers, fly up into his face . . . the air is now full of the stuff—impossibly more than

---

82 Greenaway, 124–25. The phrase “litterall advantage” is Purchas’s, quoted in Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 10.
83 Greenaway, 125.
he can have ripped from his stolen books.” 84 And Greenblatt, providing a context for Caliban’s “Burn but his books,” recounts the story told by Claude Duret in 1607 about the Hurons who “were convinced that we [Europeans] were sorcerers, imposters come to take possession of their country, after having made them perish by our spells, which were shut up in our inkstands, in our books, etc.—inasmuch that we dared not, without hiding ourselves, open a book or write anything.” 85

The Duret anecdote, by turning the book of the explorer into a kind of “magic book,” points obliquely to an unexpected connection between the explorer/conqueror and the sorcerer. The connection is buttressed by Greenblatt’s discussion of “the discourse of travel in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.” 86 He finds the “strength” of this discourse in its expression of “the shock of the unfamiliar, the provocation of an intense curiosity, . . . the encounter with difference that is at once initiated and epitomized by Columbus’s marvelous landfall in an unimagined hemisphere.” 87 I suggest that these phrases describing geographical discovery from the point of view of the lettered—“the shock of the unfamiliar,” “the provocation of an intense curiosity,” “the encounter with difference”—could just as well be describing the conjuror’s attempted forays into the dark world of the spirits. The resemblance between the explorer and the conjuror appears as well in the language of subjugation used by the conqueror against his victim and by the conjuror against a summoned spirit:

Therefore . . . I doo bind you and constreine you into my will and power; that you being thus bound, may come vnto me in great humilitie, and to appeare in your circles before me visiblie, in faire forme and shape . . . , and to obeie vnto me in all things, whatoever I shall desire, and that you may not depart from me without my licence. And if you doo against my precepts, I will promise vnto you that you shall descend into the profound deepeness of the sea, except that you doo obeie vnto me . . . . 88

A comparable linguistic parallel is found in the accusations of treachery and lying leveled by the grimoire masters against the spirits and by New World explorers against the Indians. 89

84 Greenaway, 125.
86 Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 2–3.
87 Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 3.
88 Scot, sig. 2H6v.
89 The tone of the grimoire masters is captured in Simon Forman’s language about a summoned spirit: “And if he do not tell you the truth in these things then . . . punish him. And if he say, leave punishing me and I will do it, then say him nay. I will punish thee most cruelly for this lie” (MS Additional 36674, fol. 48v). For accusations of treachery and lying against native Virginians and North Carolinians in the first decade of settlement (1607–1617), see the accounts of George Percy,
Prospero is, of course, both voyager and sorcerer, and The Tempest, through its bookish allusions, conjures the long sweep of human exploration, colonizing, and empire-building that predates the early modern period. I have argued elsewhere that the play’s intertextual citations serve to make the play an episode, as it were, in a great and continuous sequence of voyage stories and that behind this sequence of epics, romances, and dramas stretching from Homer’s Odyssey through The Tempest lies the ancient and ongoing saga of exploration, colonization, and suffering that is human history. In terms of Prospero’s book—as book—the significant point is that, whether in poetry or travel narrative, the empire-builder is always set against the barbaric other; as early as the Aeneid, Jove’s promise is that Aeneas will “crush wild peoples and set up laws for men and build walls.” From Cicero on, the power “to transplant human beings from a barbarous life in the wilderness to a civilized social system” was seen as belonging to the eloquent; and, long before the writing of The Tempest, much of the power that Cicero grants to eloquence had become located more specifically in the book—in the power of reading and writing. As Greenblatt notes, “those who wrote the books . . . saw writing as a decisive mark of superiority.” Within the real-world saga of exploration and colonization—especially as it manifested in early modern Europe, Africa, and the New World—the book therefore carried enormous significance as a sign of learning, of civilization, and thus of both real and perceived power.

It is here that the book of magic converges with the book of the explorer/conqueror and where our sense of Prospero’s book as a “magic book” spills over into the play’s voyage story. When Prospero says of Gonzalo, “Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me / From mine own library with volumes that / I prize above my dukedom” (1.2.198–200), Prospero evokes simultaneous images of the humanist scholar, the early modern sorcerer, and the lettered European who uses the book as a weapon against those perceived as “Brutish, Savage, Barbarous.” The Bible, the grimoire, the book carried by the explorer: all possess a mana, a force that can be perceived as

92 Quoted here from Greenblatt, Learning to Curse, 20.
93 Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 9–10.
“magic” (as we see in the Duret anecdote). That Prospero’s magic book remains offstage, a source of power that we only imagine as an actual object, increases that mana. Like the offstage alchemical laboratory in Jonson’s *Alchemist* (which for Sir Epicure Mammon is Novo Orbo, Peru, and Solomon’s Orphir), Prospero’s book takes on a reality all the greater because imagined rather than seen. But, unlike the *Alchemist*’s alembic, Prospero’s book is no mirage, no fraud. In the context of the play, it is a source of tremendous power, and Prospero’s decision to destroy it seems, within the frame of magic and sorcery, only prudent.

Within the frame of literacy as civilization and as power, however, the decision is more ambiguous. When, as in Greenaway’s film, we see Prospero’s books—leather-bound, gorgeous, their pages yielding all the world’s mythologies, its temples, its art, its histories—their destruction seems, to lovers of books and admirers of Western civilization, both problematic and poignant. To those who instead share Caliban’s view of Prospero, who see Prospero as little more than a tyrant and Western civilization as little more than tyranny, the destruction of the book may be more a matter of celebration. Such a divided response to the play today seems almost inevitable, forcing the early-twenty-first-century viewer/reader to grapple with the meanings of literacy, of history, of civilization, and to confront the clash of values and of worlds implied in *The Tempest*’s larger story.

The book of magic that I suggest Shakespeare provides for Prospero carries with it, as book *per se*, a long and difficult colonial and postcolonial history, especially since it is represented as the source of Prospero’s control over the spirits who torment Caliban and who make possible Prospero’s rule over his island kingdom. As a grimoire—and even more so as a stage-prop grimoire—its historical moment seems much further in the past and its baggage strangely lighter. But it opens up a host of questions about Prospero and his magic, many of which must remain unanswered until we know more about manuscript conjuring books. As Nicholas Watson points out, we cannot, for example, fully grasp who Prospero is as a magi-

---

94 On the “magic” power of the book, specifically that attaching to books in the eyes of aboriginal Americans, see James Axtell, “The Power of Print in the Eastern Woodlands,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 44 (1987): 300–309. Axtell quotes Thomas Harriot’s account of the Roanoke voyage of 1585, in which the natives see books as “works of gods” (301–2), despite the attempts of the Englishmen to disabuse them of this superstition.

95 F. H. Mares points out in his edition of *The Alchemist* that “the laboratory—though it is never seen, or need not be—is the symbol at the centre of the play. It is the dream factory, the most potent instrument of delusion” (lvi). Mares notes other features of this 1610 play which seem to me to be interestingly parallel to *The Tempest*, including the fact that “the time of the action is pretty well co-terminous with the duration of the play in performance” (xvi). Given the dates and venues of performance of the two plays, it seems plausible that *The Tempest* was written in answer to *The Alchemist*. 
cian or why his book appears to differ from extant grimoires until our knowledge of the field is greater. We know enough, however, to see that awareness of the existence of grimoires forces us to look again at all the early modern wizard and sorcerer plays and their magic books, beginning with the commedia dell’arte and ending with, or soon after, The Tempest itself. And even a glimpse into the world of grimoire masters, of Oberion and Storax, of the Lemegeton and the Clavicle of Solomon brings us the salutary reminder that there is much yet to learn and understand not only about The Tempest but also about the world that is supposedly our own scholarly bailiwick.

96 Private correspondence. I am grateful to Watson, to Claire Fanger, and especially to Frank Klaassen for so generously sharing their expertise with me. Any inaccuracies that remain are despite their kind efforts.