

Excerpts from
Shakespeare
& the
Itinerant Street Conjurers

with a fresh interpretation of the phrases
'hinge nor loop' , 'exit pursued by a bear',

revealing Shakespeare's knowledge of a
17th century conjuring trick
and how the method by which that trick
was accomplished has been hidden in
the text for over 400 years,

and proposing that Shakespeare, in
staging the illusion scene in *The Winter's
Tale*, had two specific objects in relation
to King James

MARTIN PROBERT

EXCERPTS
from the Paperback Version of

Shakespeare
and the
Itinerant Street Conjurers

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Shakespeare and the Itinerant Street Conjurers

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Introduction: Witchcraft and Juggling

Prospero, in Act V of the *Tempest*, tells us of the magic he has performed:

I have bedimm'd

The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault
Set roaring war...

Such magic—the influencing of the sun, the winds and waves—is typical of the magic which witches were supposed to perform. But not everyone believed that witches really had such powers. They realised that the witches' magic was, in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a 'pretended art'. Yet the dictionary has a second definition, a definition of something else also called 'magic' which is 'the art of producing ... surprising phenomena resembling the pretended results of magic'. Which is the art that Shakespeare would have encountered when he walked out of the Globe and wandered about the streets: the art of the street conjurer.

For street conjuring was a common sight in Shakespeare's England. To many, sleight of hand and witchcraft were often seen as one and the same thing. It is a theme that we will return to several times.

Shakespeare would not have referred to the sleight-of-hand workers as 'conjurers'. Shakespeare would have called them

‘jugglers’. If that brings up an image of someone throwing coloured balls into the air, it is the wrong image. That meaning of the word ‘juggler’ only dates from the nineteenth century. The word ‘juggler’ in the seventeenth century simply meant an entertainer, someone who worked alone or in a troupe, as an acrobat, or exhibiting performing animals, or showing puppet plays, or performing mystifying tricks.

Surprisingly we know exactly what tricks were performed by the jugglers in Shakespeare’s time. Their tricks are described in detail in a book known to Shakespeare, Reginald Scot’s 1584 *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. It is a huge book of over 500 pages. Within the book is a section of 31 pages in which the jugglers’ tricks are described. We will have a look at what use Shakespeare made of the juggler, and the jugglers’ tricks, in two of his plays, *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*.

Part 1 below is based on material in an online PhD thesis submitted to McGill University by J. A. Shea entitled *The Juggler in Shakespeare: Con-Artistry, Illusionism, and Popular Magic in Three Plays*.

Part 2 presents my own thoughts on the subject.

Part 1

Fast and Loose

Desdemona has lost her handkerchief. Iago, who has got hold of it, persuades Othello that Desdemona has given it as a love token to Cassio. Othello asks Desdemona for the handkerchief but she is unable to produce it.

Othello (III.iv) says:

That is a fault.

That handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give:

She [the Egyptian] was a charmer [a sorcerer]...

So it is not just any old handkerchief that Desdemona has lost. It is the 'handkerchief' of an 'Egyptian' sorcerer. 'Egyptians' was a seventeenth-century term for Romani people, for it was thought, incorrectly, that the Romani came originally from Egypt.

We now open Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, p. 276, to a trick entitled 'Fast and loose'. Scot explains what this trick is: 'how to knit a hard knot upon a handkerchief, and to undo the same with words'. Scot is going to teach us a trick with a handkerchief, and the trick is called 'fast and loose'. The text begins: 'The Aegyptians juggling witchcraft or sortilegie standeth much in fast and loose...'

So both Scot and Shakespeare are introducing some trickery based upon the 'handkerchief' of an 'Egyptian' sorcerer.

This trick, known as 'fast and loose', is one that both Shakespeare and his audience will have encountered in the hands of the street juggler. The magic worker begins by taking two opposite corner ends of the handkerchief. These he ties together in a loose reef knot. He appears to pull the knot tight, but in so doing he causes the knot to re-form in a manner that will allow it to be pulled apart. 'Then will it seeme a true and a firme knot.' Then, while handing the bunched-up handkerchief to an onlooker, the knot is secretly dissolved. 'And so after some words used, and wagers laied, take the handkercher and shake it, and it will be loose.'

The phrase 'fast and loose', while referring to such tricks, was also applied to inconstancy, to the breaking apart of the knot of marriage. By associating the handkerchief in Othello with the handkerchief of the well-known fast-and-loose trick, Shakespeare's audience will have sensed that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona was about to come apart.

Shakespeare drops several more clues to enable his audience to make the link with the fast-and-loose trick.

When Iago first speaks with Othello, his very first question is 'Are you fast married?' (1.ii.11). Then, describing the handkerchief, Othello says 'there's magic in the web of it'. A few lines further on, when Othello once more demands the handkerchief, Desdemona says, 'This is a trick...' (3.iv.65,81), which, in the double sense of 'fast and loose', is exactly what it proves to be.

Pages 11-36 not included

In Part 2, not included here, are fresh interpretations of the phrases 'hinge nor loop' and 'exit pursued by a bear'.

In addition we reveal that Shakespeare knew exactly how one of the street-conjurors' tricks was performed, and we demonstrate – with the aid of photographs - that although the method by which that trick was accomplished is described within Shakespeare's text, it has lain unnoticed for over 400 years.

In the final section of Part 2 we argue that Shakespeare had two objects when staging the illusion scene in *The Winter's Tale*, firstly to flatter King James, and secondly to obtain justice for the jugglers at a time when sleight of hand and witchcraft had often been seen as one and the same thing.

About the Author

I have not taught Shakespeare, nor acted in a play of Shakespeare's, nor directed a Shakespeare play, nor written criticisms of Shakespeare productions. But from the age of six I have been interested in magic and the allied arts, and the further back one goes into the history of conjuring, the more one discovers evidence of performances taking place on the street. And so one year I took my own magic act onto the streets of Europe, which is, as it were, my sole qualification for having written this essay on *Shakespeare and the Itinerant Street Conjurers*.

Or almost. As is revealed in *Love Letters of a Swiss Doctor and English Poet*, my interest in Shakespeare goes back almost as far as my interest in the history of street conjurers.

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Shakespeare & the Itinerant Street Conjurers

Street conjuring was a common sight in Shakespeare's England. In this article we look at what use Shakespeare made of the juggler, and the jugglers' tricks, in two of his plays, *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*.

We offer fresh interpretations of the phrases 'hinge nor loop' and 'exit pursued by a bear'.

In addition we reveal that Shakespeare knew exactly how one of the street-conjurers' tricks was performed, and we demonstrate – with the aid of photographs - that although the method by which that trick was accomplished is described within Shakespeare's text, it has lain unnoticed for over 400 years.

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