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Cunning-folk in Daniel Defoe's Occult Treatises: An Insight into Popular Magic in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain

Abstract

According to the historian Owen Davies, Daniel Defoe represented cunning-folk as pure quacks who played tricks upon their clients to despoil them of their money. This paper adopts a more qualified point of view. Admittedly, most cunning-folk did not possess any supernatural powers at all and were only trying to swindle their patients. But Defoe did not discard the possibility that some of those magical practitioners might have enlisted the services of the Devil to achieve their cures. Indeed, positing the existence of a world of spirits was part of Defoe's strategy to combat atheism. This was an aim he shared with the Restoration thinkers Méric Casaubon, Henry More and Joseph Glanvill. But Defoe lived in a different intellectual context : that of the early Enlightenment, which was marked by a growing scepticism towards the existence of the supernatural. This goes a long way towards accounting for his ambivalent portrayal of cunning-folk.

Keywords

Daniel Defoe – Cunning-folk – Popular magic – Great Britain – Eighteenth century – Early Enlightenment – Devil

Résumé

Selon l'historien Owen Davies, Daniel Defoe représente les devins-guérisseurs comme de véritables charlatans, qui trompent leurs clients pour leur soutirer de l'argent. Cet article adopte un point de vue plus nuancé. Certes, la plupart des devins-guérisseurs ne possèdent aucun pouvoir surnaturel et tentent seulement d'escroquer leurs patients. Mais Defoe n'écarte pas la possibilité que certains de ces praticiens de la magie aient pu recourir aux services du Diable pour effectuer leurs guérisons. De fait, poser l'existence d'un monde d'esprits fait partie de la stratégie de Defoe pour combattre l'athéisme. C'est un but qu'il partage avec des penseurs de la Restauration tels que Méric Casaubon, Henry More ou Joseph Glanvill. Mais Defoe vit dans un contexte intellectuel différent : celui des Lumières précoces, qui est marqué par un scepticisme grandissant à l'égard du surnaturel. Ceci explique en grande partie son portrait ambivalent des devins-guérisseurs.

Mots-clés

Daniel Defoe – Devins-guérisseurs – Magie populaire – Grande-Bretagne – XVIII^e siècle – Lumières précoces – Diable

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Cunning-folk in Daniel Defoe's Occult Treatises: An Insight into Popular Magic in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Introduction

Daniel Defoe is best known for his novels *Moll Flanders* (1722), *Roxana* (1724) and, above all, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). However, he also wrote a great many treatises, pamphlets and newspaper articles on a seemingly endless variety of subjects. One of them is the supernatural. In the 1720s, Defoe produced three occult—or demonological—treatises: *The Political History of the Devil* (1726), *A System of Magick* (1727) and *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727). In these works, he deals with angels and demons, draws a full-length portrait of the Devil and evokes his notorious earthly instruments, evil witches. In the first two treatises, *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magick*, he likewise pays considerable attention to practitioners of “good” magic known as cunning-folk. Their multifarious activities include fortune-telling, recovering lost or stolen property, witch-finding, unbewitching and healing¹. Besides discussing cunning-folk at length in a general way, Defoe portrays three representatives of the cunning trade and their clients in a few short scenes. These particular cunning-folk may have existed. But they are much more likely to have been invented by Defoe. One of them is called “Dr Boreman”. The other two are given no names, and are only referred to as the “Northampton” and “Bristol” cunning-men, after their places of residence. Defoe also devotes a scene to a conversation he holds about cunning-folk with an anonymous “countryman”, which provides him with an opportunity to dispel some prejudices about them. He thus achieves a fairly well-rounded portrayal of early eighteenth-century British practitioners of popular magic. According to the historian Owen Davies, it is one that is suffused with scepticism about their powers and prowesses: “From Defoe’s [...] ‘enlightened’ viewpoint [...] cunning-folk were [...] to be discarded as relics of the past [...] He decried both the deceits of cunning-folk and the conceits of those who continued to resort to them”². Defoe’s *System of Magick* “stoked anti-cunning-folk sentiment” and endorsed Francis Hutchinson’s sceptical position that cunning-folk were “a fraudulent reality”³, thus possibly paving the way for the 1736 Witchcraft Act, which provided that “their magical activities were no longer considered as technically feasible but rather explicitly fraudulent pretences designed to fool the

¹ Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study*, [1970], 2nd ed., London, Routledge, 1991, p. 117-118, 121, 127; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, [1971], Oxford, OUP, 1997, p. 178, 213, 233-234, 237; James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia, PENN, 1997, p. 67; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford, OUP, 1997, p. 463; Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History*, London, Hambledon and London, 2003, p. 93-118; Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2005, p. 3, 41.

² Owen Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 40-41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

credulous”⁴. Davies’s assessment is shared by Defoe scholars Paula Backscheider and John Richetti. Backscheider stresses that “*A System of Magick* [...] exposes modern magicians and fortunetellers as frauds and cheats”⁵, while Richetti argues that “Defoe has absolutely no tolerance for popular beliefs in magic and witchcraft and pure contempt for those conjurers and ‘cunning men’ who swindle ignorant folk”⁶.

There is some truth in this view. But Defoe’s outlook on cunning-folk in *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magick* is more ambiguous. Admittedly, it is indebted to the works of sceptical authors on witchcraft and magic such as Reginald Scot⁷, John Wagstaffe, Thomas Ady, John Webster or the poet and satirist Samuel Butler. However, as we shall argue, Defoe’s view of cunning-folk is not unmitigatedly sceptical. Although he does not look upon it as the most likely option, he does not quite rule out the possibility that cunning-folk might occasionally perform truly magical feats by consorting with supernatural forces. Defoe’s willingness to envisage the possibility that cunning-folk’s performances might involve the supernatural should come as no surprise to us if we consider that his main objective in his demonological treatises is not so much to suppress popular prejudices and beliefs about cunning-folk, magic and the Devil—although it is certainly on his agenda—as to reassert the existence of an invisible world of spirits in order to fight atheism. This was an objective Meric Casaubon, Henry More and Joseph Glanvill had also pursued in the second half of the seventeenth century⁸. But the fact that Defoe lived in a supposedly more “enlightened” age ensured that he proceeded differently to achieve that goal and that his outlook on cunning-folk was in several respects different from theirs.

Cunning-folk as cheats: the impact of sceptical works about witchcraft and magic

In *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magick*, cunning-folk are generally depicted as charlatans. They are “*meer Jugglers, Cheats, Mountebanks, and Posture-masters*” as well as “*Rogues*”⁹, who play tricks on their clients. They pretend to magic, but most of them are ignorant of the Black Art. Regardless of their appellation, they are not cunning. If they are sometimes thought to be so, it is only owing to their clients’ lack of cunning¹⁰. Like the Bristol fair cunning-man, they are inclined to take advantage of their patients’ credulity. Some of them pretend to converse with spirits, like Dr Boreman, but they probably do not do so¹¹. Neither is it likely that they deal with the Devil, as some of them claim to do, like The East-Smithfield cunning-man—at least until he became a black witch¹².

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ Paula R. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: A Life*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989, p. 523.

⁶ John Richetti, *The Life of Daniel Defoe*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, p. 172.

⁷ Pierre Kapitaniak points out that Reginald Scot does not embrace philosophical scepticism as it is professed by authors such as Montaigne or theorised by Richard Popkin. Scot is a sceptic in that, as a pragmatic gentleman, he doubts the reality of witchcraft and magic. See Pierre Kapitaniak, “Introduction”, Reginald Scot, *La sorcellerie démystifiée*, trans. Pierre Kapitaniak and Jean Migrenne, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 2015, p. 5, 12-14, 72-73. Philip C. Almond, Scot’s recent biographer, also refers to his “scepticism”. See Philip C. Almond, *England’s First Demonologist: Reginald Scot and ‘The Discoverie of Witchcraft’*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2014, p. 135, 146, 182-186.

⁸ See Pierre Kapitaniak, *op. cit.*, p. 76-79; Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations c. 1650-c. 1750*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 57, 60, 65, 116.

⁹ Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick*, London, 1727, “Preface”, [i,ii].

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, “Preface”, [ii].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

¹² Daniel Defoe, *The Political History of the Devil*, [1726], New York, AMS Press, 2003, p. 254, 255, 257, 272.

Cunning-folk may have conversed with the Devil in a distant past, but this is over now. Instead, they use legerdemain, sleight-of-hand and other tricks to impress, distract and cheat their clients, like the Northampton cunning-man who “made Circles three or four times, and talk’d to himself all the while” to bedazzle them. One of cunning-folk’s favoured devices consists in pumping information from their patients by getting them to talk about their problems before the consultation starts. To carry on their cheating activities, cunning-folk are sometimes assisted by confederates such as George, the Bristol Fair cunning-man’s accomplice, “a subtle, oily-tongu’d, young Fellow”, who impersonates a ghost to haunt Thomas, a young man who has deserted the girl he had seduced, and frighten him into seeking aid from George’s master¹³. Cunning-folk are mainly interested in money and have no qualms about swindling their clients¹⁴. Their main goal is to pick unwary people’s pockets. Such is that of the Northampton cunning-man and his Bristol Fair colleague, who takes advantage of a pregnant girl’s distress to extract as much money as possible out of her. Well aware that “they can tell nothing, nor say any thing to the purpose”, they usually ask for some money before the seance begins, like the Northampton cunning-man, who “takes [a shilling] before he will speak a Word”. That’s the only thing they deserve to be called cunning men for¹⁵. To put it in a nutshell: “Here’s not an Ounce of Magick in it all; here’s no dealing with the *Devil* in all this. ‘Tis nothing but a *Bite*, a kind of a Juggle; a *Devil* and no *Devil*; a Doctor no Conjurer, a Vision without a Spirit, a Dance without a Fiddle”¹⁶.

Defoe’s portrayal of cunning-folk is, in many respects, indebted to sceptical authors on witchcraft and magic such as Reginald Scot, John Wagstaffe, Thomas Ady, John Webster or Samuel Butler. These authors show no restraint when it comes to branding cunning-folk as cheats. In *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), Reginald Scot, a Kent country gentleman, argues that they are “but liers, deceivers, and couseners”, who “can doo nothing”¹⁷. Mother Bungie, he points out, recognized as much when she confessed on her deathbed that “hir cunning consisted onlie in deluding and deceiving the people.” Similarly, one “*T. of Canturburie*”, a cunning-man renowned for finding lost property, admitted just before dying that “he knew nothing more than anie other, but by slight and devises, without the assistance of anie divell or spirit, saving the spirit of cousenage”¹⁸. Likewise, in *A Candle in the Dark* (1655), the physician and humanist Thomas Ady describes those so-called “good Witches” as “common Deceivers” and points out “the vanity and ridiculousness of those delusions and lying Wonders, by which men [are] so easily deluded [...] now adays by our professed Wizzards, or Witches, commonly called Cunning Men, or good Witches, who [...] do all by Jugling delusions”¹⁹. He also denounces “their craft of cousening the people”²⁰. John Wagstaffe, for his part, depicts them as “counterfeit *Miracle-mongers*” and “false *Prophets*”, and blames them for being “impudent Liars, Mountebanks in Divinity and Physick”²¹. So does John Webster, an English cleric, physician and chemist who, in *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677) brands them as “Impostors, Cheaters, and active Deceivers”, who

¹³ Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick*, cit., p. 151, 189, 263, 264, 269, 364, 368-371.

¹⁴ Daniel Defoe, *The Political History of the Devil*, cit., p.272.

¹⁵ Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick*, cit., p. 262-263, 291, 316, 318, 389.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

¹⁷ Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, [1584], Mineola, N. Y., Dover, 1972, p. 63, 65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹⁹ Thomas Ady, *A Candle in the Dark*, [1655], London, 1656, p. 40, 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²¹ John Wagstaffe, *The Question of Witchcraft Debated*, London, 1669, p. 3, 72.

deserve “to be punished for couzening of the people, and taking upon them, and pretending to bring to pass things that they have neither skill nor power to perform”²². The so-called witch of Endor, in actual fact a cunning-woman, was “a most notorious dissembling cheater” as well as “a Deceiver and Impostor”²³. So was Elizabeth Barton, “the holy Maid of Kent”, who performed “false and feigned miracles”²⁴. This description also fits perfectly Sidrophel, Samuel Butler’s astrologer-cum-cunning-man in *Hudibras* (1684), who is said to have fallen “to Juggle, Cant, and Cheat”, while both he and his assistant, Whachum, are called “false Knaves and Cheats/Impostors, Jugglers, Counterfeits” by *Hudibras*²⁵, whose point of view is, in this case, obviously endorsed by Butler.

The portrait of cunning-folk that emerges from the writings of those sceptical authors on witchcraft and magic is well summed up by Owen Davies’s remark that “not all writers of the period saw cunning-folk with horns on their heads and the devil behind them, but rather as garbed in the capacious cloak and wearing the sly look of the trickster: more in the service of Mammon than Satan”²⁶. Defoe was familiar with the works of those authors and, to a large extent, endorsed their outlook on cunning-folk. He even adopted in his own portrayal of those magical practitioners some specific features with which they were associated by sceptical writers, such as their benefitting from people’s tendency to make much noise about their correct predictions and to pass their wrong ones over in silence. Yet, Defoe’s portrait of cunning-folk in *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magick* occasionally diverges from the one drawn by writers such as Scot, Ady or Webster.

Some doubts concerning cunning-folk’s relation to the supernatural: the influence of Restoration Protestant demonologists

Indeed, Defoe’s view of cunning-folk is not unmitigatedly sceptical. Although he does not look upon it as the most likely option, he does not quite rule out the possibility that they might occasionally perform true feats of magic. Admittedly, they do not possess any intrinsic magical powers²⁷. But they may employ spirits to achieve their exploits. In actual fact, when they first appeared in the world, cunning-folk, then known as magicians or wisemen, were “only Philosophers and Studiers of Nature, wise, sober and studious Men”. But very soon, “the *Devil* drew these wise Men in, to search after more Knowledge than Nature could instruct them in”, to the extent that, as early as biblical times, it was usual for them to consort with the Devil and evil spirits²⁸. So was it afterwards for the magician Merlin or the prophetess Mother Shipton²⁹.

Even in the present age, Defoe suggests, some cunning-folk might still achieve some genuine deeds of magic. Thus, he admits that Dr Boreman “did perform several strange things”. The Doctor was said to “set Spells for the Country People for the preserving their

²² John Webster, *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft*, London, 1677, “Dedication”, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 44, 181. For a study of the debates surrounding the biblical story of the witch of Endor, see François Lecercle, *Le retour du mort : débats sur la sorcière d’Endor et l’apparition de Samuel*, Genève, Droz, 2011. English early modern interpretations of this episode are analysed on pages 235-338.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

²⁵ Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, [1684], London, 1761, p. 199, 222.

²⁶ Owen Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²⁷ Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick*, *cit.*, p. 337.

²⁸ Daniel Defoe, *The Political History of the Devil*, *cit.*, p. 234, 235, 236.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Cherry-Gardens from being plunder'd, and their Orchards from being robb'd"³⁰. He was also reputed to "cure" haunted houses. He reportedly exorcised one that was "so plagu'd with evil Spirits, that no body could lie in it". It was an intense confrontation that lasted for a whole night, but Boreman finally prevailed. Indeed, "he so frightened the *Devil* [...] that the House has never been haunted any more since". But Boreman was best known for ensuring by his magical art that young people did not swerve from the path of virtue and, especially, did not engage in illicit sexual intercourse. As a result, "a young Fellow [dared] not come near an honest Girl, for fear of him"³¹. When one of them named Thomas broke this rule and abused a young girl, Boreman seemingly used his magic to compel him to marry her:

The Doctor, it seems, told her, that if she could perswade him to get into her Smock upon their next Intimacy, he would certainly agree to marry her; upon which the poor Girl makes herself a new one, and very large for the Purpose, and getting the young Fellow into it, the Doctor, as was said, laid such a Charm upon it [...] that the Fellow could never get out of it till he gave the Girl a Note under his Hand to marry her the next Morning, and accordingly did it³².

Defoe points out that Dr Boreman's feats "pass for creditable" among Kent people. In particular, the story of Thomas's being caught in the abused girl's smock as a result of Boreman's charm and promising to marry her so that the doctor would lift his spell and allow him to break free is "loudly affirm'd" to be "fact" by the local population. According to Defoe's "landlord" in *A System of Magick*, "all the Country believes it", and he does not doubt in the least its veracity himself³³. It is noteworthy that Defoe does not openly disavow the landlord's narrative. Indeed, he seems rather to bear it out, even though a certain degree of uncertainty remains:

This last Part is merry enough; nor is it more than I have heard by many other Hands, I mean of the Doctor's Exploits; and particularly 'twas certainly true of him, that he kept all the young people, I mean the wicked part of 'em, in Awe; whether by Spells or Charms, and what those Spells or Charms were, that I could never come to a Certainty about³⁴.

Thus, although he does not subscribe unconditionally to that story and expresses no absolute certainty about its reality, he is far from rejecting it altogether, just as he is far from positively denying the efficiency of Boreman's charms, spells or magical practices. Indeed, he does not exclude that the Devil or other evil spirits might be involved in them and suspects that the Doctor "must have had some unlawful Conversation with such Spirits or such Beings as [he] should still call [...] *Devils*" and points out "that he did not disown the Appearance of Spirits to him"³⁵. More specifically, Defoe looks upon the charm laid by Boreman on the abused girl's smock to trap Thomas and oblige him to marry her as the product of an agreement between the Doctor and the Devil: "The *Devil* and Dr. *Boreman* agreed the Matter". In fact, the charm was laid not so much by Boreman himself as by "the *Devil* by his Order". Charms require the intervention of the Devil or evil spirits. Defoe defines them as "agreed Signals, upon making which, the *Devil*, according to the Terms agreed on between them, shall act in such and such a manner without appearing" (as against

³⁰ Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick*, *cit.*, p. 316-317.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 309, 310.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 152, 310, 316.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

enchancements, in which he is expected to make an appearance). They imply “a criminal correspondence” with the Evil One³⁶.

Defoe insists that, when they do deal with supernatural entities—which is very seldom—cunning-folk, notwithstanding the claim most of them make to converse with good spirits, always consort with evil ones. If they are not cheats, they are bound to be “*real Wizards and downright Dealers with the Devil*”³⁷. Otherwise, they would not call up their supposedly benevolent spirits as if they were malevolent ones:

They apply to them just after the Pattern of the Wizards and Necromancers in their enquiring of the *Devil*, with Mutterings and Whispers, with hard and exotick Words, and unintelligible Speeches; as if the good Spirits did not understand *English*, as well as *Arabick* and *Hebrew*, or as well as their unmeaning, unsignifying *Devil-Languages* [...] How can this be reconcil’d to the conversing with Good Spirits?³⁸

Defoe’s failure to embrace an all-out sceptical view of cunning-folk’s identity and activities suggests that he is not totally immune to the influence of Restoration Protestant demonologists. According to Meric Casaubon, Henry More and Joseph Glanvill, cunning-folk often perform true feats of magic. It is usual for them to accomplish “supernatural operations” and “*strange Things*”³⁹. Cunning-folk can protect people by means of charms. Casaubon is convinced of their efficacy: “That there be, even now, *Spells* and *Charms* [...] to make men *invulnerable*, no man, I think, upon the attestation of so many creditable witnesses, can rationally doubt”⁴⁰. Charms can also be used to heal people—as well as animals. Casaubon reports that, in the early sixteenth century, a Florentine soldier whose chest and shoulder had been shot through by an arrow, sent for a cunning-man who, thanks to some well-suited charms, was able to restore him to health. He also mentions a Roman cunning-woman who “*was wont with smooth (or harmless) inchantments, to cure intermitting Fevers (or Agues)*”⁴¹. As for More, he relates how “a Farrier that had, it should seem, some tricks more then ordinary, and dealt in *Charms* or *Spells*, and such like Ceremonies” was able to cure a horse that had been suffering from some unidentified trouble⁴².

These feats are due to magic. As such, they are bound to have a supernatural origin. Charming, More argues, “is of no natural efficacy, but supernatural, if it take any effect at all”⁴³. However, Protestant demonologists point out, cunning-folk do not possess intrinsic magical powers, and their rites are only pretences meant to confuse on-lookers. Casaubon insists that “what rites or ceremonies are used, or whether some or none” are solely intended “to amuse”⁴⁴. Cunning-folk perform their feats of magic thanks to the assistance of spirits, which are, in the words of Glanvill, “*principal Efficient*” causes in the magical process⁴⁵.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152, 156.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, “Preface”, [ii]. See also p. 217, 358, 388, 389.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 396-397.

³⁹ Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, London, 1668, p. 7; Joseph Glanvill, *Sadducismus Triumphatus*, [1681], 4th ed., London, 1726, p. 225-226.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85, 114.

⁴² Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism*, [1653], 3rd ed., London, 1662, p. 89.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴⁴ Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, *cit.*, p. 44, 64-65, 96, 145.

⁴⁵ Joseph Glanvill, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

Restoration Protestant demonologists are emphatic that cunning-folk only deal with evil spirits. According to Casaubon, the cunning-man who, in the early sixteenth century, healed the Florentine soldier whose chest and shoulder had been shot through by an arrow by means of a charm did so with diabolical aid, since “such a cure could not be wrought by such means, without the *Devil*”. In like manner, the Roman cunning-woman who cured people’s fevers with charms and enchantments was guilty of dealing with the Devil and taking “unlawful courses”⁴⁶. Similarly, in More’s and Glanvill’s opinion, the “Woman of Endor” was “forsaken of God and good Spirits, and given up to those evil ones that were her Agents and Familiars”⁴⁷. According to More, the prophetess Anne Bodenham also consorted with the Devil, notwithstanding her claims to converse with good spirits only. So did the farrier that cured an ailing horse with charms and spells. His owner realised it when he noticed that “there was an *S. branded* on his buttock, which he conceited stood for *Satan*”⁴⁸. In fact, in the opinion of Casaubon, More and Glanvill, all cures wrought by charms are “impious, and unlawful”, for they are due to “the Assistance, Confederacy and Co-operation of evil Spirits”⁴⁹.

Of course, Defoe does not unreservedly or uncritically embrace Casaubon’s, More’s or Glanvill’s outlook on cunning-folk. He does not believe that all but a few of them consort with spirits to achieve their feats of magic. In his opinion, most of them do not, and their pretended exploits are counterfeited. The majority of cunning-folk are cheats, and, if their charms have any effect at all, it is usually due to their clients’ imagination. However, Defoe does not call into question the theological foundations underpinning the Restoration Protestant demonologists’ view of cunning-folk. By suggesting that some of them might achieve real feats of magic and that they may use spirits to perform them, he posits the existence of a supernatural world of angelic and demonic creatures, which he adduces as evidence of the existence of God.

Fighting against “credulity” v. struggling to overcome “incredulity”: a matter of priority

Defoe’s willingness to consider the possibility that cunning-folk’s performances might involve the supernatural should not surprise us if we bear in mind that his objective in his demonological treatises is not primarily to correct popular views on cunning-folk and magic, but rather to reassert the existence of an invisible world of spirits in order to fight atheism, just as Casaubon, More and Glanvill had done in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Admittedly, in *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magick*, Defoe does endeavour to change his compatriots’ attitudes towards cunning-folk. Somewhat irritated by their dependence on those magical practitioners to whom they rush as soon as they are assailed by a doubt or a difficulty, he undertakes “to cure [them] of this Itch of their Brain, the Tarantula of the present Age, in running to Cunning Men, as you call them”. In order to

⁴⁶ Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, *cit.*, p. 85, 115. Rodney M. Baine is wrong when he asserts that Casaubon believed in “the possibility of white witchcraft, or the employment of the supernatural for effecting good, without the intervention of the Devil” (Rodney M. Baine, *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1968, p. 71).

⁴⁷ Joseph Glanvill, *op. cit.*, p. 264. See also Henry More, “Postcript”, Joseph Glanvill, *op. cit.*, p. 18, 25.

⁴⁸ Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism*, *cit.*, p. 89, 110.

⁴⁹ Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, *cit.*, p. 88 ; Henry More, “Postcript”, *cit.*, p. 16.

do so, he “laughs at them”, since “*Men are to be ridicul’d into good Manners, when they won’t be cudgell’d into it*”⁵⁰.

However, as Novak has shown⁵¹, Defoe’s principal aim in his demonological treatises is to convince his compatriots of the reality of spirit and of God’s existence. It is to discredit atheism, or “incredulity”, then in steady expansion, together with deism, arianism and other heresies. Indeed, Defoe denounces “the gross Absurdity of Atheism” and its “horrid Inconsistency”. Atheism is totally irrational, “beyond all the Enthusiasm and religious Frenzy in the World”⁵². It is also deeply shocking: “No God! what a Shock it gives to the Soul, what a Blow to the reasoning Powers!”⁵³. Defoe cannot find harsh enough words to describe atheists, those “modern Unbelievers” who “instead of worshipping many Gods, save themselves the trouble of Idolatry, and worship no God at all”. The Sceptic and the Deist are both much to blame, but “the *Atheist* out-goes them all”. In fact, atheists are worse than the Devil himself, since, unlike them, Satan acknowledges the existence of God⁵⁴. Just as they controvert the being of their creator, atheists “deny there is such a thing as a *Devil* or evil Spirit”. Actually, they gainsay the existence of all spirits, whether good or evil. Defoe takes them to task for holding this opinion and asserts that “there is an invisible World, a World of Spirits” and “a Converse between the Spirits unembodied, and our Spirits embodied”⁵⁵. If spirits exist, he argues, the Devil, who is one of them, is bound to exist too, and so is God, whose essence is also spiritual. Having thus postulated the existence of a world of spirits, it was somehow necessary for Defoe to, at least, suggest that some cunning-folk might have an access to spiritual entities and might employ them to achieve their feats.

In condemning popular attitudes to cunning-folk, Defoe follows in the footsteps of both sceptical writers and Restoration Protestant demonologists. Indeed, the former take a dim view of their compatriots’ attraction to those magical practitioners. Scot complains that people “flie from trusting in God to trusting in witches” and are more inclined to “seeke comfort and counsell” from the latter than from “learned” physicians⁵⁶. Similarly, Ady deplores that his fellow countrymen should be “so easily deluded [...] now adays by our professed Wizzards, or Witches, commonly called Cunning Men, or good Witches”. He also blames those who have their future told them by cunning-folk, thus disregarding the role of Providence and failing to trust in God “in time of trouble”⁵⁷. By the same token, Webster frowns on “the seeking unto Witches, Wizards, Mutterers, Murmurers, Charmers, South-sayers, Conjurers, Cunning-men and women (as we speak here in the North) and such like”⁵⁸.

Restoration Protestant demonologists likewise condemn their compatriots’ fascination with and dependence on cunning-folk. Casaubon warns his fellow countrymen against calling upon those magical practitioners for healing purposes insofar as their skills are inadequate. When suffering from some ailment, people had better turn to “an allowed,

⁵⁰ Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick, cit.*, “Preface”, [iii].

⁵¹ Maximillian E. Novak, *op. cit.*, p. 653-668.

⁵² Daniel Defoe, *A System of Magick, cit.*, p. 117, 241, 245.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54, 235, 236, 241.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54, 282.

⁵⁶ Reginald Scot, *op. cit.*, p. 3, 7, 161.

⁵⁷ Thomas Ady, *op.cit.*, p. 25, 40.

⁵⁸ John Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

and well-grounded Physician” than to an “Empirick”⁵⁹. Besides, the cures—if any—worked by cunning-folk are immoral and sinful. Casaubon takes exception to the popular belief that those magical practitioners “do no hurt, but much good”, stressing that they rely on the Devil’s assistance to heal their patients⁶⁰.

In blaming cunning-folk’s clients for their credulity rather than their sinfulness, Defoe is closer to sceptical writers than to Restoration Protestant demonologists. On the other hand, his endeavour to prove the existence of spirits, the Devil and God against atheists is very reminiscent of the Protestant demonologists’ effort against “incredulity” in the mid- and late seventeenth century. Indeed, Casaubon, More and Glanvill vigorously condemn “infidelity”. Casaubon mounts a powerful charge against “incredulity”, “obstinate *unbelief*” and “right down *Atheism*”, which he equates with “wickedness”⁶¹. Atheism is the worst kind of profaneness and “[the] most unworthy of a rational man”. It deprives him of “all sense of piety, all sense of immortality”, to the extent that he is left with nothing but “what is common unto bruits”. It is “*the original of all misery*”⁶². Similarly, More denounces “the poison of *Atheism*”, the roots of which he traces back to Epicureanism. Besides, he looks upon this “enormous *disease of the Soul*” as a form of enthusiasm and attributes it to “*vanity of mind*” and “*brutish sensuality*”⁶³. Glanvill is just as critical of atheism, which he deems to be “*worse than Heresy*”⁶⁴.

Against atheists, Restoration Protestant demonologists assert the existence of a world of spirits. According to Casaubon, it is neither rational nor plausible to assert, as unbelievers do, that “there be no Spirits”. He professes himself unable to understand “how any Learned man, sober and rational, can entertain such an opinion (simply and seriously) that there be no *Divels* nor *Spirits*”, except for the fact that one cannot be learned in all fields and that not all learned men are conversant with pneumatology⁶⁵. Although he stresses that there are good and evil spirits, he rejects the view that all spirits dwell either in heaven or in hell: many of them live in our atmosphere, close at hand⁶⁶. More, for his part, is “as well assured [...] of the *Existence of Spirits*, as that [he has] met with men in *Westminster-Hall*, or seen beasts in *Smithfield*”⁶⁷. Glanvill is just as adamant that “there is a *World of Spirits*”. It truly exists, and not only in the minds of melancholic people. Glanvill stresses its diversity, pointing out that it contains “different *Orders* and *Degrees of Spirits*, and, perhaps, in as much *Variety of Place and State*, as among ourselves”⁶⁸.

To prove the existence of that world of spirits, Restoration Protestant demonologists undertake to show that witches and other magical practitioners, including cunning-folk, have been in contact with spiritual entities. According to Casaubon, the confessions of the Lorraine witches and wizards put together in Nicolas Rémy’s *Daemonolatria* (1595) prove

⁵⁹ Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, *cit.*, p. 165, 166.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115-116.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2, 7, 91.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 2, 3, 7.

⁶³ Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism*, *cit.*, p. 138-141.

⁶⁴ Joseph Glanvill, “Preface [to the first part]”, *op. cit.*, [ii].

⁶⁵ Meric Casaubon, “Preface”, John Dee, *A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Years between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits*, London, 1659, [v, xviii].

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, [xlii]; Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, *cit.*, p. 195.

⁶⁷ Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism*, *cit.*, p. 133.

⁶⁸ Joseph Glanvill, “Some Considerations about Witchcraft”, *op. cit.*, p. 16, 21, 52.

beyond doubt the existence of spirits⁶⁹. Besides, Dr John Dee's *True and Faithful Relation* goes a long way to evince that "Atheists, and such as do not believe that there be any Divels or Spirits" are in the wrong⁷⁰. In order to establish that "there are other intelligent Beings, besides those that are clad in heavy Earth or Clay"⁷¹, More tells stories of diabolical possession and provides an account of "*the Supernatural Effects observed in the bewitched Children of M^r Throgmorton and M^s Muschamp*"⁷². Also persuaded that the existence of the world of spirits can best be proved by adopting an empirical approach⁷³, Glanvill tells many stories about witches, magicians, possessed people and haunted houses, including that of the "Daæmon of Tedworth"⁷⁴, the most famous of them.

The Restoration Protestant demonologists' basic argument is that, if there is a world of spirits, then, there is a Devil and a God, who are spirits. As stated by Casaubon, once the existence of spirits and supernatural phenomena is established, "*Atheism* hath lost its greatest prop"⁷⁵. In other words, "if there be Spirits indeed [...] then certainly must it follow, that there is a great over-ruling Power, that takes care of the Earth, and of the Inhabitants of it"⁷⁶. More makes the same point by drawing a comparison between politics and metaphysics: "Assuredly that Saying is not more true in Politicks, *No Bishop, no King*, then this is in Metaphysicks, *No Spirit, no God*"⁷⁷. This "Chain of Connexion" also appears in Glanvill's observation that "*Atheism is begun in Sadducism. And those that dare not bluntly say, There is NO GOD, content themselves (for a fair Step and Introduction) to deny there are SPIRITS or WITCHES*"⁷⁸.

The Restoration Protestant demonologists' conception of cunning-folk as people consorting with the Devil or other evil supernatural entities is perfectly suited to their aim of proving the existence of a world of spirits and a God against atheists. Defoe's more ambiguous view of those magical practitioners, who may not necessarily have employed spirits and were indeed more likely not to have used any, is obviously less adapted to achieve that goal.

Conclusion

We have shown that Defoe's depiction of cunning-folk in *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magick* is in many respects indebted to the works of sceptical authors on witchcraft and magic such as Reginald Scot, John Wagstaffe, Thomas Ady or John Webster. Samuel Butler's portrait of the astrologer-cum-cunning-man Sidrophel is undoubtedly a source of inspiration as well. However, we have also demonstrated that Defoe's view of cunning-folk is more ambivalent than critics have generally argued insofar

⁶⁹ Meric Casaubon, "Preface", *cit.*, [xii].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, [li].

⁷¹ Henry More, "Dr. More's Letter to Mr. Glanvill", Joseph Glanvill, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁷² Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism*, *cit.*, p. 96. For a study of these cases of demonic possession, see Philip C. Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts*, Cambridge, CUP, 2004, p. 71-149, 358-390.

⁷³ Joseph Glanvill, *op. cit.*, p. 223-224, 230.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270-285.

⁷⁵ Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, *cit.*, p. 133.

⁷⁶ Meric Casaubon, "Preface", *cit.*, p. 51.

⁷⁷ Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism*, *cit.*, p. 142.

⁷⁸ Joseph Glanvill, "Preface [to the first part]", *op. cit.*, [ii].

as he does not altogether exclude that some cunning-folk might achieve true feats of magic thanks to the assistance of the Devil or other spiritual entities. Although he is very far from endorsing the Restoration Protestant demonologists' point of view that the great majority of those magical practitioners dealt with the Devil or other spirits, he does not completely preclude the possibility that some of them might do so and does not call into question the theological assumptions underpinning Meric Casaubon's, Henry More's or Joseph Glanvill's outlook on cunning-folk. This makes sense, since Defoe's main aim in his two treatises is not to eradicate popular views about magic, but to assert the existence of a world of spirits and a God to fight atheism. Yet, to be fair, Defoe's rather ambivalent view of those magical practitioners, who may not have dealt with spirits as a matter of course and were in fact more likely not to have resorted to any, was not perfectly suited to achieve that goal. At any rate, it was less so than the Restoration Protestant demonologists' outlook on those magical practitioners as people more or less systematically consorting with the Devil or other evil supernatural entities.

This ambiguity may go some way towards explaining the puzzlement, not to say the irritation, felt by some critics when it comes to discussing Defoe's intentions in *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magick*⁷⁹. It can be accounted for by the historical and ideological context in which he wrote these two books. Already, during the Restoration period, Casaubon complained that "this Licentious Age will afford very many, who with the *Saduces* of old (that is, Jewish Epicures) believe no *Spirit*, or Angel, or Resurrection"⁸⁰ and that "mocking and scoffing at Religion, and the Scriptures, is so much in fashion"⁸¹, while Glanvill bemoaned that "*of all Relations of Fact, there are none like to give a Man such Trouble and Disreputation, as those that relate to Witchcraft and Apparitions, which so great a Party of Men (in this Age especially) do so rally and laugh at, and, without more ado, are resolved to explode and despise, as meer Winter Tales and old Wives fables*"⁸². The scepticism and free-thinking that prevailed when Casaubon, More and Glanvill were writing were even stronger and more widespread in Defoe's day, as the Enlightenment was dawning. Defoe's numerous allusions to an intercourse between "spirits embodied" and "spirits unembodied" and, more generally, to an invisible spiritual world in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) had elicited condescending mirth and mockery from Charles Gildon's vitriolic pen⁸³. This may have contributed to inducing Defoe to downplay cunning-folk's connection with the supernatural in *The Political History of the Devil* and *A System of Magic*, which was something of an impediment on his way to demonstrating the existence of a world of spirits and a Protestant God against atheists.

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⁷⁹ See, for instance, James Sutherland, *Defoe*, London, Methuen, 1937, p. 263-264.

⁸⁰ Meric Casaubon, "Preface", *cit.*, [ii].

⁸¹ Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity*, *cit.*, p. 49.

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⁸³ Rodney M. Baine, *op. cit.*, p. 33-34.

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