Comment on the Papers by Paul Monod and William G. Pooley

REBECCA L. SPANG

I am genuinely thrilled that we have finally managed to conjure up the magical eighteenth century. I say "finally" because this rubric was first tossed around in 2017, when I had (belatedly) just read Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norell* and stumbled upon a short article by Owen Davies describing several historical "friends of English magic" who could be found writing about, teaching, or demonstrating "magic" in the period of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. But at that time—with Trump just elected, families being separated at the border, ICE raiding restaurant kitchens, and the BLM movement growing in urgency—we worried that "the magical eighteenth century" might seem an escapist, maybe even trivial, topic for a workshop held at a time of such urgency. Our interest in the past was shaped by the present: we gathered in this room to talk about Privilege, Fake News, and later, via zoom, about environments and networks. Now, however, after four years of Trump and two plus of a global pandemic; with the excessive use of military force causing humanitarian crises in the Middle East, Ukraine, and (three weeks ago) nearly on this campus; and with great research universities under attack in Florida, Texas, North Carolina, the U.S. House of Representatives, and (alas) in Indiana… now, there is no escape. No topic can be escapist. Now is the time for magic.

It has certainly felt for the last year or more that this campus is under a malevolent spell, that it has somehow been cursed. Things that used to be normal suddenly take supernormal efforts to accomplish; upper administration behaves like a poltergeist, taking delight in breaking things, scaring innocent people, even threatening to scramble space and reset clocks. Zombie words ("efficiency," "level setting," "the market") have power that tenured faculty apparently lack. The ghosts of Herman Wells, Elinor Ostrom, and Alfred Kinsey walk among us, yet they can do nothing to save us. We must fight magic with magic.

Now, of course, as a good *dix-huitièmiste*, a creature of the Enlightenment, I know far too well than to attribute the current "campus climate" to a curse or a witch. I can explain it to anyone who cares to listen in terms of electoral politics, the structure of the Board of Trustees, and the long, inglorious American tradition of anti-intellectualism. I can show you graphs of declining state support for education at all levels; of population shifts; of changing patterns in academic employment. I know all those things are true, yet somehow they do not suffice to explain what has happened on this campus just in the last six weeks. There is something more, something that cannot be counted or graphed or tallied or measured—both for good and for evil.

The "good magic" that currently pervades this campus and university—the surprising shows of solidarity and the ease with which conversations take place and priorities converge across seemingly impermeable boundaries: Business School, science departments, South Bend campus—reminds me very much of the "magical" quality of this very workshop. I don't quite have words for it, but year after year, regardless of theme, some ingredients go into the cauldron, a spark is struck, a bell is heard ringing in the distance, and … Poof! people are excited and happy and animated. It's a wonderful thing, and if we can export this magic—this interest in what other people have to say, this willingness to talk with and through and about disciplinary differences, this openness to new ideas and new questions—then we will have done great good. "Expecto patronum" we might say, and all that is positive about the Eighteenth-Century Studies Workshop will take shape and rise to protect us.

Now to the workshop at hand and the first two papers in particular. Paul Monod, the author of our first paper, has taught at Middlebury College since 1984 and is now the Hepburn Professor of History. He grew up in Montreal, was educated at Princeton and Yale, and has had fellowships at Oxford and the Huntington, as well as research support from the NEH, the Getty Research Institute, and the Leverhulme Trust. He has published five books, including *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe 1589-1714* (Yale, 1999); *The Murder of Mr. Grebell: Madness and Civility in an English Town* (Yale, 2004); and *Solomon's Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (Yale, 2013). So well versed is he in all the relevant literature that I am tempted to call him a "friend of English magic" himself (!), except that he so successfully maintains some skeptical distance from his many magical subjects. Will Pooley, who joins us from Great Britain, has his degrees from Oxford and is now a senior lecturer at the University of Bristol. His first book was on folklore collected by Félix Arnaudin in mid-late nineteenth-century Gascony and he is now completing a major book on witchcraft and sorcery in France from the Revolution to the Second World War.

Both authors present an overview of magic in a very long period: Paul Monod's paper covers attitudes to, definitions of, and policies around magic and witchcraft in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe (broadly defined). One of the great values of this paper, I think, is to highlight the very different timelines for the "decline of magic" in different parts of Europe—it hung on longest in the far North and in Switzerland—and to underscore the different forces (including religious authority—be it Orthodox, Islamic, Catholic, Protestant or Jewish; state officials; cultural and social dynamics) at play in this quite extended and uneven history. Will Pooley's paper takes up where Paul's ends (at the "turn" of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century) and if its geographic scope is slightly less wide, the story it tells is nonetheless equally varied.

These papers are an excellent start for this workshop because they pose the questions of how early-modern and modern magic differed from each other and the part played by the eighteenth century in shaping that difference. Paul Monod's paper is very clear: magic as an area of official concern "declined" when secular courts lost interest in policing religious beliefs, when heterodoxies were no longer assumed to threaten state authority, and when tolerance was recognized as a better strategy for regime legitimation than was violent repression [a lesson that upper administration on this campus might well take to heart]. Yet at the very same time, forces we associate very closely with a Habermasian cultural history of the Enlightenment—growing literacy, an expanding periodical press, a mania for reading, and, crucially, the commercialization of all these phenomena—allowed, even encouraged, the proliferation of texts, broadsides, and public presentations in which magic's reality was touted and/or its workings supposedly revealed. Magic did not so much disappear or decline as it became socially much more specific: increasingly irrelevant to educated, male elites, yet of vital interest (and a source of at least sporadic income) for "popular" magic practitioners.

On a similar note, Will Pooley's paper argues that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments in science, Enlightenment, reason etc. did not so much "disenchant" the world as they exaggerated fractures in pre-modern mentalité. Magic became an index of mutual incomprehension, the context in which elites wondered if non-elites *really* believed something or were only pretending to do so—and, also, a context in which elites predicated beliefs of others that the others knew full well to be nonsense.

This dynamic—in which magic remained vibrant both as a set of beliefs predicated of others and as a way for those who feel "outside" the main channels of information to claim knowledge for

their own—is a bit reminiscent, I think, of the most outrageous conspiracy theories or of the headline I once saw on an issue of *The Weekly World News*: "Four-Armed Man Earns Fortune as Deodorant Tester"! Surely some part of the fascination of theory and headline alike is imagining (and perhaps bemoaning) a world in which other people actually believe these things. Paul cites the Spanish Benedictine monk Benito Jerónimo Feijóo, who argued that "magic" spread from common people into literature and then back into society—a circuit that reminds me of our "Mixed Media" workshop more than a decade ago. Wondering why "vulgar fables" were so readily reproduced, Feijóo pointed to vanity, malevolence, and a general enthusiasm for "prodigious" events: all motives one might easily conjure for social-media posting today.

Will Pooley's paper is very helpful, I think, in emphasizing that magic and witchcraft were (are) not simply things in which one did or did not "believe," they were forces that were feared, debated, discussed, worried about, and sometimes joked about. For a joke to be funny, it needs to make a sort of social sense, to be intelligible in a shared context. Will's point, if I read him correctly, is that since the early nineteenth century, France has lacked a shared context for claims about witchcraft or magic such that concerns that for some were very serious became for others the stuff of derision, scorn, or more nervous laughter.

I am brought back now to reconsider our own anxiety or hesitance in 2017 when we rejected "The Magical Eighteenth Century" as potentially too frivolous a workshop theme or as a rubric that might lead our colleagues to accuse us of escapism or ignorance. Our concern, that is, was to remain on the side of "elite" knowledge, to signal that we were serious people with serious concerns. These two papers help us understand that decision, even as they reveal it to have been misguided.