JOHN WEBSTER, THE ROYAL SOCIETY AND THE DISPLAYING OF SUPPOSED WITCHCRAFT (1677)

by

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This paper publishes for the first time the dedication to the Royal Society that John Webster wrote for his Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft (1677), but which failed to appear in the published work. It also investigates the circumstances in which the book received the Royal Society’s imprimatur, in the light of the Society’s ambivalent attitude towards witchcraft and related phenomena in its early years. The paper concludes that the role of Sir Jonas Moore as Vice-President in licensing the book was highly irregular, evidently reflecting the troubled state of the Society in the mid to late 1670s.

Keywords: witchcraft; Royal Society imprimatur; Sir Jonas Moore; John Pell; Martin Lister

The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft, the treatise published in 1677 by the former Parliamentarian chaplain, medical practitioner and natural philosopher, John Webster, has been the subject of various treatments in recent years. The argument put forward by Thomas H. Jobe in 1981 that the work is to be seen as a political statement in a post-Restoration debate between an ongoing radical tradition represented by Webster and a more conservative position exemplified by the Anglican divine and demonologist, Joseph Glanvill, has not met with widespread support. Instead, Webster’s attempt to argue for a naturalistic explanation of witchcraft and related phenomena in terms of his avowedly Helmontian standpoint has often been seen as a slightly paradoxical one, a typical outcome of the mixed intellectual trends that are now seen as characterizing the natural philosophical scene in the late seventeenth century.

Equally perplexing has been the fact that the book was issued with the imprimatur of the Royal Society. Traditionally, this was seen as a symptom of the Society’s sceptical pose in relation to magical beliefs, though it is actually slightly anomalous in this respect, since—as I have illustrated elsewhere—the Society’s attitude on such matters was otherwise one of convolution and denial. In general, while many members of the Society showed a strong interest in occult phenomena, such matters were avoided in the Society’s institutional proceedings, and it was only retrospectively that this was taken to constitute an anti-magical stance on the Society’s part. Indeed, in the case of Webster’s Displaying, at least

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one early commentator expressed puzzlement that the Society’s imprimatur should have been attached to a book which expressed a view so contrary to that espoused by other members of the Society, such as Glanvill and Henry More, both of whom published books defending the reality of the very phenomena that Webster sought to deny.  

As for the background to the granting of the Society’s imprimatur for Webster’s volume, this too turns out to be more problematic than has hitherto been realized. If attention is given to the Society’s use of its imprimatur in the years between the granting of this power in the first charter of 1662 and the licensing of Webster’s book in 1676, three things become clear. First, the imprimatur was generally granted to books directly associated with the Society’s activities, including presentations given at meetings, or occasionally to works by savants who had been encouraged by the Society, such as Marcello Malpighi in Italy.  

By contrast, Webster was not even a Fellow of the Society and his book bore no relationship to the Society’s proceedings. Second, the imprimatur had always previously been given by the Society’s first president, William, Viscount Brouncker, at a meeting of the Society’s council. In the case of Webster’s book, on the other hand, the licence was granted by a Vice-President, Sir Jonas Moore, on a day when the Society did not meet at all. Third, we learn from a statement by Webster that his book had been refused a licence by the ecclesiastical authorities prior to his submitting it to the Society: this is the only time in the Society’s early history when it is known that the imprimatur was granted to a book already refused one elsewhere, and it therefore makes the licensing of Webster’s book all the more extraordinary.

This article will expound all this in full in conjunction with the publication of a hitherto overlooked document relating to the affair, which also throws light on the process by which the Society vetted books that were submitted to it. As will become apparent, the story of how the imprimatur for Webster’s book was obtained offers tantalizing hints concerning the modus operandi of the Society in its early years and particularly the effect of the dwindling support and internal divisions from which the Society suffered in the 1670s.

This is not the place for more than a very brief summary of the career and writings of John Webster (1611–1682). During the Civil War and Interregnum, he had been a notorious radical, responsible for one of the most telling critiques of the universities in his Academiarum Examen, or the Examination of Academies of 1654, which earned a sharp riposte the same year from John Wilkins and Seth Ward in their Vindiciæ Academiarum. After the Restoration, however, Webster conformed and took up medical practice in Lancashire while also conducting various intellectual pursuits, including Helmontian chemistry. In 1671 he published his Metallographia, or, an History of Metals, a work which sought to understand the nature of mineral deposits and metallurgical processes along predominantly Helmontian lines. By this time he had evidently already begun work on The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft, a substantial book on the rationale, both scriptural and natural philosophical, of witchcraft, which must have been many years in the making. In it, Webster argued for the impossibility of demonic intervention in the world, arguing that all the phenomena that supposedly provided evidence for this could be explained by natural means according to his capacious, primarily Helmontian, view of nature. 

Webster’s preface is dated 23 February 1673 (probably for 1673/4), and, having completed the work, he obviously wanted to get it published. This meant that it needed an imprimatur and initially he seems to have submitted it to the ecclesiastical censors. However, as he explained in a letter of 13 February 1674/5 to Martin Lister, physician
and Fellow of the Royal Society, who shared Webster’s interest in mineralogy, ‘the Ecclesiasticks refuse to license [the work], pretending I have attributed too much to naturall causes, & in maintaineing falne Angells to be corporeall: And now it is with a member of the Royall Society to try if it will be licensed there’.\textsuperscript{12} Webster had earlier made a fulsome reference to the Royal Society in the dedication to his \textit{Metallographia}, seeing it as ‘one of the happy fruits of His Majesties blessed and miraculous Restauration, and that which will speak him glorious to all succeeding Generations, beyond all his Royal Progenitors’; it is therefore perhaps not entirely surprising that he should have sought to use the Society’s licensing power in connection with his new book.\textsuperscript{13} To gain support, he sent Lister a copy of the title-page and contents list of the work, in the hope that Lister ‘would be pleased to write to some of your friends there to further it’, continuing: ‘if you iudge otherwise, I shall withdraw it, & though it cost me more paines I shall habit it in Latine, & then I am sure I can get it printed beyond seas’. It is perhaps worth noting that the draft title-page sent to Lister differs from the published version in having a quotation from Bacon’s \textit{Sylva Sylvarum} as well as the one from Galen’s \textit{De compositione medicamentorum localium . . . libri decem} that appears in the printed title-page; in addition, in the draft Webster identifies himself as a practitioner in ‘Chirurgery’ as well as ‘Physick’.\textsuperscript{14} As for the book’s lengthy title, in the manuscript version the wording and ordering is slightly different from that published, which is as follows:

\begin{quote}
THE DISPLAYING OF SUPPOSED WITCHCRAFT. Wherein is affirmed that there are many sorts of \textit{Deceivers and Impostors}, AND Divers persons under a passive \textit{Delusion} of \textit{MELANCHOLY} and \textit{FANCY}. But that there is a \textit{Corporeal League} made betwixt the \textit{DEVIL} and the \textit{WITCH}, Or that he sucks on the \textit{Witches Body}, has \textit{Carnal Copulation}, or that \textit{Witches} are turned into \textit{Cats, Dogs}, raise Tempests, or the like, is utterly denied and disproved. Wherein also is handled, The Existence of Angels and Spirits, the truth of Apparitions, the Nature of Astral and Sydereal Spirits, the force of Charms, and Philters; with other abstruse matters.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

By contrast, after the main title the draft states rather more clearly: ‘Wherein the existence of two sorts of Witches is granted’, namely the ‘deceivers, & Impostors’ and those affected by melancholy and ‘fancy’ who are rather less helpfully introduced on the printed title-page by the statement: ‘there are many sorts of . . .’. In addition, after ‘fancy’, the manuscript version has the words ‘But the existence of such a Witch, as is supposed to performe the things underwritten, is utterly denied, and disproved’, which fail to appear in the published version, which instead transfers the last five words to follow rather than precede the list of matters that were denied. Moreover, included among the latter was the assertion that witches ‘doe not flye in the ayre’ as well as ‘rayse tempests’ (the printed version instead adds ‘or the like’), while the draft also mentions ‘the causes of the bleeding of the bodyes of murthered persons’ as a further topic discussed. Possibly the printer was responsible for at least some of these changes, since the title also appears virtually in the form sent to Lister in the entry in the Stationers’ Company Register, to which we will come shortly.\textsuperscript{16} Lister must have replied sympathetically, because on 6 March Webster wrote:

\begin{quote}
I returne you very speciall thankes for your favourable opinion of my peice, & your freeness to promote the licensing of it. Though I would not (as farr as I am able) be guilty of that Epidemic disease of mankind, in being too fond of our owne productions; yet it haveing cost me much paines in the composure of it, I would gladly
\end{quote}
In addition, in what appears to be a postscript to the letter of 6 March (though it might be to that of 13 February), Webster added: ‘Since the sealing of my letter, I received one from my friend about the licenseing of my booke, wherein I am informed that they question not to have it pass’. Webster therefore requested Lister to ‘be pleased to write to some friend of yours’, which he would consider ‘a great favour’.

This is all that we learn from Lister’s correspondence on the question of the Royal Society imprimatur, and the reference to the ‘member of the Royall Society’ who was a ‘friend’ of Webster’s is frustrating since it is unclear who this was. It was almost certainly not Henry Oldenburg, the Royal Society’s Secretary, who corresponded assiduously on the Society’s behalf throughout this period but does not seem to have had any direct contact with Webster. It is more likely that it was Sir Jonas Moore, Surveyor-General of the Ordnance, a Fellow of the Society since 1674 who was to be appointed a Vice-President in May 1676 and was to sign the imprimatur for the book two months later in circumstances that will be examined more fully below. Moore had moved in very similar circles to Webster in the Clitheroe region of Lancashire in the 1640s, and the two men may even have been related; clearly, this would have made the former favourably disposed towards the latter’s book.

From the Society’s minutes we learn that on 4 March 1675: ‘Mr Oldenburg presented a manuscript composed by Mr John Webster, and dedicated to the Society, concerning witchcraft. The author’s desire being, that the Society would give their sense of it, they appointed Sir William Petty, Dr Pell, and Mr Milles, to peruse it, and report their opinion.’ In addition, a note that Oldenburg ‘produced Websters new book dedicated to the Royal Society about Witches’ appears in the diary of Robert Hooke, the Society’s Curator of Experiments, under the same date. After that, we hear no more until the book was published in 1677, when it bore the imprimatur of ‘Jonas Moore Soc. Regiæ Vice-Præses’ dated 29 July 1676. On the other hand, contrary to what was stated concerning the version submitted to the Royal Society both in the minutes for 4 March 1675 and in Hooke’s diary, it does not contain a dedication to the Royal Society; instead, the book is dedicated to five Justices of the Peace of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Thomas Parker, Sir John Assheton, William Drake, William Johnson and Henry Marsden. It is, of course, quite possible that it was originally dedicated both to them and to the Royal Society, so it may not be a case of one being substituted for the other. Nevertheless, the absence of the dedication to the Society that was stated to be present both in the minutes and by Hooke is striking, as is the lengthy period that elapsed between the book being given to the committee and its being licensed, and we will return to these matters in due course.

First, however, let us continue to expound the book’s trajectory. Soon after being granted Moore’s imprimatur on 29 July 1676, the book was entered in the Register of the Stationers Company on 22 August the same year, entered under the hands of Moore as its licenser and Samuel Mearne as Master Warden of the Company. At this point, the title was the same as that which Webster had sent to Lister, differing slightly (as we have seen) from the published version. However, for some reason there was then a further delay, as the book did not appear in the published Term Catalogues of forthcoming books until a year later: it appears in the listing for Trinity Term 1677, licensed on 5 July 1677. In this entry the
title is given exactly as in the published book; it was described as a folio, priced at 10 shillings bound. The volume as published bears the imprint: ‘Printed by J.M. and are to be sold by the Booksellers in London, 1677’, and ‘J.M.’ is presumably the Royal Society’s printer, John Martyn, who had been responsible either on his own or with another bookseller for publishing most of the books issued with the Society’s imprimatur up to this point (he was to die in 1680). Thereafter, The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft enjoyed some notoriety, being the target of sustained attack first by the divine, Benjamin Camfield, in a book published in 1678 and then in the enlarged edition of Joseph Glanvill’s work on witchcraft issued as Saducismus Triumphatus by Henry More in 1681 after Glanvill’s death the previous year (and hence leading to the confusion as to what the Royal Society’s real views were on such matters that has already been referred to). Subsequently, though it was ignored by the chief sceptical writer on witchcraft, the Dutch cleric, Balthazar Bekker—whose scepticism about the reality of the phenomenon was based partly on biblical arguments that overlapped with Webster’s, but partly on rather different, Cartesian principles—a German edition of Webster’s book was printed at Halle in 1719 as part of the bitter disputes that Bekker’s work engendered.30

Here, I want to draw attention to a document relevant to the Royal Society’s role in relation to the book which has more than once been cited but has never been fully discussed. This is an item that survives among the papers collected by Thomas Birch that are now at the British Library, Additional Manuscript 4255, fols 39–40: it is a conjugate pair of leaves of small octavo size. In the Library’s 1977 Catalogue of the manuscripts in question it is said to be in the hand of Robert Hooke, but this is mistaken. In fact, it is in the hand of the mathematician and divine, John Pell, who had been a Fellow of the Royal Society almost since its inception and who played a fairly active role in it, not least at this time. As we saw above, he was one of those noted in the minutes as appointed to peruse the manuscript of Webster’s book on 4 March 1675. The document opens at the top of fol. 39: ‘Friday, March 19. 1674/75. I began to read a Manuscript brought to me (24 hours before) by Mr Oldenburg.’ It continues: ‘The Title.’ and a transcription is then given of the draft title-page, which almost exactly matches that sent by Webster to Lister the previous month, including the quotations from both Galen and Bacon. Pell’s notes continue in red ink with the words: ‘And this is all, in his first page.’ They go on, reverting to normal ink: ‘Then followes a Manuscript of 68 sheets in folio’ (the words italicized are underlined in red, as are those in the passage which follows), and after that, as a separate paragraph: ‘But perhaps he intended that his 3d page should containe his letter to the Royal Society which he wrote upon a loose leafe.’

That is the end of fol. 39, but on the conjugate leaf, fol. 40, Pell went on to transcribe the dedication to the Royal Society, which had not been included in the manuscript text that Webster had sent to Lister, and which failed to appear in the printed version, which instead only has the dedication to five Yorkshire JPs that has already been noted. This reads as follows:

To the Royall Society
Right honorable
Though the remoteness & privacy of my abode, and many other Circumstances of my life, deprive me of the happiness of being a neerer witness of your admirable and successfull endeavours, for the advancement of reall knowledge; I cannot but admyre the greatness of the Enterprise, wherein you are involved, and wish I might be any way instrumental to promote so generous a designe. This treatise which I submit to your judgement and
protection, may in some measure contribute to free the World from divers old Errors in the matters handled in it: And though my sense thereon be different from the common opinions of the age, I doe not assert them with such a pertinacious resolution, but that I shall be glad to be convinc’d by a clearer evidence of true Reason. It is that alone is the standard which you have set up, and under that Royal Ensigne I desire to imploy my small force, which how weak soever it may be, is wholly dedicated to your service, as the conductor thereof desires the honour of being received in the quality of

Right honourable
Your most humble & devoted servant
Jo: Webster.36

It is an interesting statement by Webster. In part, it echoes his *Metallographia* dedication in applauding the Royal Society’s pursuit of ‘reall knowledge’ (and, while regretting that his place of residence prevented him from playing a more active role in the Society’s activities, he emphasized his wish to enrol himself under the Society’s ‘Royal Ensigne’). More important, it clearly associated the Society with an open-minded stance on issues such as those that he discussed in his book, as if he expected the Society to support him in his challenge to ‘the common opinions of the age’. On the other hand, he acknowledged that others would disagree, professing a degree of open-mindedness which he no doubt calculated would also appeal to the Society’s members.

Yet in fact, as we have seen, this statement did not appear in the book as published; instead, there is a completely different and much longer ‘Epistle Dedicatory’ to the local JPs. In that, Webster justified dedicating such a book to them because it was their responsibility to deal with the kind of accusations it contained; he advertised his acquaintance with them through his local medical practice; he summarized the thrust of his book and he noted the hostility that he had encountered.37 This all seems fair enough, but why did he suppress the much briefer dedication to the Royal Society, which could easily have appeared alongside the published one?

Here, a few points may be made. The first is that Webster’s suppressed dedication to the Royal Society expresses perfectly the presumption that the Society would be on the side of the ‘moderns’ in rejecting magic, which we now know not to be true. Rather, the Society’s members were deeply divided on such issues, with some, such as Glanvill, trying to involve the Society in vindicating precisely the opposite viewpoint, namely of finding empirical evidence of the very beings and practices of which Webster was sceptical. Moreover, as we now know, the Society’s reaction as a corporate body to these divisions of opinion in its ranks was to duck the issue; it was only in retrospect that this failure to engage with it came to be construed as displaying a sceptical viewpoint.38 In this connection, the suppression of the original dedication is not entirely unexpected, but this makes the granting of the Society’s imprimatur for the book all the more surprising. What further may be said?

First, let us consider the make-up of the committee appointed to peruse Webster’s manuscript. One member, Sir William Petty, the great entrepreneur and pioneer of political economy, is known from other sources to have been among those Fellows of the Society who shared Webster’s sceptical view of the supposedly supernatural phenomena to which the book was devoted (if for rather different reasons than the Helmontian ones espoused by Webster); he also questioned on philosophical grounds the value of evidence of witchcraft for apologetic purposes that men like Glanvill emphasized, arguing that ‘The proving of witches and Sperits is noe proveing of God’.39 Pell’s position is slightly less
clear than Petty’s, but such evidence as exists—for instance his discussion of ancient Roman beliefs in lucky and unlucky days, which is ‘coolly critical’—suggests a comparable attitude.\textsuperscript{40} The third Fellow tasked with reading Webster’s book was Daniel Milles, a London divine who had been elected to the Society only two months before this, though he was appointed to the council in 1675–6. Thereafter his interest in the Society dwindled, and he was expelled in 1685.\textsuperscript{41} This means that he is something of an unknown quantity and, since he published nothing, his views on such topics are elusive. On balance, it is possible that the committee might have given a favourable report on the book, but unfortunately we have no clear evidence on this point.

We also have no means of knowing why there was a delay of more than 16 months between the committee being requested to read the book and its receiving the imprimatur of Sir Jonas Moore in his role as Vice-President. It is perhaps worth pointing out that, gratifyingly voluminous as the Society’s minutes are, it is not uncommon for them to contain such loose ends, so too much should not be made of this. Nevertheless, in the light of the conflicting attitudes on such matters that existed within the Society to which reference has already been made, the possibility should be considered that reservations might have been expressed about the Society’s imprimatur being given to the book by some of those who disagreed with its thrust. Alternatively, the whole matter might have been put ‘on hold’ in view of the Society’s divided opinions on such subjects, perhaps in the hope that the work could just be quietly ignored. Speculating even more freely, one might even suggest the possibility that a deal was done, with the dedication being abandoned as a quid pro quo for the imprimatur being granted—the Society thus becoming somewhat associated with the work, but not too much.

There is also the question of how the licensing of the book relates to the Society’s fortunes in the mid to late 1670s, when it suffered from an overall decline in support and an increasingly bitter factionalism, due largely to dissatisfaction by Robert Hooke and others with the regime of William, Viscount Brouncker, as President and Henry Oldenburg as Secretary that had dominated the Society almost since its inception.\textsuperscript{42} What can be said about these matters? At the outset, it has to be admitted that the Webster book is hard to map directly on to the controversy between Hooke and Oldenburg, since both men were sceptical in their attitudes to witchcraft and related subjects, even if they would not have agreed with many of the arguments on such matters put forward by Webster.\textsuperscript{43} More significant is the extent to which the conflict had a destabilizing influence on the Society, leading to a greater laxity in the Society’s administration than hitherto, and here the role of Sir Jonas Moore, who licensed the book as Vice-President, becomes suspicious. We have already seen how Moore would almost certainly have wished to help Webster for personal reasons. Moreover, although Moore never made his views on witchcraft explicit, two members of his family, John and Hugh Moore, had been among the supposed victims of the Pendle witches in the early seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{44} This episode occurred long before Sir Jonas was born, but he must have been aware of it and it might possibly have inclined him to a sceptical position like Webster’s (though it has to be admitted that it could equally easily have impelled him to a quite contrary position like that of Glanvill). Whatever the case, Moore’s role in the Society just at this time placed him in a strong position to assist his friend.

One effect of the Society’s troubled fortunes at this time was that Fellows who had only recently been elected were often elevated surprisingly quickly to senior positions. Daniel Milles’ elevation to the council only nine months after his election has already been
noted, and the elevation of Sir Jonas Moore to Vice-President was somewhat similar. It should perhaps be explained here that the office of Vice-President was a slightly curious one: at any one time there were multiple Vice-Presidents, the aim being that meetings should never be prevented from occurring due to the absence of the President.45 Prior to the mid 1670s only a handful of Fellows, mostly senior ones, held the office, but on 18 May 1676, an unprecedentedly large group of Fellows were appointed Vice-President, a move that itself probably reflects the Society’s rather unsettled state at this time. Moore was appointed as part of this cohort and, among the Fellows involved, his elevation to the office was perhaps the most surprising since he had only been a Fellow of the Society for 18 months, having been elected on 3 December 1674.46

Then there is the fact of Moore’s giving his imprimatur to the book on 29 July 1676 in the role as Vice-President to which he had been appointed two months earlier. This is more significant than has hitherto been realized, since this was the very first time in the Society’s history that a book had been licensed by a Vice-President rather than by the President, William, Viscount Brouncker.47 Moreover it was virtually without parallel: the only comparable example of a book being licensed by a Vice-President occurred slightly more than a year later, on 15 November 1677, at one of the moments of greatest crisis in the Society’s early history, when Thomas Henshaw, acting in this role, licensed Nehemiah Grew’s *Experiments in Consort of Luctation* (1678). This was just as the challenge to Brouncker’s presidency was reaching its climax, following Oldenburg’s death in September that year, and hence the departure from normal procedures is hardly surprising.48 Also unprecedented in the case of Moore and *The Displaying* (in contrast to Henshaw and *Experiments*) was the fact that Moore issued the imprimatur on a day when there was no meeting either of the council or of the Society. Previously, the imprimatur had invariably been issued at a council meeting (and was generally noted in the minutes), but in this instance the date of the imprimatur fell during the Society’s long vacation, on a day when there was no meeting at all. The final meeting of the Society that summer had occurred on 5 June and the next did not follow until 26 October, and although in the interim three council meetings were held, one on 18 July which was chaired by Moore as Vice-President— in fact the only meeting that he ever chaired—the imprimatur was dated 11 days later, on 29 July.49

It is perhaps worth reiterating here that this instance was also unique in the Society’s early history in that the imprimatur was given to a work by a non-Fellow, and to a book that had already been refused a licence elsewhere. (It is, of course, possible that although Webster divulged the latter fact to Lister in his letter of 13 February 1674/5, he withheld it from Moore. However, it seems likelier that Moore, too, was complicit in this.) This therefore constituted a more aggressive use of the imprimatur than otherwise occurred in the Society’s early years, which is notable in itself.

To conclude, it appears that Moore used his new office as Vice-President in the summer of 1676 to gratify an old acquaintance by taking a step that was unprecedented in the Society’s history. Moreover, this makes it all the more plausible that Moore was indeed the ‘friend’ whose opinions Webster reported to Lister in February/March 1675, including his optimism that the Society would ‘have it pass’, suggesting that Moore was already ‘gunning’ for the book at that point. On the other hand, as will be apparent from what has been said, his initiative was an anomalous one, symptomatic of the greater laxity forced on the Society by the difficult times it was experiencing. Indeed, in this connection it is perhaps worth noting another example from about the same period of a recently elected
Fellow using the Society’s procedures in a manner that seems to have been deprecated by other Fellows—namely, the recruitment campaign in 1681 by the tradesman and journalist, John Houghton, who had himself been elected just one year earlier. Houghton’s nominees included a disproportionately large number of candidates of middling status, an abnormally high percentage of whom failed to achieve election, and this led to a tightening up of the Society’s admissions policy in the following year.\textsuperscript{50} In the case of Webster’s book, the strong implication is that contingency and factionalism within the Society were either directly or indirectly responsible for its obtaining the Society’s imprimatur. What is clear, however, is that this episode throws significant new light on the Society’s early history, while Webster’s suppressed dedication to the Society deserves at last to be more widely known.

\section*{ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS}

I am grateful to Noah Moxham for his comments on a draft of this paper and to Frances Willmoth and Giles Mandelbrote for their assistance.

\section*{NOTES}


2 Charles Webster, \textit{From Paracelsus to Newton: magic and the making of modern science} (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 96–98; Elmer, \textit{op cit.} (note 1), pp. 7ff; Coudert, \textit{op. cit.} (note 1); Fitzharris, \textit{op. cit.} (note 1), ch. 5.


6 The only slightly similar earlier instance concerns John Graunt’s \textit{Natural and political observations upon the bills of mortality}, of which the third and later editions (1665 et seq.) were licensed by the Society although (as with Webster’s) Graunt’s book dealt with matters that were arguably slightly outside the Society’s usual terms of reference. In this case the clue to what occurred is provided by the dedication to the first edition (which has no imprimatur because it preceded the Licensing of the Press Act of 1662) in conjunction with the Society’s minutes. The dedication was to Sir Robert Moray, then acting president of the Society, and it is full of praise for the Society and its design, representing a real pitch by
Graunt to be elected (Graunt, *Natural and political observations upon the bills of mortality* (London, 1662), sigs. A3v–4). The Society’s minutes for 5 February 1662 reveal that the 50 copies of the work were sent for distribution to members of the Society; at the next meeting a committee was appointed to examine the book and Graunt was elected FRS a fortnight later (Thomas Birch, *The history of the Royal Society of London* (4 vols, printed for A. Millar, London, 1756–1757), vol. 1, pp. 75, 76, 77). For the licensing of the subsequent editions by the Society, see Rivington, ‘Early printers’, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 22–23 (although he is incorrect in dating the 2nd edition to 1665 and including it in his list; in fact, it is a 1662 reprint of the 1st edition).

For a helpful edition of both works, along with a further response to Webster by Thomas Hall, see A. G. Debus (ed.), *Science and education in the seventeenth century: the Webster–Ward debate* (Macdonald, London, 1970). For Webster’s subsequent career, see Elmer, op. cit. (note 1), ch. 1, and Fitzharris, op. cit. (note 1), passim.

For the fullest extant account, see Fitzharris, op. cit. (note 1), chs 3–4.

See Webster, *op. cit.* (note 2), Elmer, Coudert and Fitzharris, op. cit. (note 1).

Webster, *The displaying of supposed witchcraft* (London, 1677), sig. a1v.

That the censors in question were at York is stated in David Harley, ‘Mental illness, magical medicine and the Devil in Northern England, 1650–1700’, in *The medical revolution of the seventeenth century* (ed. Roger French and Andrew Wear), pp. 114–144 (Cambridge University Press, 1989), at p. 140, but no documentation is given, and my attempts to follow up Webster’s reference to the refused licence have proved fruitless. One tantalizing clue concerning the book’s censorship is possibly to be found in a manuscript insertion in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Ashmole 580, Elias Ashmole’s copy of Meric Casaubon’s *True & faithful relation of what passed for many yeers between Dr John Dee . . . and some spirits* (London, 1659), which comprises Ashmole’s notes on passages critical of Casaubon that were omitted from the version actually published in *Displaying*, pp. 7–8, 311. In them, Webster rather inconclusively questioned the authenticity of the Dee manuscript that Casaubon deployed in his edition as a means of defending Dee against Casaubon’s aspersions.

Anna Marie Roos (ed.), *The correspondence of Dr Martin Lister (1639–1712)*, vol. 1 (1662–1677) (Brill, Leiden, 2015), pp. 768–769, with the title-page and contents list on pp. 769–771 (these are in fact bound in MS Lister 34 as fol. 145, prior to the Webster letter of 12 January printed in *ibid.*, pp. 754–755, but they clearly belong with this letter). I made my own transcription from the original manuscript before the edition was published, and I regret to note that in it ‘causes’ is incorrectly given as ‘cases’ while the word there transcribed as ‘say’ seems likelier to be ‘try’, as given here (which would at least make sense); I have also restored the ampersands normalized in the edition. For Webster’s earlier letters to Lister see *ibid.*, pp. 723–724, 727–728.

In addition, after ‘melancholy & fancy’, both the version in the Stationers’ Company Register (see note 26) and in Pell’s version (see note 35) have the additional phrase ‘Of both which there are many sorts’ (i.e. the source of ‘there are many sorts’ in the printed title). This is missing from the version that Webster sent to Lister, which must be a simple copying error. After this, in addition to the omissions noted in the text, the draft has ‘visible &’ before ‘corporeall’; ‘Corporeality of’ where the printed one has ‘Existence of’ angels; ‘and substance’ between ‘truth’ and ‘Apparitions’; ‘Words’ instead of ‘Philters’; and pertaining to this subject after ‘abstruse matters’; there are also slight differences in the ordering of the
words between the manuscript and printed versions. As for the list of contents, this has the same 17 chapters as the published version and the description of them is almost identical, though with occasional verbal variants that seem of no great significance (puzzlingly, the transcription in Roos, op. cit. (note 12), p. 770, seems to follow the printed rather than MS version of the titles of chs 4 and 5, in that ‘Authors’ is included in ch. 4, as is ‘rationally or’ and ‘weak, frivolous, and’ in ch. 5, where ‘Allegations’ is given rather than ‘arguments’). It is perhaps worth noting here, in case it might be suspected that the omissions in the printed title page from the list of topics covered in the book were due to revisions on Webster’s part during the period that elapsed prior to the book’s publication, that the topics noted do appear in the published work: for instance, the bleeding of bodies in the presence of the murderer is discussed in Webster, op. cit. (note 10), pp. 304ff.

Roos, op. cit. (note 12), vol. 1, p. 773 (but ‘returne’ there appears as ‘returned’, and the word there transcribed as ‘success’ seems to me likelier to read ‘freeness’, as included in the text above; also, the volume in which the letter appears is incorrectly cited as MS Lister 3, not MS Lister 34).

Ibid., p. 772: this slip of paper is attached to the letter of 12 January in MS Lister 34. The editor prints it as an addendum to the letter of 13 February but, in view of the reference in the Society’s minutes, it seems likelier that it actually belongs with the letter of 6 March.

No comment is made on this figure in Roos, op. cit. (note 12).


Birch, op. cit. (note 6), vol. 3, p. 192.

H. W. Robinson and Walter Adams (eds), The diary of Robert Hooke 1672–1680 (Taylor & Francis, London, 1935), p. 151. However, it should be noted that Roos’ statement, in Roos, op. cit. (note 12), vol. 1, p. 772, that ‘Webster also sent a copy of the work to Oldenburg, who forwarded it to Hooke, who read it on 19 March 1675’ is an almost direct quotation from Antonio Clericuzio’s entry on Webster in ODNB (http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28944 (accessed 15 September 2016)), itself evidently based on a misunderstanding of the new document discussed below (it should perhaps be noted that Hooke does not refer to reading the book in his diary entry for 19 March: Robinson and Adams, ibid., p. 153).

On these men, see Peter Elmer, Witchcraft, witch-hunting and politics in early modern England (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 249–250, including the claim that they ‘were responsible for promoting the publication’ of the book, although no evidence is provided for this.

The only possible clue on this matter is Webster’s statement on the second page of the published ‘Epistle Dedicatory’ (which lacks pagination or signatures) that he was presenting the book to the five JPs ‘rather than to others, whose abilities and integrity I did not so well understand’. Could this refer to the Royal Society?


Rivington, op. cit. (note 5); the principal book not published by him was Grew’s Anatomy of vegetables begun (1672): ibid., p. 23.


Fol. 39 (but without fol. 40) has been cited in Antonio Clericuzio’s *ODNB* article on Webster (see note 23) for his failure to question the attribution of it to Hooke and the resulting misunderstanding as to who read Webster’s manuscript, echoed by Roos); Noel Malcolm and Jacqueline Stedall, *John Pell (1611–1685) and his correspondence with Sir Charles Cavendish: the mental world of an early modern mathematician* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 223, n. 43; and Rhodri Lewis (ed.), *Sir William Petty on the order of nature: an unpublished manuscript treatise* (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, Arizona, 2012), p. 37 n. 105 (both of whom correctly attribute it to Pell). Fol. 39 also appears in the bibliography to Fitzharris, *op. cit.* (note 1) p. 302, but is nowhere discussed in the text. See also note 36.


Followed by ‘Or left w...’ deleted. In the manuscript, ‘74/75’ has been underlined and ‘to’ has been inserted above the line.

However, like the Stationers’ Register version, it includes the words ‘of both which there are many sorts’ which was accidentally omitted in the version sent to Lister. Beyond that, it differs in that ‘Witchcraft’ is not hyphenated and the headings under ‘Wherein also is handled’ are set out as a list. See note 14, for the transcription in Roos, *op. cit.* (note 12), vol. 1, pp. 769–771. The title as far as Webster’s name appears on the recto of fol. 39, with the Galen and Bacon quotations and Pell’s further comments on the verso; the latter are enclosed in large brackets.

Add. MS 4255, fol. 40; the verso is blank. One phrase from this, ‘different from the common opinions of the age’, is quoted in Harley, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 141.

Webster, *op. cit.* (note 10), Epistle Dedicatory.

See Hunter, *op. cit.* (note 3).

BL Add. MS 72887, fol. 56. See also Lewis, *op. cit.* (note 31), pp. 36–37, including n. 105, and Elmer, *op. cit.* (note 24), p. 239, n. 25. For Petty and the Royal Society see Hunter, *op. cit.* (note 33), entry 8 and passim.

See Malcolm and Stedall, *op. cit.* (note 31), pp. 230–1, including n. 83.


See Hunter, *op. cit.* (note 33), pp. 38ff. Brouncker had been appointed President in the first charter, and Oldenburg had become increasingly dominant in the role of Secretary, to which he had been appointed in 1663.


See Hunter, *op. cit.* (note 33), pp. 79–81.
Ibid., entry 313. For Moore’s role in the Society, including his support for Hooke in the Oldenburg dispute, see Willmoth, op. cit. (note 21), pp. 171–176.

My conclusion that the imprimatur had previously invariably been issued at council meetings and was usually recorded in the minutes is based on a collation of the dates given in the imprimaturs with Birch, op. cit. (note 6), passim. It is perhaps worth noting that The diary of Robert Hooke has no relevant reference under the date of the Moore imprimatur (Robinson and Adams, op. cit. (note 23), p. 245).

For the meeting see Birch, op. cit. (note 6), vol. 3, p. 352, though the licencing of Grew’s book is not referred to. For Henshaw’s appointment as Vice-President, see ibid., p. 330, and for his role in chairing meetings both of the council and of the Society in the autumn of 1677, see ibid., pp. 342ff.

Ibid., vol. 3, p. 319. The other two council meetings, on 3 and 12 October, were chaired by Lord Brouncker, as were almost all other council meetings in this period, though the chair was occasionally taken by other Vice-Presidents, namely Sir Robert Moray, Sir William Petty and Seth Ward, Bishop of Salisbury, most often during the vacation: see Birch, op. cit. (note 6), vol. 3, passim; for later ones chaired by Henshaw, see previous note. Milles was present at the council meeting on 3 October 1676 and Pell at that on 12 October; both were present at that of 6 March.