

The Magical Adventures of Mary Parish: The Occult World of Seventeenth-Century London. Frances Timbers.

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While hunting treasure in Islington, the cunning woman Mary Parish (1630–1703) met the ghost of William Laud, who promptly confessed that he had always been a Catholic. She later exorcised demons with Cardinal Wolsey's spirit. In an underground chamber not unlike the Red Room from *Twin Peaks*, the Faery King proposed marriage and, though flattered, Mary politely declined. But she happily accepted from the archangel Gabriel—in her bedroom closet—a red blanket that had swaddled the baby Jesus, which she tailored into underwear for her young lover Goodwin Wharton. He wore them faithfully. These are some of Mary's magical adventures, and if they fail to paint the picture, Frances Timbers recounts many others, expertly guiding us through London's basements, pawn shops, "taverns, brothels, gambling houses, and bowling allies" (131), not to mention the several forbidden forests scattered across the countryside. Indeed, Mary took a lot of men into dimly lit groves to meet beautiful pixies, which strikes me as subterfuge for something else, yet Timbers seems not to think that Mary was involved in prostitution. Maybe not, but there sure were a lot of odd trips into the woods.

The book's strength lies in its weird atmosphere. Timbers makes palpable London's fringe culture of cunning magic and provides, too, an intimate portrait of an adept in the craft, or the scam, as the case might sometimes be. For example, we cannot help but detect fraud when Mary blames the stars because her clients lost at gambling or love, or their peas of invisibility failed to render them invisible. But maybe this is fraud for bread's sake. Necessity is the mother of invention, and Mary did what was necessary. She survived, and this against all odds. She lost a husband and children, broke her leg twice, suffered poverty, spent time in prison, and almost certainly endured rape, which leads to the book's weightiest insight: trauma activated Mary's magic. Caught in a desperate situation, she cried out "abracadabra" and was transported. Mary found in wizardry an answer that she never found in the world of men, or the world at large, for that matter, and through it—in a very real sense—she encountered God.

Yet the modern tendency is to see magic as a form of escapism from the real. We hear talk of magic as fancy or confabulation. Or delusion. And Timbers, from my vantage point of belief in the deeper magic, sounds too modern when she describes Mary's spells as purely metaphorical, or likens her occult philosophy to *Alice in Wonderland*. Not, of course, that I think it fair to critique an author for disbelief in magic, and not that I wish to press the point, but allow me to suggest on Mary's behalf that the opposite might well be the case. Mary did not use magic to escape from reality but rather to escape to it.

Finally, a caveat, or an afterthought: all of this is complicated by the fact that Goodwin Wharton's autobiographical journal is the source from which Timbers gleans nearly every detail of Mary's life. The extent to which we trust Goodwin is the extent to which we see

Mary, and that he thought he wore magical underwear proves worrisome, no doubt, but credulity is not dishonesty. What we know for sure is that Mary's magic gave Goodwin the confidence to become a successful politician. He also, incidentally, became a successful rake, for which Mary is not to blame. I mention this last point because Timbers writes the book as a feel-good love story between Mary and Goodwin, which seems unlikely to me. If looking for true love in Mary's adventures, then George Whitmore is the better option. He was hanged for thievery but returned to Mary in the form of a familiar spirit, because she invoked him with a spell from Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Scot, a skeptic, included the spell in order to mock it, but it worked for Mary, apparently, and ethereal George watched over her for the rest of her life. In fact, Goodwin—through a locked door, and on more than one occasion—heard Mary speak with George, and he heard George, “in a low voice,” respond (69). There were other noises, too. Cue the romantic music?

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