This paper considers a number of problems concerning the publication of Samuel Harsnett’s *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, a tract registered with the Stationers’ Company on 16 March 1603, as an introduction to a more general discussion of the views on witchcraft circulating in the English government at the time of the passing of the 1604 Witchcraft statute. Not least, the publication gives some indication of the attitudes of a key player in the making of the statute—the new king, James I.

The tract has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest, but largely from students of English literature, and one of them, F.W. Brownlow, has produced a full scholarly edition of Harsnett’s treatise.¹ This interest stems from the fact, first noted by an eighteenth-century editor of Shakespeare’s works, that the names of the devils that Edgar (disguised as the madman “Poor Tom”) lists as tormenting him in *King Lear* are derived from Harsnett’s tract: the latter can be added to the list of works read and used by the playwright. Twentieth-century scholarship has both extended the range of borrowings from Harsnett,² and focused on the issue of what drew Shakespeare to this text. One obvious answer to this question is that Shakespeare was intrigued by the

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¹ F.W. Brownlow, *Shakespeare, Harsnett, and the Devils of Denham* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993). Pages 9–189 of this work consist of Brownlow’s discussion and scholarly apparatus. Pages 191–415 are a transcription of Harsnett’s text: of this, pp. 191–335 consist of Harsnett’s account; pp. 337–413 are copies of the examinations of the five witnesses taken by the officers of the Court of Ecclesiastical High Commission. References to Harsnett’s work will be given in the text, to the pages of this edition.

treatise’s remarkably rich vein of references to the stage. This emerges early in the tract, and is a leitmotiv throughout. Harsnett continuously employs a series of references, tropes and metaphors drawn from the theatre: he refers to classical playwrights; to the old miracle plays; to stage technicalities. Harsnett presents himself as a theatre critic, assisting his readers to evaluate the play at Denham: “that every part may be considered, how well it hath been plaied and what actor hath best deserved the plaudite […] for his good action and wit” (203). Harsnett develops a sustained metaphor in which acting and the theatre come to typify exorcism and, ultimately, the Roman Church in general. This analysis was floated in an earlier Harsnett treatise, in which exorcism is described as “a singular foundation to uphold the Pope his play-house and to make religion a pageant of Puppittes.” Its climactic statement informs the opening lines of the concluding chapter of the Declaration: “the end of a Comedie is a plaudite to the Author and Actors.” (319)

As Richard Wilson has written, consideration of Harsnett’s text “prompts most current discussion of the playwright’s Catholic sympathies among literary scholars.” Those disposed to see Shakespeare as deeply sympathetic to traditional Catholicism, even a committed recusant, have argued that the playwright was using a fiercely anti-Catholic polemic with the intention to subvert it. Harsnett’s style of exuberant, coruscating satire, often prurient and bawdy, was not universally appreciated even by fiercely anti-Catholic writers: one of them remarked with distaste his “immodest style and lascivious pen”. Shakespeare, it is argued, was both fascinated and repelled by Harsnett’s dirty amalgam of ridicule, vitriol and prurience. In King Lear, with its sympathy to the possessed and to exorcism, Shakespeare distanced himself from the crude and mechanistic universe of official Protestant culture that Harsnett had sought to promote. This kind of analysis, shorn of its confessional engagement, has been developed brilliantly by the ‘New Historicist’ commentator, Stephen Greenblatt. For Greenblatt, Harsnett was a spokesman for the state, for the ruling elite who were seeking to obliterate “pockets of rivalrous charisma”, and to impose their own

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3 [Samuel Harsnett], A Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of John Darrel (London, 1599), sig. A3.
4 Richard Wilson, Secret Shakespeare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 54; and see pp. 55, 189–92, 289.