In *The Witches of Lancashire*, by Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, the sceptical character Mr. Generous is finally persuaded that witches are at work in his village, indeed that his own wife is one, and proclaims, “Does this last age / Afford what former never durst believe?” (V.3.101–02). First performed in 1634, Heywood and Brome’s play, especially given Generous’s quote about “this last age,” opens up the question about just how much influence the Witchcraft Act of 1604 had on the subsequent drama. For dramatists, did the Act represent a ‘new age’ of belief, or at least a new way to present dramatic spectacle?

Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge argue that “the dramatists drew heavily from [early modern] intellectual discourse” and “exploit[ed] the dramatic potential of contemporary sensation.” They also recognize “a significant surge in theatrical use of the more spectacular aspects of witchcraft belief.” Just exactly what are those “spectacular aspects” of certain plays written soon after the Witchcraft Act of 1604 came into law? It seems that the more detailed the Act’s proscription of certain behaviours was, the more spectacle the dramatists could bring onto stage. Elizabeth’s Act—the one which James’s Act repealed in 1604—was written after Elizabeth herself declared that “my people are afraid of witches” and the writers “reacted” to that societal anxiety by producing a legislation that, roughly speaking, treated witch behavior as a misdemeanor in many cases. But while Elizabeth’s 1563 Act was reactive, James’s 1604 Act against Conjuration and Witchcraft was heavily proscriptive, detailing numerous behaviors that could lead to the

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execution of the transgressor but which also provided all the dramatic fodder that an eager playwright could ever want.

A primary example of a witch spectacle occurs in John Marston’s *The Tragedy of Sophonisba*, a play first performed around March 1606—perhaps the first such drama to show the influence of the 1604 Act. As Act IV closes, the stage directions indicate “Enter Erictho in the shape of Sophonobia […] and hasteth in the bed of Syphax” (210–212). Various scholars read this scene as a succubus seduction, done only with the aid of the Devil, an act which would condemn Erictho for being in league with the arch-enemy of goodness and perhaps also Syphax for another violation. Erictho opens the subsequent act of Marston’s play by lamenting, “Our love, farewell/Know he that would force love, thus seeks his hell” (V.1.20–21), thus making the role of her witchcraft clear, for the 1604 Act makes criminal “the intent to provoke any person to unlawful love.” When she later conjures the ghost of Sophonisba’s father to appear, the angry ghost describes himself as “thus ungraved” by the witch’s power. The modern editors of the play, Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, maintain that “Erictho’s necrophilic practices also place her within contemporary witch-belief, since the Act of 1604 specifically cites such activity as incurring the death penalty”. The audiences watching Marston’s play and also Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which was first acted within weeks, either way, of *The Tragedy of Sophonisba*, had perhaps previously read pamphlet literature and had certainly heard stories of witches, but now they had a chance to see them on stage. Marston took advantage of the witchcraft mania:

Marston’s boldness in the use of stage spectacle goes well beyond the creation of striking local effects, making full use of, and sometimes straining to the utmost, the resources of the Blackfriars’ stage. Trapdoors not only act as a means of escape from Syphax’s bed-chamber, but also act as a cave’s mouth or vault opening into Belos’ forest.

Virtually all of the “stage spectacle” just mentioned pertains to witch activity, and enhances it in an imaginative way. For example, the fact that Syphax never leaves the stage when the scene shifts from Belos’ forest to the bed-chamber serves as a visual metaphor for Erictho’s ability to alter realities or conjure settings—both practices prohibited by the 1604 Act. The imagination of each member of the audience

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4 John Marston, *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1604), in Corbin and Sedge, eds.
5 Ibid., p. 7.
6 Ibid., p. 9.