

SADUCISMUS TRIUMPHATUS OF JOSEPH GLANVILL:

Can a book be deceiving about its true nature?

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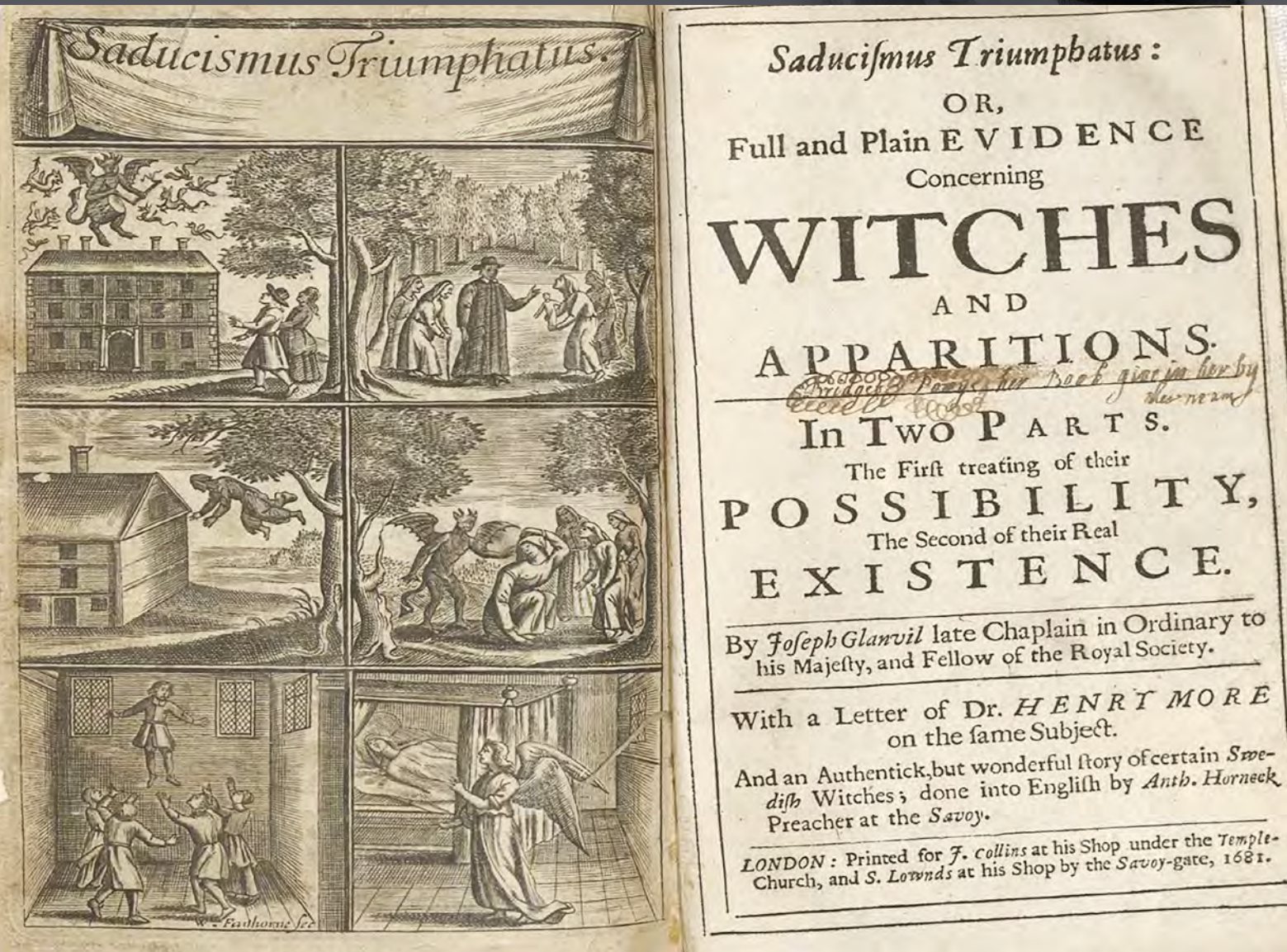


Fig 1.: The frontispiece and title page of the *Saducismus Triumphatus*. The illustrations are examples of evidence for witchcraft discussed in the book. *Saducismus Triumphatus*...1681. Courtesy of the Harold and Mary Jean Hanson Rare Book Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries. <https://guides.uflib.ufl.edu/rare-book-collection>.

"What intrigued me the most was the claim to prove the real existence of witches."

One of my greatest joys as an archivist is to receive an extraordinary object to process and describe or to find something equally extraordinary when opening a box of an unknown collection. Our shelves may look oppressive, filled with hundreds of numbered boxes, dull and grey, but I think of our collections as an ocean full of deep-sea creatures waiting to be discovered.

On October 31, 2023, the Smathers Libraries' program "Magic at the Libraries" displayed a book with fascinating and intriguing illustrations on its frontispiece, and an equally intriguing title: *Saducismus Triumphatus: Or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions. In Two Parts. The First Treating of Their Possibility. The Second of Their Real Existence*, by Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680). When I read the title, I hesitated before picking it up. What intrigued me the most was the claim to prove the real existence of witches. This language reminded me of René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

When I began to read Glanvill's book, I was astounded by what I was seeing. The language and style were so similar to Descartes's *Meditations*. Glanvill seemed to use the *Meditations* and Cartesian language as a template—words like essence, attribute, corporeal, substances, divisibility, mental substance, material substance, extension. Like Descartes, who developed his method of doubt to find indubitable truths upon which he would build his new philosophical system, Glanvill used a skeptical argument to prove the existence of witches. My first reaction was a sense of puzzlement that made me wonder if the intention was to mock Descartes. I wanted to understand why a book dedicated to proving the existence of witches was using the language of philosophy—language that Descartes fashioned to establish his new mechanistic philosophy. In answering this question, I discovered interesting facts about the *Saducismus Triumphatus*, and now I understand that the book is not solely a book on witchcraft and superstition; it is much more.

In 1641, **René Descartes (1596-1650)** published his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. One of the key metaphysical claims in the *Meditations* is Descartes's claim of the real distinction between mind and body, stated in the title of the *Sixth*

Meditation: The existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body (Cottingham, 1990). To establish the real distinction between mind and body, Descartes re-defined Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophical terms such as substance, modes, attributes, and essence, and used his method of skeptical doubt to find certainty, or knowledge. It is a method of exaggerated doubt that leads to discovering truths. Ontologically, Descartes believed that there is one (infinite) substance, God, and two kinds of created (finite) substances: mental and material. The essential property of mental substance is thought, the essential property of material substance is extension, and because of their essences, there is a real distinction between them. The belief in mental and material substances is known as Cartesian Dualism.

Descartes used his method of doubt to show how skepticism is wrong and how certainty, or knowledge, can be achieved about certain principles. If you doubt something, you will give reasons for being uncertain about it; but that you doubt something does not mean you prove it false, or believe that it is true, you just doubt that it is certain. The goal of Descartes's method of doubt is to find something indubitable, something that provides certainty. In the *Meditations*, Descartes concludes that he can be certain that God exists, that he is a thinking thing whose



Fig 2.: The frontispiece and title page of Renati Descartes Opera Philosophica...1692. Courtesy of the Harold and Mary Jean Hanson Rare Book Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries. <https://guides.uflib.ufl.edu/rare-book-collection>.

essence is thought, that the essence of material substance is extension, and that there is a real distinction between mind and body. Because he is certain of these things, he has knowledge of and about them, and thus skepticism about these things is wrong. The goal of the *Meditations*, which he stated in the dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne, is to prove the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the real distinction between mind and body. **Both Descartes and Glanvill were trying to prove certain truths, both using skeptical arguments for this purpose.**

Joseph Glanvill, (1636-1680) was a fellow of the Royal Society. The *Saducismus Triumphatus* was not the original title of the book. The book was first published by Glanvill in 1666 and was titled *A Philosophical Endeavour towards the Defence of the Being of Witches and Apparitions*. In 1681, Henry More, friend and colleague of Glanvill, published the book posthumously after Glanvill's death under the new title *Saducismus Triumphatus*. When Glanvill published the book, he was well known as an author of intellectual,

scientific, and serious writings, and the book was seen by some as an “anomaly” (Prior, 1932).

More and Glanvill had been Cartesians early in their career, eventually becoming disenchanted with Cartesian philosophy in general. As I researched the philosophical background behind the book, I began to comprehend that the book is Glanvill's attempt to reconcile his philosophical beliefs with his religious beliefs—that he was, as R. H. Popkin writes, “a defender of both philosophy and religion” (Popkin, 1954). Glanvill and More viewed Descartes's mechanistic philosophy as a world without spirits, leading to atheism, and Hobbes's materialism as full-blown atheism, while other aspects of their philosophy were unintelligible. Douglas Jesseph writes that “Descartes took the soul's power over the body as an unproblematic feature of daily experience that needed no complex explanation. Glanvill, however, was happy to draw skeptical conclusions from Cartesian premises, even if Descartes would not have granted the inference” (Jesseph, 2005). Jesseph helped me to understand the “anomaly” of the *Saducismus Triumphatus*: the “mystery is solved by understanding Glanvill's witchcraft

writings as part of a broader program to combat atheism and evince the reality of a world of spirits” (Jesseph, 2005). Glanvill’s real goal, according to Jesseph, “is to make a case against the extreme Hobbesian version of materialism as well as Cartesian natural philosophy. [...] Glanvill saw evidence of witchcraft as refuting Cartesian mechanism, even if Descartes himself would not have seen such evidence as relevant to the case” (Jesseph, 2005).

The *Saducismus Triumphatus* is a fascinating book. It is a book that was used in the Salem Witch trials (Drake, 1970), which in my opinion, Glanvill would have disliked given that he was against “abusing the name of religion by justifying superstition” (Popkin, 1954). To my surprise, I learned that the book is much more than a book about witches,

superstition, evil, ghosts, or spirits. It is a book that, besides describing and reporting upon witches and supernatural phenomena, also has a serious underlying philosophical agenda. I now see the *Saducismus Triumphatus* as much more than a treatise arguing for the possibility and existence of witches. A cursory look at the book would not have done it justice. But even if I did not know anything about philosophy and Descartes’s *Meditations*, I still would have been fascinated by the *Saducismus Triumphatus* as a rare book with an intriguing subject matter.

I discovered that a hitherto unknown book had many secrets within its pages. And there are so many more discoveries yet to be made! 📖

Fig 3-5.: Below - Magic of the Libraries 2023: Smathers Library saw around 250 students!



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