

TRANSCRIPTS FOR JANUARY 2019

# Games from Folktales

COMBAT SIMPLIFICATION  
CORNWALL: SMUGGLING  
MICROEPISODE WEEK  
DUNSANY: THE MIST  
POISON MAIDENS  
CATERPILLARS

**An experiment in podcasting for the Ars Magica roleplaying game**

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# Combat Simplification

Ars Magica's combat system has always been a bit of a problem. The current one doesn't let a nudist with a sharpened stick dependably defeat a knight, or require that your character's actions be subsumed into a small tactic unit roll, but there are obvious problems with it, and these make the game difficult to present to new players.

Many of these issues go back to how this minigame is designed. To be clear about what I mean here, regardless of whether you think Ars is about the life of a community in Mythic Europe, or the consequences of magicians using their power, there's not a lot of role for two guys hitting each other with bits of steel. The game spends an inordinate amount of time on stating up monsters, and balancing those stats, against not a central character, like a magus, but against an average human.

To posit an axiom: you can tell if the minigame is fair by seeing how you feel when you lose. If your character dies, do you feel it was a good, or at least narratively-necessary, outcome? Ars works the fairness angle in several ways.

You are told, over and over again, not to get attached to grogs. They are also less detailed than your companions or magi. This is so that when they die, you as a player are less upset than when, for example, your magus's pets die. Your character, no matter how wounded, only every reaches a state of deep incapacitation. In virtually all cases a player character might theoretically step in and cure you with an enormous amount of *Creo vis*. They never do, because *Creo vis* is really, really valuable, but at least you've been forced into making that choice as a group: the character is too expensive to save.

You get to decide several trade-offs, in terms of how your weapons give bonuses, and what protective kit you wear.

The process of dying takes an awful lot of dice rolls. One of the purposes of the ridiculously long combat is to make sure a single roll never kills your character.

Everything uses the same stats. Virtually every human character is technically playable, as are most of the Magical or Faerie critters. They are built using a painfully lengthy version of the human character design mechanics.

Can we find other ways to build a fair combat minigame, to allow new players to just get in and play without having to fight through the choice paralysis of character design? Let's see what we can steal from other game systems.

In many games of Amber, your character does not and cannot die in a single blow. That your character has been injured is a sign that something is going wrong and you should change strategies. In some online versions of the game, your character cannot die without your consent. Similarly, in Doctor Who, the highest damage level means that your character must depart the TARDIS. You choose how: you don't need for them to die, but they are going to exit. I like these mechanics, because they let us hollow out a lot of the procedures attempting to model fairness, by just saying that regardless of the numbers, fairness is the goal.

In many games, combat is simultaneous. In Ars we have the old D&D idea that you see who goes first, then sides take turns hitting each other. This doesn't make a lot of sense for two reasons: an Ars combat round is a minute, so the idea that someone goes first and then someone responds is a bit odd. The second is that the decisive element in the combat is generally the magus, who is going last in the round, and that means that all of the carry-on may be made moot. Why go to all the trouble of playing with all of those numbers if someone is just going to toss a fireball at the end? The way I'd get around this is to suggest that Attack and Defence aren't separate things: just compare scores and give a bonus for surprise if that matters.

The finely balanced weapon table is meant to make your trade off different aspects of each weapon to specialise your character, so that one pick will let you be fast, and one pick will sacrifice that for more damage. The thing is, if all of them are meant to be balanced across the entire process of combat, why not just abbreviate the whole process to a single roll, and given them all the same statistics? The advantage of this is that if you swap between weapons, it doesn't make you recalculate.



Imagine a traditional joust: two knights trying to hit each other with lances, then dismount and try to hit each other with swords, and who then wrestle and try and shiv each other with daggers. In Ars that's three different sets of four statistics for each weapon, when really all you need to know is which knight is the better fighter, and buy how much. All the added detail numerical detail doesn't add anything to the combat, insofar as it doesn't swiftly solve the question of who won, what it cost, and what the game-world effects are.

So, I'd like to suggest the following system for new players.

Your character's choices on the weapons table do not matter. All armed melee is 0/0/0/+5 which is human average. If you are fighting unarmed, your Dmg is +1. Bows are +5, but you can work that out.

- Do you have surprise? (Perception or roleplay)
- If you have surprise, what do you do to give you a bonus? (generally +3)
- Magi begin their formulaic spells now. Players may fastcast anywhere in the round, but that loses them their formulaic for the round.
- Compare combat rolls (dice + combat ability, plus any bonus from a relevant Characteristic, like Sta, Qik, Str, plus and Virtues). The dice roll is going to seem crowded out by the bonuses, but in the process of combat, it already is: it's just hidden by splitting the bonuses off onto different rolls which all average together.
- Choose if you do Damage or not. If not, you retain your advantage for next round.
- There are no Soak rolls. They victor's Advantage is just chipped down by Soak score. The Storyguide tells the player if the outcome is minor, major or incapacitating and the player narrates the attack accordingly. This can include damage, but it can also include environmental advantages of equal value (for example, breaking an enemy's shield, pushing them over, claiming the high ground).
- The next round does not have an Init roll, it just goes back to a comparison of combat rolls. One side or the other should be either hurt or building up advantage. Sensible characters react to this by changing strategy or fleeing.

# Dunsany: The Mist

This is a tiny episode, recorded sometime ago when I was doing all the Duunsany material. It's only about a minute long but it's his take on the armies of ghosts which we covered in one of the previous books. I remember a Cramon magus putting on the cap of their leader.

Now for a weeping army of the remnant dead in less than a minute.

I believe it's our second last reading by Thomas Copeland from LibriVox. Thanks to Thomas, Stats eventually.

*The mist said unto the mist: "Let us go up into the Downs." And the mist came up weeping.*

*And the mist went into the high places and the hollows.*

*And clumps of trees in the distance stood ghostly in the haze.*

*But I went to a prophet, one who loved the Downs, and I said to him: "Why does the mist come up weeping into the Downs when it goes into the high places and the hollows?"*

*And he answered: "The mist is the company of a multitude of souls who never saw the Downs, and now are dead. Therefore they come up weeping into the Downs, who are dead and never saw them."*

# Poison maidens

Poison maidens occur in Indian folklore, where they are called visha kanya. They are assassins. Perhaps they are based on a real tradition of women taught to seduce and then poison the men to whom they are sent as gifts, but that seems almost entirely theoretical. In the more developed form, the maidens are raised around poisonous things, or being tiny amounts of poison, so that their bodily fluids become toxic. In the most dangerous forms, even their touch can kill.

The story first leaps the the West in the Gesta Romanorum, which was a wildly popular collection of stories from the late 13th Century, the contents of which you've seen recycled in all sorts of later authors. It seems like a worthwhile subject for a series of episodes. Richard Burton worked this into a story about a woman sent to Alexander the Great. Nigel Hawthorne (whose Twice-Told Tales may have something to do with the Ars supplement Thrice-Told Tales) used Burton as a source for his short story, "Rappacini's Daughter". In that story an alchemist makes his daughter, Beatrice, a poison maiden. He then experiments on a neighbouring young man named Giovanni, giving him the same properties. The experiment seems to take the form of mere proximity: it's transmitted merely by either being in the presence of the poison maiden for an extended time, or perhaps it is caused by their walks occurring in a garden of toxic alchemically-hybridised flowers.

Beatrice knows she is a poison maiden, but not that she can transfer her curse, so she avoids contact with Giovanni. She appears to think that the touch even of her clothes can cause harm. She grabs his hand at one point, to stop him touching her "sister", which is what she calls the tree that sprouted at her birth. It is fatal, so her intervention is necessary, but her fingerprints become vivid bruises on her beau's wrist. Giovanni sends Beatrice flowers from outside the poison garden, but her breath makes them wither. Giovanni discovers he has become like Beatrice when his breath kills a spider. As a spoiler, Beatrice's nature has been so reversed that when she takes a sort of universal purgative to remove her poisonous nature, it kills her instead of healing her.

The Poison Maidens seem like a class of Transformed Human, but Beatrice, at least appears not to be a magical creature. She may be a human, but if so, she's a Companion, simply because she needs a vast number of Virtues and Flaws for her construction. We might, instead, suggest that Rappaccini is a Mystagogue and has invested his daughter as she grew, so she has more virtues than is usual for player characters. Giovanni's development of the curse seems to suggest this is an incorrect interpretation. A simpler alternative is that the garden he has created, filled with alchemically spliced plants, is a mystical space which warps the people who enter it, granting them the flaws required.

Here are some Virtue and Flaw packs to create various versions of the poison damsel.

## Legendary Assassin

### Virtues

Greater Power: Fluids poisonous to the touch, CrAq 35: Init. (Qik-4), 0 points,  
Create a poison that causes a fatal wound. (Ease 6) CrAq25, +5 Touch, Special (as Momentary), Individual, +5 Ease 6.  
Improved Power : reduces cost of power above to 0.  
Lesser Immunity (Poison)  
Flaw  
Lesser Malediction (cannot benefit from medicines)

## Fatal concubine

### Virtues

Greater Power: Fluids poisonous to the touch, CrAq 30: Init. (Qik-4), 0 points,  
Create a poison that causes a fatal wound. (Ease 6) CrAq25, Personal, Special (as Momentary), Individual, +5 Ease 6.  
Lesser Immunity (Poison)  
Flaw  
Lesser Malediction (cannot benefit from medicines)

## Beatrice

### Virtues

Personal Power: Poisonous touch and breath, CrAq15: Init constant, 0 points, CrAq 15 Create a poison that causes a Light Wound. (Ease 3). CrAq5, +5 Touch, Special (as Momentary), Individual, +5.  
Improved Power: reduces cost of above to 0  
Lesser Immunity (Poison)  
Flaw  
Lesser Malediction (cannot benefit from medicines)

## Retiring creature

### Virtue

Lesser Immunity (Poison)  
Flaw  
Greater Malediction (killing touch – any of the above)  
Lesser Malediction (cannot benefit from medicines)

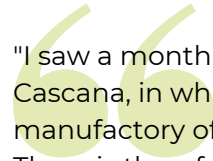
# Caterpillars

This week another story from E.F. Benson. E.F. Benson has only provided one story for this podcast previously: it was “The Room in the Tower” which provided the reverer of Julia Stone.

I wanted to share with you a different Benson story that would link into our Cornwall material. It's been in the public domain in Australia for about twenty years, but won't enter the public domain in the United States until January 2020. I don't want to tempt you to look for it online. Basically it's about a giant, shadowy slug creature like luciferge – for those of you who are familiar with “Realm of Power: the infernal” – that acts as an Avenger of Evil. It to hunts down the impious and leaves them as sacks of skin and bones. It's truly lovely and I wanted to present it to you, but it turns out there's that little legal technicality, so instead a story called “Caterpillars”.

Caterpillars was read into the public domain by Andy Minter of LibriVox. Andy passed away in 2017. He's one of my favourite Voxers. He would not have remembered, but he was encouraging to me when I first started. I only know Andy through his participation in LV, but he seemed shy and he was very deeply hurt whenever people criticized his readings. It seemed to hurt his confidence to continue reading, so with Andy it always seemed important to tell him how much you enjoyed what he read. I suppose I'm mentioning this because when I'm recording this it's Christmas which is a season for giving thanks. Anyway, I've rambled enough...

Originally when I looked at these things I thought they were demons. Instead they could be a particularly viscous sort of faerie. I like the idea that you may be tempted to farm these terrible things as a Corpus vis source, infernally-tainted perhaps. What are you willing to do for power?



"I saw a month or two ago in an Italian paper that the Villa Cascana, in which I once stayed, had been pulled down, and that a manufactory of some sort was in process of erection on its site. There is therefore no longer any reason for refraining from writing of those things which I myself saw (or imagined I saw) in a certain room and on a certain landing of the villa in question, nor from mentioning the circumstances which followed, which may or may not (according to the opinion of the reader) throw some light on or be somehow connected with this experience.

The Villa Cascana was in all ways but one a perfectly delightful house, yet, if it were standing now, nothing in the world--I use the phrase in its literal sense--would induce me to set foot in it again, for I believe it to have been haunted in a very terrible and practical manner.

Most ghosts, when all is said and done, do not do much harm; they may perhaps terrify, but the person whom they visit usually gets over their visitation. They may on the other hand be entirely friendly and beneficent. But the appearances in the Villa Cascana were not beneficent, and had they made their "visit" in a very slightly different manner, I do not suppose I should have got over it any more than Arthur Inglis did.

The house stood on an ilex-clad hill not far from Sestri di Levante on the Italian Riviera, looking out over the iridescent blues of that enchanted sea, while behind it rose the pale green chestnut woods that climb up the hillsides till they give place to the pines that, black in contrast with them, crown the slopes. All round it the garden in the luxuriance of mid-spring bloomed and was fragrant, and the scent of magnolia and rose, borne on the salt freshness of the winds from the sea, flowed like a stream through the cool vaulted rooms.

On the ground floor a broad pillared loggia ran round three sides of the house, the top of which formed a balcony for certain rooms of the first floor. The main staircase, broad and of grey marble steps, led up from the hall to the landing outside these rooms, which were three in number, namely, two big sitting-rooms and a bedroom arranged en suite. The latter was unoccupied, the sitting-rooms were in use. From these the main staircase was continued to the second floor, where were situated certain bedrooms, one of which I occupied, while from the other side of the first-floor landing some half-dozen steps led to another suite of rooms, where, at the time I am speaking of, Arthur Inglis, the artist, had his bedroom and studio. Thus the landing outside my bedroom at the top of the house commanded both the landing of the first floor and also the steps that led to Inglis' rooms. Jim Stanley and his wife, finally (whose guest I was), occupied rooms in another wing of the house, where also were the servants' quarters

I arrived just in time for lunch on a brilliant noon of mid-May. The garden was shouting with colour and fragrance, and not less delightful after my broiling walk up from the marina, should have been the coming from the reverberating heat and blaze of the day into the marble coolness of the villa. Only (the reader has my bare word for this, and nothing more), the moment I set foot in the house I felt that something was wrong. This feeling, I may say, was quite vague, though very strong, and I remember that when I saw letters waiting for me on the table in the hall I felt certain that the explanation was here: I was convinced that there was bad news of some sort for me. Yet when I opened them I found no such explanation of my premonition: my correspondents all reeked of prosperity. Yet this clear miscarriage of a presentiment did not dissipate my uneasiness. In that cool fragrant house there was something wrong.

I am at pains to mention this because to the general view it may explain that though I am as a rule so excellent a sleeper that the extinction of my light on getting into bed is apparently contemporaneous with being called on the following morning, I slept very badly on my first night in the Villa Cascana. It may also explain the fact that when I did sleep (if it was indeed in sleep that I saw what I thought I saw) I dreamed in a very vivid and original manner, original, that is to say, in the sense that something that, as far as I knew, had never previously entered into my consciousness, usurped it then. But since, in addition to this evil premonition, certain words and events occurring during the rest of the day might have suggested something of what I thought happened that night, it will be well to relate them.

After lunch, then, I went round the house with Mrs. Stanley, and during our tour she referred, it is true, to the unoccupied bedroom on the first floor, which opened out of the room where we had lunched.

"We left that unoccupied," she said, "because Jim and I have a charming bedroom and dressing-room, as you saw, in the wing, and if we used it ourselves we should have to turn the dining-room into a dressing-room and have our meals downstairs. As it is, however, we have our little flat there, Arthur Inglis has his little flat in the other passage; and I remembered (aren't I extraordinary?) that you once said that the higher up you were in a house the better you were pleased. So I put you at the top of the house, instead of giving you that room."

It is true, that a doubt, vague as my uneasy premonition, crossed my mind at this. I did not see why Mrs. Stanley should have explained all this, if there had not been more to explain. I allow, therefore, that the thought that there was something to explain about the unoccupied bedroom was momentarily present to my mind.

The second thing that may have borne on my dream was this.

At dinner the conversation turned for a moment on ghosts. Inglis, with the certainty of conviction, expressed his belief that anybody who could possibly believe in the existence of supernatural phenomena was unworthy of the name of an ass. The subject instantly dropped. As far as I can recollect, nothing else occurred or was said that could bear on what follows.

We all went to bed rather early, and personally I yawned my way upstairs, feeling hideously sleepy. My room was rather hot, and I threw all the windows wide, and from without poured in the white light of the moon, and the love-song of many nightingales. I undressed quickly, and got into bed, but though I had felt so sleepy before, I now felt extremely wide-awake. But I was quite content to be awake: I did not toss or turn, I felt perfectly happy listening to the song and seeing the light. Then, it is possible, I may have gone to sleep, and what follows may have been a dream. I thought, anyhow, that after a time the nightingales ceased singing and the moon sank. I thought also that if, for some unexplained reason, I was going to lie awake all night, I might as well read, and I remembered that I had left a book in which I was interested in the dining-room on the first floor. So I got out of bed, lit a candle, and went downstairs. I went into the room, saw on a side-table the book I had come to look for, and then, simultaneously, saw that the door into the unoccupied bedroom was open. A curious grey light, not of dawn nor of moonshine, came out of it, and I looked in. The bed stood just opposite the door, a big four-poster, hung with tapestry at the head. Then I saw that the greyish light of the bedroom came from the bed, or rather from what was on the bed. For it was covered with great caterpillars, a foot or more in length, which crawled over it. They were faintly luminous, and it was the light from them that showed me the room. Instead of the sucker-feet of ordinary caterpillars they had rows of pincers like crabs, and they moved by grasping what they lay on with their pincers, and then sliding their bodies forward. In colour these dreadful insects were yellowish-grey, and they were covered with irregular lumps and swellings. There must have been hundreds of them, for they formed a sort of writhing, crawling pyramid on the bed. Occasionally one fell off on to the floor, with a soft fleshy thud, and though the floor was of hard concrete, it yielded to the pincerfeet as if it had been putty, and, crawling back, the caterpillar would mount on to the bed again, to rejoin its fearful companions. They appeared to have no faces, so to speak, but at one end of them there was a mouth that opened sideways in respiration.

Then, as I looked, it seemed to me as if they all suddenly became conscious of my presence.

All the mouths, at any rate, were turned in my direction, and next moment they began dropping off the bed with those soft fleshy thuds on to the floor, and wriggling towards me. For one second a paralysis as of a dream was on me, but the next I was running upstairs again to my room, and I remember feeling the cold of the marble steps on my bare feet. I rushed into my bedroom, and slammed the door behind me, and then--I was certainly wide-awake now--I found myself standing by my bed with the sweat of terror pouring from me. The noise of the banged door still rang in my ears. But, as would have been more usual, if this had been mere nightmare, the terror that had been mine when I saw those foul beasts crawling about the bed or dropping softly on to the floor did not cease then. Awake, now, if dreaming before, I did not at all recover from the horror of dream: it did not seem to me that I had dreamed. And until dawn, I sat or stood, not daring to lie down, thinking that every rustle or movement that I heard was the approach of the caterpillars. To them and the claws that bit into the cement the wood of the door was child's play: steel would not keep them out.

But with the sweet and noble return of day the horror vanished: the whisper of wind became benignant again: the nameless fear, whatever it was, was smoothed out and terrified me no longer. Dawn broke, hueless at first; then it grew dove-coloured, then the flaming pageant of light spread over the sky.

The admirable rule of the house was that everybody had breakfast where and when he pleased, and in consequence it was not till lunch-time that I met any of the other members of our party, since I had breakfast on my balcony, and wrote letters and other things till lunch. In fact, I got down to that meal rather late, after the other three had begun. Between my knife and fork there was a small pill-box of cardboard, and as I sat down Inglis spoke.

"Do look at that," he said, "since you are interested in natural history. I found it crawling on my counterpane last night, and I don't know what it is."

I think that before I opened the pill-box I expected something of the sort which I found in it.

Inside it, anyhow, was a small caterpillar, greyish-yellow in colour, with curious bumps and excrescences on its rings. It was extremely active, and hurried round the box, this way and that.

Its feet were unlike the feet of any caterpillar I ever saw: they were like the pincers of a crab. I looked, and shut the lid down again.

"No, I don't know it," I said, "but it looks rather unwholesome. What are you going to do with it?"

"Oh, I shall keep it," said Inglis. "It has begun to spin: I want to see what sort of a moth it turns into."

I opened the box again, and saw that these hurrying movements were indeed the beginning of the spinning of the web of its cocoon. Then Inglis spoke again.

"It has got funny feet, too," he said. "They are like crabs' pincers. What's the Latin for crab?" "Oh, yes, Cancer. So in case it is unique, let's christen it: 'Cancer Inglisensis.'" Then something happened in my brain, some momentary piecing together of all that I had seen or dreamed. Something in his words seemed to me to throw light on it all, and my own intense horror at the experience of the night before linked itself on to what he had just said. In effect, I took the box and threw it, caterpillar and all, out of the window. There was a gravel path just outside, and beyond it, a fountain playing into a basin. The box fell on to the middle of this.

Inglis laughed.

"So the students of the occult don't like solid facts," he said. "My poor caterpillar!"

The talk went off again at once on to other subjects, and I have only given in detail, as they happened, these trivialities in order to be sure myself that I have recorded everything that could have borne on occult subjects or on the subject of caterpillars. But at the moment when I threw the pill-box into the fountain, I lost my head: my only excuse is that, as is probably plain, the tenant of it was, in miniature, exactly what I had seen crowded on to the bed in the unoccupied room. And though this translation of those phantoms into flesh and blood--or whatever it is that caterpillars are made of--ought perhaps to have relieved the horror of the night, as a matter of fact it did nothing of the kind. It only made the crawling pyramid that covered the bed in the unoccupied room more hideously real.

After lunch we spent a lazy hour or two strolling about the garden or sitting in the loggia, and it must have been about four o'clock when Stanley and I started off to bathe, down the path that led by the fountain into which I had thrown the pill-box. The water was shallow and clear, and at the bottom of it I saw its white remains. The water had disintegrated the cardboard, and it had become no more than a few strips and shreds of sodden paper.



The centre of the fountain was a marble Italian Cupid which squirted the water out of a wine-skin held under its arm. And crawling up its leg was the caterpillar. Strange and scarcely credible as it seemed, it must have survived the falling-to-bits of its prison, and made its way to shore, and there it was, out of arm's reach, weaving and waving this way and that as it evolved its cocoon.

Then, as I looked at it, it seemed to me again that, like the caterpillar I had seen last night, it saw me, and breaking out of the threads that surrounded it, it crawled down the marble leg of the Cupid and began swimming like a snake across the water of the fountain towards me. It came with extraordinary speed (the fact of a caterpillar being able to swim was new to me), and in another moment was crawling up the marble lip of the basin. Just then Inglis joined us.

"Why, if it isn't old 'Cancer Inglisensis' again," he said, catching sight of the beast. "What a tearing hurry it is in!"

We were standing side by side on the path, and when the caterpillar had advanced to within about a yard of us, it stopped, and began waving again as if in doubt as to the direction in which it should go. Then it appeared to make up its mind, and crawled on to Inglis' shoe.

"It likes me best," he said, "but I don't really know that I like it. And as it won't drown I think perhaps--" He shook it off his shoe on to the gravel path and trod on it.

All afternoon the air got heavier and heavier with the Sirocco that was without doubt coming up from the south, and that night again I went up to bed feeling very sleepy; but below my drowsiness, so to speak, there was the consciousness, stronger than before, that there was something wrong in the house, that something dangerous was close at hand. But I fell asleep at once, and--how long after I do not know--either woke or dreamed I awoke, feeling that I must get up at once, or I should be too late. Then (dreaming or awake) I lay and fought this fear, telling myself that I was but the prey of my own nerves disordered by Sirocco or what not, and at the same time quite clearly knowing in another part of my mind, so to speak, that every moment's delay added to the danger. At last this second feeling became irresistible, and I put on coat and trousers and went out of my room on to the landing. And then I saw that I had already delayed too long, and that I was now too late.

The whole of the landing of the first floor below was invisible under the swarm of caterpillars that crawled there. The folding doors into the sitting-room from which opened the bedroom where I had seen them last night were shut, but they were squeezing through the cracks of it and dropping one by one through the keyhole, elongating themselves into mere string as they passed, and growing fat and lumpy again on emerging. Some, as if exploring, were nosing about the steps into the passage at the end of which were Inglis' rooms,

others were crawling on the lowest steps of the staircase that led up to where I stood. The landing, however, was completely covered with them: I was cut off. And of the frozen horror that seized me when I saw that I can give no idea in words.

Then at last a general movement began to take place, and they grew thicker on the steps that led to Inglis' room. Gradually, like some hideous tide of flesh, they advanced along the passage, and I saw the foremost, visible by the pale grey luminousness that came from them, reach his door. Again and again I tried to shout and warn him, in terror all the time that they would turn at the sound of my voice and mount my stair instead, but for all my efforts I felt that no sound came from my throat. They crawled along the hinge-crack of his door, passing through as they had done before, and still I stood there, making impotent efforts to shout to him, to bid him escape while there was time.

At last the passage was completely empty: they had all gone, and at that moment I was conscious for the first time of the cold of the marble landing on which I stood barefooted. The dawn was just beginning to break in the Eastern sky.

Six months after I met Mrs. Stanley in a country house in England. We talked on many subjects and at last she said:

"I don't think I have seen you since I got that dreadful news about Arthur Inglis a month ago."

"I haven't heard," said I.

"No? He has got cancer. They don't even advise an operation, for there is no hope of a cure: he is riddled with it, the doctors say."

Now during all these six months I do not think a day had passed on which I had not had in my mind the dreams (or whatever you like to call them) which I had seen in the Villa Cascana.

"It is awful, is it not?" she continued, "and I feel I can't help feeling, that he may have--"

"Caught it at the villa?" I asked.

She looked at me in blank surprise.

"Why did you say that?" she asked. "How did you know?"

Then she told me. In the unoccupied bedroom a year before there had been a fatal case of cancer. She had, of course, taken the best advice and had been told that the utmost dictates of prudence would be obeyed so long as she did not put anybody to sleep in the room, which had also been thoroughly disinfected and newly white-washed and painted.

But--

# Early English Smuggling

I wasn't going to write in detail about Cornish smuggling, because its golden age is three centuries beyond the game period. If you go onto Wikipedia, as it reads while I write, it says that there was no smuggling before Edward I established customs payments in 1275. That sounds plausible. On a whim I followed the footnotes on the article, and the author Wikipedia is quoting says precisely the opposite. In "The early English customs system; a documentary study of the institutional and economical history of the customs from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century" by Norman Gras, there's a chapter on customs before the "Old Custom" of 1275. Looking at the early law, it occurred to me that House Mercere isn't just a merchant company: it also needs to engage in smuggling. It really has no choice.

## PRISE

The oldest royal tax on merchants is "prise" and for magi it's the most troublesome. This word, which becomes both the modern "prize" and "price", describes the royal right to seize useful material, then pay for it at a rate that is either historical, or pegged to a particular market. The prise is only levied on material being exported. It is most well known on wine. The king's court needs a heap of wine, and his people have the right to grab as much of it as they like, then pay for it at a rate determined by the merchants of London.

During the game period, prise expands to other luxury goods. Here's a quote from the game period "Within the term of...three tides, the sheriff and the king's chamberlain are to come to the ship and, if there is a vessel of gold or silver of Solomon work, or precious stones, or cloth of Constantinople or of Regensburg, or fine linen, or coats of mail from Mainz, they shall take them for the king's use, by the view and appraisal of the loyal merchants of London and within a fortnight pay the money." This means that a heap of stuff that House Mercere is moving about for magi, particularly forms for making magic items, can be lawfully seized. In other accounts, wool, cloth and wax are also prise. These are of value to magi, particularly wax, which is what they use to create light when not using magic.

A larger problem is that the king infeudates the right to collect prise. It's all very well saying the king will take your stuff, then pay for it at the price assessed by your business rivals in the city of London, but when the king sells the prise rights for a port to some minor noble in the middle of nowhere, and that noble gives the right to assess to the local church steward, who may be his brother, things just become ridiculous.

## LASTAGE AND SCAVAGE

In nine, or perhaps ten, of the biggest ports in England, merchants are required to pay "lastage". This word has several meanings, and may have multiple derivations. It is paid per ship, on exports. Although some places call it ballastage, there's no proof that it was a charge for rocks to use as ballast – which was apparently a thing in some places. Lastage doesn't affect coastal trade within England, so if you are shipping grain from Kent to Cornwall, you are exempt. Scavage is a similar fee charged on imports.

It only affects goods for sale, but if a redcap is dressed shoddily and he has some magic items for emergencies, it's hard to prove they are personal possessions, not trade goods. Worse, if he's carrying stuff for someone else, that he's doing so without an expectation of sale is hard to prove. Say he's carrying the Robes of Ruby Dawn to the new Primus of Ex Miscellanea, it's tricky to prove these are aren't a commissioned work of cloth being taken to a churchman in Normandy. Lastage and scavage are probably farmed out, like the prise. That is, a person pays the king an annual fee to be able to collect it in an area.

## PETTY PORT CUSTOMS

Lords who have the control of a port have a series of rights. These include anchorage, keelage, ballastage, lestage, busselage, prisage, towage, wharfage, morage, housellage, terrage, tronage, cranage, and measurage. Basically the person in charge of the port could nickel and dime you for every little thing, from dropping anchor, to using a crane, using a wharf, putting stuff on his land, using a warehouse, exporting stuff in barrels, and so on. Townspeople don't pay petty noble customs – which is why so many villages with rich people in them want to become towns, and pay the king for the privilege.

## TIN AND PEWTER

Cornish tin was taxed through the Stanneries, a sort of Parliament of miners. Smuggling lets you avoid those. Pewter was exported, at times in large quantities, from Bristol, London, Exeter and Dartmouth. It attracted a tax, so again if your covenant is selling tin, you need to smuggle or pay the tax.

# TOWN CUSTOMS (CUSTUMA VILLE)

Most towns have a custom which is paid whenever material either enters or leaves the town. One of the key features of this system, however, is that local notables do not pay these tolls. Burgesses do not pay the tolls in their own towns and, if from certain special towns, do not pay town tolls anywhere in England. I believe Bristol is such a town. The king can give the same right to ignore tolls to anyone, and often gives it to his own merchants, and to the representatives of religious houses.

Time for another quote “So great indeed was the list of exemptions by the end of the twelfth century that it was chiefly aliens, the poorer citizens of towns, and peasants, who paid the town tolls.”

As an example the Billingsgate tolls, which are for London, covered wood, cloth, fish, wine, oil, pigs, pepper, gloves, vinegar, fowl, eggs, cheese, and butter in the Eleventh Century. You can see why House Mercere wants its Mercer House in London, and a pawn as its face, so that they can avoid much of this hassle.

## THE FIFTEENTH OF KING JOHN

The fifteenth was a tax on all goods exported or imported, but not coastal trade. It was not farmed out: it was enforced by the King's own men, the chief of whom was called a *customarius*. It was novel in that it was only charged once, no matter how many towns the goods touched in their travel to final owners. This did not replace the local systems, which continued to tax people. The Fifteenth was by weight or value, and so this meant that you owed 16d per pound. It's around 6 percent, but given that an international trader paid it both on the cargo coming in, then the new cargo going out, and that it sat atop local charges, this creates a price differential which makes smuggling profitable.

Under the new custom of 1275, indefinite prise is discontinued. The custom was not a pure percentage, it was a series of dues on different products. For example, wine was 2 shillings per tun. Wool was 3s/4d per sack, the same for 300 woolfells, and 6s/8d. for a last of hides. Wine and wool are mainstays of the later smuggling trade. Shipping wool to Flanders is so important to the English economy that eventually it caused wars with the French, and the Speaker of the House of Lords still sits on a woolsack. Wine was the counter-cargo. To explain the other two, a woolfell is a hide with the fleece still attached, and a last is a standard cargo (in this case 200 hides). Cloth (2s or less, by quality) , wax (12d per hundred pounds) “All other wares, exported or imported, fine cloths, animals, com, and general merchandise at 3 d. per £ value”.

So, these give us scope for actual smuggling, despite the claims to the contrary in a surprising number of sources.

# Microepisode Week

Microepisode week is to allow me to use up plot ideas that have been sitting in my notebooks for a while. I've noticed that ideas that go out to the community and circulate around a little tend to come back in better forms. That is when you look at Ars Magica it's often the second or third attempt that we make it something that's the good one.

So this lets me get the primary idea out into the ether, so that any of you have some ideas can connect together ideas you have and, hopefully in a week or a month or a year, I'll see them reflected back in some more beautiful form. This is far better than if I just left them in my notebooks.

## TYCHO BRAHE'S NOSE

Tycho Brahe lost his nose during a duel at University so he wore a prosthetic one. I won't be able to stop myself until I call this a prosthetic proboscis, so I'll get that out of the way now. He had several: he had a brass one for everyday wear and he had a court nose which was gilded, for when he was swanning about with royalty. A long time ago I considered faerie prosthetic limbs, but now I'm trying to write up Stellasper, a covenant housing an astronomical sept of Criamon magi, and I can't help thinking that cutting off your nose to use a prosthetic nose that previously belonged to a great astronomer might be some sort of initiation ritual. Criamon magi tend to be aloof from human contact at best, so making changes to their faces might not count as a flaw. Nevertheless the nose of Tycho Brahe is one of those things that if I were to write it up people would think I was being silly and that makes me want to write it up even more.

That nose has been next to every telescope that has made every famous discovery by Tycho Brahe. If it's a spirit of artifice it should be a powerful one and to make the best use of it you might have to cut off your nose. Worse, he has two noses for different purposes: one for serious work as an astronomer and one for when he was with noblemen. What if the two noses are rivals? What if they force their two wearers into competition?

## ROSSINI'S WIGS

A little trivia can lead to a plot hook. Recently on "No such thing as a fish", which is a podcast run by the people who do the research for the television program QI, they mentioned that the composer Rossini was terribly embarrassed by his baldness so he had ten wigs made, each slightly longer than the one before, and he wore them in a weekly sequence. He made sure to comment to people that he was going to visit the barber and then switch back to the shortest.

In thinking about this I was immediately struck by the idea that this prevented you from having your hair used against you as an Arcane Connection. So as a plot hook: the covenants stables have burst into flame! Once you control the fire, and save most of the horses and supplies, you discover one of the animals is dead. Basic divination makes it the source of the fire, but how is that possible? Horses don't just explode. One of your senior mages wears a horsehair wig. His enemy cast a pilum of fire using hairs from that wig as an arcane connection. This struck the horse and incinerated it, setting the hay in the stables to flame. How can you keep the elder magus safe while tracing his attempted murderer, and how do you deal with them, given that they must have a great skill at magic to open an intangible tunnel?

Looking a little more, I discovered that his work-space was oddly geometric: everything had its precise place, including his wigs which were kept in their order on busts. People who visited him were astonished, because back then opera composers were Libertines. If you've seen the movie "Amadeus", people were expected to live like that: in a sort of squalor that only the truly rich can manage. I like that he was so persnickety, partly because I have OCD and we like to claim every historical genius as ours, and because it makes him sound more like a magus. A Twilight scar could have caused his incurable baldness.



## NOTES ON FAIRY FEASTS

This is a tiny bit of color for fairy feasts, from a study by the Institute of Making. Most fairies don't use iron in *Ars Magica*. They tend to use bronze or brass weapons instead. That was particularly the case in the 2nd and 3rd editions – now instead they use faerie iron, which is a substance that looks like iron only to people who don't really know anything much about iron. Their faerie iron is made out of glamour and ambient matter rather than real iron.

The inability to use iron is a particular difficulty when eating. In the modern day we use stainless steel in our eating utensils because it doesn't interact with the acids in foods or with saliva. Eating food off brass or bronze implements tastes terrible. Similarly silver dining utensils, although they have been popular historically, taste horrible. Faerie iron and faerie silver may have other flavors – it's possible they're even positive. Some people report that copper utensils make fruit taste sweeter. The Institute suggests that you haven't lived until you've eaten off gold implements, as these have the pure flavor of the food, with nothing added, as gold is all but unreactive. Frankly if you have the fluorine in your mouth required to make the gold react you have bigger problems than listening to my podcast. Get to a hospital immediately. The paper I'm reading doesn't consider wood or ceramic utensils which, particularly in the latter case, can have a similar flavorlessness, because they're not reactive.

Many Europeans carry an eating knife with them so this would be one easy way of telling if a person is a faerie. You would look at their knife, or you would let them use your knife to eat with.

## WINE SLUSH

Ice cream hasn't been invented in Europe yet but it's getting close. In period there is some reference to people eating wine slush, which is the dregs from wine mixed with snow. This creates a delicacy which is a little bit like shave ice. I imagine that Magi use this as a festive food, because they can produce ice easily. They don't have to import it (and that was a business that made certain people very rich somewhat after the medieval period) because they can produce ice simply, Turkish sherbet is not yet known in Mythic Europe I know that it enters English through French where it's called sorbet

## AMALFI PAPER

One day one of us will write a Venice book. It's obvious. They're the rising power in 13th century Europe. They're the crossroads where everything meets. In the setting, Venice hasn't yet risen to the heights it will reach in the Renaissance, but it has been set up as a place where covenants from all over Europe have chapter houses. Someone will write Venice and that means that someone should write Amalfi. Amalfi is the first of the merchant city-states that trade through the Mediterranean, and thereby get money to hire mercenaries, build ships, and develop banks. They fall. They fall to Venice and to the Normans who invade southern Italy.

Venice is built on services transport banking but it has some unique luxury good: glass. Particularly in mythic Europe as described, that's overemphasized. When I was describing the glass trade in "City and Gild" I got that bit wrong. I mistook fine glass for all "quite good" glass. At some point I need to do an episode about forest glass, to explain what the rest of Europe was doing for glass, because it's probably what your covenant mates are doing. In my defense everyone who'd written about *Ars Magica* glass previously had also been tied into the Venetian magic of glass.

Amalfi's great treasure, the thing that it made no one else could make as well, was paper. Paper is one of those evocative things that we know that Magi want. In some ways they need it, because it would allow their apprentices to study faster, from disposable books. It's a population growth tool and a military preparedness tool.

So Amalfi, the great merchant state, surrounded on all its mountains by water driven mills pounding cotton fibers into paper, has never been written up. I think perhaps it's that it's very difficult to find materials about Amalfi in English. It is certainly easier to write about Venice. It is certainly easier to write about Norman Sicily and the splendours of the court of Frederick II. When we do write about Frederick II's court, and we're doing Venice and we're doing Rome and we're doing Magvillus, it would be very easy to forget little Amalfi. I think it would be a perfect place for a covenant/

# BELGIAN WHETSTONES

The best whetstones in Europe come from Belgium. There's a particular mine there. The stones aren't particularly large. They're a sort of blue marbled substance and the Romans made sure that they kept quite a tight hold of that spot while they were in that part of Europe. I keep thinking that one of the local covenants should control that place.

Clearly it's something that everyone wants. Everyone wants sharp swords. Everyone wants sharp knives. Everyone wants sharp agricultural tools. I like the idea of it because when we talk about what covenants do for a living, tying them down to a single commodity can force stories. That's why I suggested in Covenants that there is one that makes its money by mining custard.

## HOT CRUST PIES

The pies which are baked in period are hot crust pies. They are made by shaping a dough up around a wooden form, which is called a dolly, blind baking the pie, then stuffing the pie. The fats which go into the pie tend to be things like lard and it is unusual to eat the outer case of the pie in period. In later periods, less salt is used and more butter is added, so that the case itself becomes edible. We now call it a crust: in period it was called a coffin, a word which at the time just meant "box". You would pop the top off and scoop the contents out of the coffin, then eat them.

[That sounds disgusting and necromancers should probably do that]

Pies are designed to prevent their contents from going off. The whole point of the crust is to act as clingfilm. It prevents air reaching the middle of the pie so that the things inside don't rot. American settlers used to be able to fill a barn with pies during harvest season and just thaw one out each morning. It doesn't matter how dirty it gets. It doesn't matter if stuff grows on it, so long as nothing gets inside. In this it would be assisted by the resistance to rot and decay that magic items have.

In many pies, particularly pies with meat in them, it was necessary to exclude the air further. They did that with a thick layer of gelatine. This is called aspic. Aspic pies are those slightly terrifying ones you see in period British dramas. They would make a really decent form for single use magic items, because the problem with potions is you can spill them. I've often thought potions should be in the form of boiled sweets: that way if you drop them it doesn't matter

# CAULDRONS

Your covenant probably doesn't have a cauldron. The structure of a cauldron is basically a pot with little legs underneath, so that you can pack fuel in. It can be suspended over a fire. Sometimes if it doesn't have the little legs, but basically it's got the rounded shape because it doesn't sit upon a flat surface. Flat-bottomed saucepans, which I'm told by Wikipedia Americans may call stockpots, occur because you've got an oven underneath. The fire in the oven is heating the element and the element is heating the pot.

In the kitchens of many covenants they have a simple magic item which causes a stone or a piece of a metal to heat up. If you have that sort of magic item you don't have cauldrons: you would have something that directly contacts across the entire surface like a saucepan or a stockpot. So, because they have invented ovens, the way that hermetic magicians produce food might look entirely different to the way that contemporary people produce food. You could still have some of the dry heat applications – like spit roasting for example – but if you have ovens cauldrons make less sense. Baking makes a lot more sense and not just for bread. Most of the roasts we now eat aren't actually roasted from a medieval perspective, they're baked. When you go into a covenant kitchen you're likely to see something far more like a Victorian kitchen, simply because magi have accidentally invented the oven element.

This also affects what they cook. It's easier to make omelettes on an element for example. It's easier to make pancakes on an element. It's easier to get closer to the element, so it's easier to manipulate the food. This means you can fry food in smaller individual pieces. The cuisine of the order of Hermes may seem strange to cooks from that period

# SHOCK QUARTZ

Shock quartz has a lamellar structure (that is, it's in sheets) rather than in the traditional crystals. It was discovered in the blast craters of nuclear weapons, then people started finding naturally-occurring shock quartz. It turns out that this shock quartz is caused by meteoric impacts. We've only discussed meteoric impacts seriously in one *Ars Magica* supplement. That's the "Fallen Fane". It's the one with which I'm, perhaps, least familiar with because it's an adventure and I don't believe I've run it. It's interesting that these stones that fall from the sky have the ability to transmute the rock that they strike. Hermetic magicians may have some vague idea that this is possible because lightning does metaphorically similar thing to silica. It creates great webs of fused glass that are called thunderbolts.

Shock warts may prove the MacGuffin for all kinds of original research. Now when you're looking for it in Mythic Europe there is a particular place that's of value. It's in Bavaria, around the town of Nördlingen. Nordlingen is in a meteoric impact site and there is so much of this shocked quartz that the people used the quartz to build the foundations for their houses. They have an entire village built on this mystical stuff. Does it create an aura does it call down astral spirits? Does it make aerial demons feel more comfortable in the place?

## SHATTERCONES

Another interesting material that magicians may wish to use for their laboratories, or to enchant as forms for magic items, are shatter cones. When a meteorite falls, if large enough, it causes a pressure wave. This creates shock quartz and then, beneath the ground, it creates shatter cones.

The pressure flows away through the ground creating cones of compressed soil or pseudostriated stone. If there are multiple cones that are connected to one meteoric crater, their tips all point toward where the meteor struck. Shattercones vary in size.

The smallest are microscopic and the largest known one is about 10 meters long. I'd like to see a magician who wants to collect all of the shatter cones from a single crater and use them as a laboratory piece, to control lightning, or draw down airy spirits, or call down lightning to reanimate corpses.

# PHOSPHOROUS

Phosphorus was discovered by an alchemist called Henning Brown in 1669. He took a large amount of urine, left it sitting around for until it became a black powder, burned it with sand, and then ran the vapors and oils that came off the mass through water to condense them. (You might be wondering why someone has that much urine lying around. Up until the 17th century urine was used in laundry.)

Henning Brown called his new substance phosphorus, because it glows in the dark. He was very interested in the Philosopher's Stone and people thought that a cold substance that a cold fire was just the kind of mystical thing that may lead to being able to live forever or turn led to gold. Brand is the first named person to discover an element.

Elements don't exist in *Ars Magica* in the conventional sense, but we may finally have found an elemental more dangerous than the published one full of toxic white lead. An elemental made out of phosphorus is explosive and toxic to the touch. The main forms of phosphorus are white phosphorous, which is the one that would be discussing so far, and red phosphorus, which is what happens when you take white phosphorous and, in the absence of air, you heat it to about 300 degrees. The advantage of red phosphorus is that it's not toxic to touch. Similarly white phosphorous will just burn on its own when left in air: red phosphorus is slightly more stable. Having mentioned phosphorus I'd like to draw your attention back to an earlier episode of the podcast called *Playing The Ghost* in which I discussed the early Australian custom of people covering themselves in phosphorescent paint and jumping out to scare other locals. That episode also deals with the Spring-heeled Jack phenomenon

## DRAGEES

In the window of the oldest chocolate shop in Adelaide there's an explanation for where dragees come from. Dragees have various forms, but what I'm talking about here are sugared almonds, which in Australia are used as wedding favors. The sign said that they were invented in Paris at the start of the 13th century and they were made by coating almonds in a toffee made out of honey. Paris is significant in that it's the start of the Grand Tour for House Jerbiton. Who's making these honeyed nuts?

I'd like to suggest that it's a demon who wants to appear affable and friendly, so he gives these things out. He seems weak, and it encourages the young apprentices to underestimate him and call him "Old Honeynuts". The bear-leaders of the Grand Tour insist that they don't do that, but forbidding actions makes people want to do them. The young magi steal his nuts, and underestimate him, but he doesn't mind, because it allows him to entrap them in one of the later places where demons have greater power, for example the demonic bridge that crosses St Bernard's Pass in the Alps