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The Dead Can Speak; Or, The Testament of Elizabeth Sawyer in Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton*

Chuck Conaway, *University of Southern Indiana*

On Saturday, April 14, 1621, Elizabeth Sawyer was arraigned and indicted on charges of witchcraft at Justice Hall in the Old Bailey in London. Three days after her indictment, Henry Goodcole, the chaplain at Newgate Prison, took Sawyer's confession, documenting his conversation with her in *The Wonderful Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch* (1621), a pamphlet in which Sawyer admits that she has "bene by the helpe of the Diuell, the meanes of many Christians and beasts death." According to Goodcole, the charges against Sawyer indicate that she wanted to take revenge upon her neighbors, who refused to buy brooms from her, and therefore obtained "Diabolicall helpe [in order to] witch to death their Nurse Children and Cattell." Sawyer was further charged with receiving "Diabolicall helpe...[to] witch vnto death *Agnes Ratcleife*... [because] *Ratcleife* did strike a Sowe of hers in her sight for licking vp a little Soape" (Goodcole). Two days after confessing to Goodcole, on April 19, 1621, Elizabeth Sawyer was executed.

In his prefatory "Apologie to the Christian Readers," Goodcole claims that he had no intention of publishing Sawyer's confession, insisting that he "would haue beene content to haue concealed it," but that he needed to "defend the truth of the cause, which in some measure hath receiued a wound already, by most base and false Ballets, which were sung at the time of our returning from the *Witches* execution." He further claims that there is nothing fictitious about his pamphlet: "I meddle hearewith nothing but matter of fact, and to that ende produce the Testimony of the liuing and the dead, which I hope shall be Authentickall for the confirmation of this Narration, and free mee from all censorious mindes and mouthes." Viviana Comensoli nevertheless encourages us to consider the credibility of Goodcole's report, noting that his pamphlet follows generic conventions:

The pamphlet records Goodcole's 'interviews' with Elizabeth Sawyer shortly before her execution. Goodcole's question-and-answer scheme is essentially a tract against the dangers traditionally associated with witchcraft. Elizabeth's

answers form a conventional catalogue of descriptions about the causes and effects of demonology, revealing little about the personality of the woman or the social roots of witchcraft.

(43)

Comensoli throws Sawyer's confession into question not only by using scare quotes to indicate that Goodcole's interview of Sawyer might be partially, if not entirely, fictional, but also by implying that its conformity to convention might very well indicate that her narrative was fashioned by those conventions precisely in order to reinforce them. In any event, Comensoli argues, the pamphlet tells us next to nothing about Sawyer or the social forces that lead to witchcraft practices or accusations. Like Comensoli, Anthony B. Dawson claims that even though Goodcole "informs his readers that he wishes to present the true story of Elizabeth Sawyer as distinguished from the rumors and fantasies of 'lewd balladmongers'" (81), "[n]owhere does he cast doubt on the actuality of Sawyer's occult powers, nor does he seek to explain her actions or her malevolence" (77).

Comensoli, Dawson, and other recent scholars who have examined Goodcole's pamphlet do so from a late-twentieth-century perspective that is skeptical of witchcraft. But what can be said of Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621)? Drawing on Goodcole's pamphlet and other rumors and fantasies circulating after her trial and execution, their play was first performed only months after Sawyer's death. What do they have to say about the life of an actual woman who was accused of practicing witchcraft and executed for her alleged crimes? Do they, like twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars, glance with a skeptical eye on claims about witchcraft, suggesting, in the fictional world of the play, that supernatural powers are simply the product of the imagination, or do they present the metaphysical aspects of witchcraft as something that is real? And if they present the supernatural as something that is real, what ideological purpose is served? Do the writers claim that the dramatization of witchcraft is an accurate representation of forces at work in our own lives? Do they present the witch as a metaphorical projection of the imagination, as a character who functions figuratively, as Spenser's Acrasia, Duessa, and others do in *The Faerie Queene*? Or do the writers present the fantastic as real simply in order to exploit and profit from the audience's appetite for spectacle?

Early modern attitudes about witchcraft and the supernatural were by no means monolithic. Neither were attitudes about dramatic representations of the metaphysical. Many of Shakespeare's plays, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*, not only ask us, as the Chorus of *Henry V* entreats us, to “piece out [the] imperfections [of the stage] with [our] thoughts” in order to supply what the theater is incapable of presenting and make the artificial seem real (Pr.23), but they also invite us to enter imaginary worlds that rely on the willing suspension of our disbelief in what is otherwise contrary to our understanding—the existence of faeries, ghosts, witches, spirits, and magic—so that a fantastical world might come to life. Shakespeare's canon thus demonstrates that not only “lovers and madmen,” as *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* Theseus contends, but also members of the audience, draw on their imaginations and “apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends” (*MND*.5.1.4 and 5.1.5-6). At least, this is what happens when we're in the theater. Generally speaking, we're willing to imagine clearly and in detail what the stage can sometimes only gesture at, and we can easily suspend our disbelief in the fantastic or the supernatural during the two hour traffic of the stage.

But what happens to the relationship between literature or theatrical performance and the audience's imagination when we consider the drama in relation to the world outside the playhouse? What happens when we want to make connections between the drama and its historical context or our own lives? In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus derides the “antique fables” of the young lovers (5.1.3) and proves unable to employ his own imagination to “amend” the performance of the mechanicals (5.1.209). No doubt he would advise us to reclaim our suspended disbeliefs and employ our cool reason when we respond to drama. In fact, when Theseus claims that “the lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (5.1.7-8), he argues that there is little to no reason in their thought processes. They irrationally see “more devils than vast hell can hold” (5.1.9), and they note “Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt” (5.1.11) or give “to airy nothing, / A local habitation and a name” (5.1.17-18). When Theseus trivializes the “fairy toys” and “shaping fantasies” of lovers and madmen (5.1.3 and 5), he draws lines of distinction between the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, on the one hand, and the employer of reason, on the other. For Theseus, imaginative works are nothing more than diversions that “ease the anguish of a torturing hour” (5.1.37). His logic denies any meaningful connection between the imaginary

world of the drama and its social context; the drama exists, it would seem, merely to entertain.

In "Shakespeare Bewitched," Stephen Greenblatt comes to a similar conclusion about the presentation of witches in a number of Shakespeare's plays. Greenblatt analyzes these depictions of witches in relation to the arguments of Medieval and Early Modern proponents and skeptics of witchcraft. Perhaps not too surprisingly, these historical arguments employ terms similar to those found in Theseus' comments about lunatics, lovers, and poets, on the one hand, and the employers of reason, on the other. In an effort to convince readers that witchcraft was real, *The Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*, ca. 1486) refutes the arguments of skeptics such as those "who held the opinion (or rather, the erroneous notion) that harmful magic simply did not exist anywhere, but that people thought it did and attributed this kind of outcome to silly women [*mulierculis*]" (132-33). Before the *Malleus Maleficarum* was written, skeptics had already argued that harmful magic did not actually exist; rather, they claimed, some people mistakenly thought or imagined it did, and they attributed the practice of harmful magic to poor women. As Greenblatt notes, then, the skeptics "with[drew] witchcraft from the real world and relocated it in the 'imagination'" (113). *The Malleus Maleficarum* attempts to reverse the efforts of the skeptics, aiming to "produc[e] the effect of the real out of the materials of fantasy...to redraw the boundary between the imaginary and the real" by insisting that witchcraft is not a product of the imagination but is in fact real (Greenblatt, 110). Nearly one hundred years later, Reginald Scot, in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), responded to *The Malleus Maleficarum* by arguing that witchcraft involves no supernatural agents or powers, but consists entirely of deception. According to Greenblatt, "Scot's principal concern is with the boundary between the imaginary and the real, and where [*The Malleus Maleficarum*] had viewed that boundary as porous, Scot views it as properly closed" (114). Drawing on cool reason, it seems, Scot draws Theseus-like distinctions between the supernatural and the natural.

Greenblatt also situates Shakespeare's changing attitudes about witchcraft in the different genres in which he was writing. In *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, Antipholus of Syracuse mistakenly and comically believes that Ephesus is full of "sorcerers" and "witches" (1.2.99 and 100), but we know that these beliefs arise from "the play's zany coincidences and the psychological and social disorientation of the characters" (Greenblatt, 119).

Shakespeare's attitude about witches in this play, Greenblatt concludes, "is very close to the views of [Reginald] Scot...[demonstrating] the emptiness of the hypothesis of witchcraft" (119). But when Joan la Pucelle appears as a witch in *1 Henry VI*, "exactly the opposite impression" is conveyed (119). Joan is depicted as an actual witch who conjures "familiar spirits" to aid her in the battle before Angiers (5.3.10). Unfortunately for Joan, when the "fiends" appear (5.3.7 sd), they refuse to help her. She loses the battle and is tried and executed for witchcraft. *1 Henry VI*, then, presents a witch in a manner that would seem to please the authors of *The Malleus Maleficarum*. Finally, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare seems to be completely uninterested in the status of witches: "there is no attempt in the play to give counsel to anyone about how to behave toward the witches and no apparent sanctioning...of legal prosecution or execution" (Greenblatt, 111). Greenblatt accounts for these contradictory attitudes about witchcraft by claiming that, ultimately, Shakespeare occupies "the position neither of the witchmonger nor the skeptic" (127), but one that is "betwixt-and-between" them (127). According to Greenblatt, Shakespeare's attitude about witches—his presentation of them "as metaphorical projection or metaphysical reality—depended on his specific and local theatrical needs" (120):

[Shakespeare] follows out the inner imperatives of the genres in which he is working;...his choices are governed by the overriding will to achieve certain histrionic effects;...he takes what he wants from the world and gives no sign of concern for the fate, either exculpation or execution of the miserable old women actually or potentially facing trial on charges of sorcery. (121)

Whereas Theseus might deny any connection between the world of the drama and our own lives because he so radically privileges reason over the imagination, then, Greenblatt suggests that, insofar as the representation of witchcraft is concerned, there is ultimately no connection between the drama and Shakespeare's time and place because Shakespeare so thoroughly privileges the realm of the imagination and its ability to "giv[e] visible form to inchoate emotions" (121) that the ontological status of witches is circumscribed by and subordinated to the dictates of genre.

Whether or not Shakespeare's actual attitudes about witches and witchcraft reside "betwixt-and-between" witchmongers and skeptics is arguable, but what concerns me here is the way in which Greenblatt's essay shifts our focus from a discussion about skepticism versus a genuine belief in witchcraft to a claim that empties meaning from the presentation of witches in Shakespeare's plays. Their only purpose, it seems, is to fulfill the dictates of genre and give rise to an affective response in the audience. But such a sentiment ignores the importance of the representational strategies at work in depictions of imaginary worlds. The magical love potion that Oberon applies to Titania's eyes in the fairy world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, signifies the patriarchal efforts to control female desire that are visible in Theseus' Athens, Early Modern England, and to a lesser extent, perhaps, our own day. Shakespeare thus exploits the suspension of our disbelief in order to reveal the gender politics of his own place and time. The distinctions between the realms of reason and the imagination that Theseus arbitrarily and peremptorily attempts to construct, then, are collapsed. For Shakespeare, the imagination is not only integral to efforts to piece out the imperfections of the stage or bring supernatural worlds to life, but also an essential role player in the process of social and cultural analysis. Greenblatt is correct to note that Shakespeare's presentation of witches changes from play to play and that these changes follow, respond to, or perhaps even experiment with the generic conventions he inherits, but he problematically turns our attention from the representational strategies at work in the drama to a celebration of Shakespeare's mastery of generic and artistic conventions. Throughout the canon, Shakespeare obsessively interrogates identity politics—especially gendered identities—and if we were to consider the status of, say, disobedient daughters in Shakespeare, we would note contrary attitudes and radically different outcomes for them in the comedies as compared to the tragedies, but scholars have not concluded that when Shakespeare depicts such disobedient daughters, he simply follows generic conventions and has no genuine concern for the desires of young women, their disobedient actions, the anger of their fathers in particular, or the ideological work of his own patriarchal culture more generally. And if we are not content with such a conclusion about the depiction of daughters, we should not be content with such a conclusion when thinking about the representation of witches, whether we're reading Shakespeare or Dekker, Ford, and Rowley.

The Witch of Edmonton presents a particular problem when attempting to assess attitudes about witchcraft because the play does not present a clear, coherent, and monolithic attitude about Mother Sawyer. Such a fragmented and contradictory characterization results in part, no doubt, from the fact that the play was collaboratively written. The play contains three separate plots: the first and main plot of the play is a domestic tragedy involving Frank Thorney, his marriage to Winifred, his subsequent bigamous marriage to Susan Carter, and his murder of Susan; the second plot involves the persecution of Mother Sawyer, who turns to witchcraft in order to gain some measure of revenge; and the third plot—perhaps a comic subplot of the Mother Sawyer plot—involves the clown, Cuddy Banks, who hopes that Susan Carter’s sister, Katherine, might be bewitched into loving him. Generally speaking, scholars have attributed the Frank Thorney plot to John Ford, with significant contributions from Thomas Dekker, who is given credit for the depiction of Mother Sawyer, while William Rowley is supposed to have written the scenes involving Cuddy Banks (Hoy, Brodwin, Smith, and Brown, Slights and Terry). While such a distribution of authorship might seem to indicate that the characterization of Mother Sawyer can be easily attributed to one writer—Dekker—and that attitudes about her therefore ought to be fairly straightforward and consistent, it is important to note that the three plots intersect at various times, chiefly through the machinations of Dog, Mother Sawyer’s familiar, who is presented as an agent of evil in her plot and in the domestic tragedy, but serves a kind of comic, trickster function in the Cuddy Banks plot, where he is more like a practical joker than a diabolical agent. Such a pluralistic attitude about Dog has its parallel in the complex presentation of Mother Sawyer. When characters from the different plotlines intersect, tones and perspectives shift, making it difficult to assign Mother Sawyer’s characterization entirely to Dekker or to come to any clear conclusion regarding the play’s attitude about witchcraft.

Specifically, it is difficult to determine whether the play imagines witchcraft as a metaphysical reality or a metaphorical projection of the imagination. Simon Trussler notes that “Dekker...had an instinctive sympathy for those who suffered poverty or injustice” (xxv), and Mother Sawyer is initially presented as a poor social outcast. While gathering sticks on Old Banks’ property so that she might make and sell a broom, she complains about how she has already been treated and branded as a witch:

And why on me? Why should the envious world
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
'Cause I am poor, deformed and ignorant,
And like a bow buckled and bent together,
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself?
Must I for that be made a common sink,
For all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues
To fall and run into? Some call me witch;
And being ignorant of myself, they go
About to teach me how to be one; urging
That my bad tongue (by their bad usage made so)
Forespeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
Themselves, their servants and their babes at nurse.
This they enforce upon me. And in part
Make me to credit it.
(2.1.1-15)

When Old Banks finds her on his property, he denounces her—"Out, out upon thee, witch" (2.1.17)—and threatens her, in a witch-like manner, demanding that she throw down the sticks or he'll "make [her] bones rattle in [her] skin" (2.1.21-22). When she returns his verbal threat of bodily harm, he strikes her twice for cursing and storms off (2.1.23-30). Comensoli argues that the play "locates[s] the roots of witchcraft in the external conditions of class, misogyny, and poverty" (45). In so doing, she adds, it "makes a bold statement about demonology: Mother Sawyer is not an agent of spiritual powers but a victim of an entrenched social code that relegates old and poverty-ridden spinsters to the Devil's company" (44). Comensoli and other scholars have noted that this scene depicts Mother Sawyer in circumstances similar to what Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane identify as the most common situation leading to an accusation of witchcraft: that is, an incident in which a poor, elderly woman is denied the charity or aid of a neighbor and reportedly mumbles some sort of curse under her breath when she is turned away. Days, weeks, or even months later, when something goes wrong in the household of the uncharitable neighbor, the old woman is considered to be responsible and is accused of witchcraft (Macfarlane, 174; Thomas, 660-61). In Mother Sawyer's first appearance in the play, then, we can see the social construction of a witch. As Anthony Dawson argues, "in inserting the incident

of the stick-gathering and Banks's violent rejection [Dekker, Ford, and Rowley]...make manifest the ideological underpinnings of witchcraft accusations, and their function within a changing society" (83).

But Dekker, Ford, and Rowley not only show us the ideological underpinnings of the accusation, they also dramatize Mother Sawyer's internalization and willing ownership of the discursive identity that has been mapped onto her. "'Tis all one," she says, "To be a witch as to be counted one" (2.1.117-18), and she calls upon supernatural aid in order to gain revenge upon Banks, going so far as to invite demonic possession:

I have heard old beldams
Talk of familiars in the shape of mice,
Rats, ferrets, weasels and I wot not what,
That have appeared, and sucked, some say, their blood.
But by what means they came acquainted with them,
I'm now ignorant. Would some power good or bad
Instruct me which way I might be revenged
Upon this churl, I'd go out of myself,
And give this fury leave to dwell within
This ruined cottage, ready to fall with age.
Abjure all goodness. Be at hate with prayer,
And study curses, imprecations,
Blasphemous speeches, oaths, detested oaths,
Or anything that's ill; so I might work
Revenge upon this miser, this black cur,
That barks and bites, and sucks the very blood
Of me, and of my credit.
(2.1.101-17)

Her call for aid is answered by Dog, a black cur who sucks her blood (2.1.145 sd) and serves as her demonic familiar. Here, then, the play suggests not simply that Mother Sawyer has been hailed into a certain subject position, but that the supernatural is real and has answered her call. Her pact with Dog, however, like Faustus' contract with Lucifer, doesn't seem to give her as much power as she might have imagined. Later in the play, Banks and other countrymen complain that Mother Sawyer has bewitched their horses and cattle, who have fallen ill, as well as their wives, daughters, and maidservants,

who have fallen into the arms of other men (4.1.1-14), and Banks complains that every time he sees his cow, he “cannot choose, though it be ten times in an hour, but run to the cow, and taking up her tail kiss...my cow behind; that the whole town of Edmonton has been ready to bepiss themselves with laughing me to scorn” (4.1.57-61). Such trivial and comical revenges are all that Mother Sawyer manages to muster against the churlish Banks.

She is, however, implicated in other villainies. When Banks' foolish son, Cuddy, asks her to help him win Katherine Carter's love, Mother Sawyer conspires with Dog first to play a trick on him that leads to a ducking. But they also have other plans, which, as Dog tells Cuddy, “concern thee, and thy love's purchase” (3.1.146). Dog advises Cuddy to “mark what a mischief . . . shall [soon] light on” Warbeck, Cuddy's rival suitor for Katherine (3.1.148-49). Shortly thereafter, Dog rubs against Frank Thorney (3.3.15 sd), nudging or inspiring him to murder Susan Carter and blame her death on Warbeck. Through her demonic familiar, then, Mother Sawyer appears to arrange Susan Carter's murder in order to dispatch Cuddy's rival, clearing the way for his attempt to win Katherine's love. Furthermore, Dog and Mother Sawyer drive Anne Ratcliffe out of her wits. Because Ratcliffe “almost had lamed” her sow (4.1.180), Mother Sawyer asks Dog to “pinch that quean to th'heart” (4.1.181), and when Dog rubs against Ratcliffe (4.1.197 sd), the poor woman “beat[s] out her own brains” (4.1.218). Katherine O'Mahoney argues that it is not just characters in the drama such as Old Banks, who “deliberately demonize the activities of Elizabeth Sawyer,” but Dekker, Ford, and Rowley themselves, who present her as a woman who is “not merely responsible for Ratcliffe's death, but also for the damnation of her soul” when she and Dog compel Ratcliffe to take her own life (254). Finally, when Mother Sawyer is eventually arrested and sent to her death, her penultimate words are both cautionary and self-incriminating: “All take heed / How they believe the Devil; at last he'll cheat you” (5.3.45-46). If Mother Sawyer is socially and discursively constructed as a witch by her uncharitable neighbors, suggesting that the supernatural is little more than a projection of the imagination or a production of the symbolic order, she uses her demonic familiar to employ powers that are metaphysical realities.

In her “Introduction” to *Women on the Early Modern Stage*, Emma Smith notes this dual-presentation of the witch:

[*The Witch of Edmonton*] deftly has it both ways on the contemporary debate about witchcraft. In presenting Elizabeth Sawyer's witchcraft as the construct of a superstitious community, the play subscribes to the learned scepticism which was beginning to understand the accusation of witchcraft as social or psychological, rather than demonic. But in its deployment of the panoply of witchcraft tropes including the blood bargain, the play can also indulge its audience in the theatrical enjoyment of scenes of possession and diabolically inspired evil—a dramatic fashion dubbed by Diane Purkiss the ‘Jacobean witch-vogue.’ (xviii)

As is the case with Greenblatt's essay, when Smith argues that *The Witch of Edmonton* has it both ways in the contemporary debate about witchcraft, our attention is turned from a debate about a Reginald Scot-like skepticism versus a *Malleus Maleficarum*-like belief in the demonic to a discussion about skepticism, on the one hand, and an association of the imaginative and the supernatural with genre, or, at least, a certain “dramatic fashion,” on the other. The supernatural elements in the play are said to relate to its social and historical context only in terms of how they conform to generic conventions.

Other scholars avoid reducing the function of the supernatural in *The Witch of Edmonton* to an opportunistic exploitation of theatrical spectacle or the satisfaction of generic conventions. David Nicol contends that the play's simultaneous presentation of witchcraft as a metaphorical projection and a metaphysical and demonic reality follows the cautionary logic of Henry Goodcole's pamphlet, advising that, while social pressures like those imposed upon Elizabeth Sawyer might unfairly burden us, we have a moral responsibility to avoid being drawn into sin. For Goodcole, whose pamphlet supposedly documents the actual confession of Elizabeth Sawyer, the moral we should take from her trial and execution is to avoid “cursing, swearing, and blaspheming” because those actions render us susceptible to the devil's influence. Nicol argues that, although the play demonstrates that “social forces *encourage* demonic interaction” (442), it also insists that “the characters have sufficient individual agency to be able to repress the small sins that draw the demonic pressure upon them” (442).

Goodcole focuses on Elizabeth Sawyer's curses just as Nicol identifies Mother Sawyer's oaths when they come to these conclusions. Diane Purkiss,

who argues that the play ultimately forwards an irresolvable epistemological uncertainty about witchcraft, likewise emphasizes the role that Mother Sawyer's language serves in Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's play. She argues that the playwrights present the arguments of the skeptics when they metatheatrically "assault" *Malleus Maleficarum*-like assumptions about the truth of witchcraft "by equating witchcraft with acting" (245). The play "shows the figure of the witch to be a role" rather than a supernatural agent when Banks "(mis)identifies Sawyer with Mother Bombie, the benign wisewoman of Lyly's Elizabethan comedy of 1590...[and] later...miscalls her Gammer Gurton, promising to 'have at your needle of witchcraft,' referring to the 1557 comedy's heroine (who was not a witch)" (246). At the same time, however, the play reveals Mother Sawyer to be a witch when it "substitutes the sound of cursing for the" witchmark—the teat which identifies a woman as a witch who nurses a demonic familiar (Purkiss, 242). In Purkiss' reading of the play, its supernatural elements—including Dog's desire "to creep under an old witch's coats and suck like a great puppy," as Cuddy puts it (5.1.178-79), and, especially, Mother Sawyer's cursing—testify to a belief in witchcraft.

Such interpretations, however, limit the function of Mother Sawyer's speech to the ways in which it incriminates her, but *The Witch of Edmonton* also gives Mother Sawyer a critical voice—the kind of voice that Elizabeth Sawyer lacks in Henry Goodcole's manuscript documenting her supposed final testament. In Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's play, the dead can speak, and through Mother Sawyer, Elizabeth Sawyer redefines what it means to be a witch:

Men in gay clothes
Whose backs are laden with titles and honours,
Are within far more crooked than I am;
And if I be a witch, more witch-like.
(4.1.95-98).

"Painted things in princes' courts" are witches, she claims (4.1.113), as are adulterous women (4.1.123-27), scolds (4.1.135-38), unscrupulous men of law (4.1.138-42), and men like Sir Arthur Clarrington, who assumes he has the right to seduce a maidservant in his own household—Frank Thorney's first wife, Winifred—and abandon her when it suits him. Sir Arthur defines a witch as a woman like Mother Sawyer who "trad[es] with hell's merchandise" and "for a word, a look, / Denial of coal of fire, kill men, / Children and cattle"

(4.1.143 and 144-46). Mother Sawyer denies she is such a witch, and when Sir Arthur tells her that others will swear to it, she continues to redefine what it is to be a witch:

Dare any swear I ever tempted maiden
 With golden hooks flung at her chastity,
 To come and lose her honour? And being lost,
 To pay not a denier for't? Some slaves have done it.
 Men-witches can without the fangs of law,
 Drawing once one drop of blood, put counterfeit pieces
 Away for true gold.
 (4.1.148-54)

These are not empty and idle words. Mother Sawyer is describing Sir Arthur's villainies—actions that play a significant role in the sequence of events leading to Frank Thorney's murder of Susan Carter (4.1.148-54). As Helen Vella Bonavita argues, when Mother Sawyer redefines 'witch,' she turns the label "back against her accusers in a manner which suggests that the evil they are seeking to contain and exclude is in fact endemic in society" (84), and Sarah Johnson notes that a critical voice can be heard even in Mother Sawyer's silences. When she refuses to confess to bewitching Anne Ratcliffe, Sawyer fails to act the scapegoat, denying her neighbors the closure they desire. Like her explicit condemnation of Sir Arthur, then, Mother Sawyer's final silence opens up "a space of subjective agency which the audience might enter to question, or conceive an unspoken challenge to...patriarchal discourse" (82).

In the fictional world of the drama, unfortunately, Mother Sawyer's redefinition of witchcraft is ineffectual: no one marks her. But we hear it, and although she doesn't directly charge her accusers of being witches themselves, Joan la Pucelle in *1 Henry VI*, identifies her accusers as men who are "polluted with your lusts, / Stained with the guiltless blood of innocents, / [and] Corrupt and tainted with a thousand vices" (5.6.43-45). Her words, like Mother Sawyer's, fall on deaf ears, and she, too, is executed. But we hear her and recognize, as Jean Howard notes, that the English in *1 Henry VI* fail "to live up to and support their own best ideas as embodied in the figure of Talbot" (470). Likewise, the function of the witches in *Macbeth*, in part at least, is to help us take measure of the title character. His reactions to the

witches' prophecies put him on trial. We see him debate the merits of the horrible means required to "be king hereafter" (1.3.48), and of course he fails spectacularly. Plays like *The Witch of Edmonton*, *1 Henry VI*, and *Macbeth* might not take the clear and untroubled stance of a skeptic such as Reginald Scot—they might not dismiss witchcraft and the imaginary from the real—but they don't simply leave us marveling at the creative faculties that produced them. Nor do they dramatize the supernatural only in order to demonize women as witches. Rather, these playwrights exploit the suspension of our disbelief in order to present us with witches who clearly condemn those who attempt to condemn them.

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