

Introduction

Witchcraft is often thought of, wrongly, as a thing of the past. In fact, it continues to be taken seriously by people all over the world. But because the subject of this study is, specifically, early modern witchcraft and its dramatic representation, it will be necessary to clarify what the term ‘witch’ meant within this specific context. As several early modern authors on witchcraft argued, the meaning of the word has changed over time. The senses in which ancient Latin or Greek authors used the terms that are typically translated as ‘witch’ are distinct from the senses in which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English people used those terms, as well as from the senses in which the word might be understood in the present. The situation is further complicated by the variety of different understandings of what defined witchcraft in early modern England. Accusations of witchcraft tended to focus on the issue of *maleficium* – the harm it caused – while theoretical writings on witchcraft were usually more interested in the witches’ supposed pact with the devil. Magical power might be conceived of as inherent in the witch herself, in the objects or words she used, in the spirit with which she bargained, or as merely illusory. Disagreement over these and other issues continued throughout the period during which witchcraft was a criminal offence.¹

One assumption of this study – widely but not universally shared today – is that magic operating outside the laws of nature and bargains with the devil are not and never were possible, and that people, both past and present, who believed these things to be possible were, and are, mistaken. Consequently, there can be no definitive

1 Jonathan Barry, *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England, 1640–1789* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) summarises the key issues (p. 5).

description of what a witch was, only a description of what a given person or group of people imagined a witch to be. Assuming that witches did not exist in the sense that they were often believed to, it is hardly surprising that early modern society did not reach a consensus on what witchcraft was; the subject was debated for centuries and eventually faded from public discourse without ever having been resolved. No work on early modern witchcraft, therefore, can ignore the fact that there was a wide range of opinion on the matter. Furthermore, it would be misleading simply to rely on an exhaustive list of the various opinions (even assuming all of these were documented). Many early modern people appear to have been quite flexible in what they were prepared to believe, and ideas about witchcraft were often fluid rather than fixed points of reference against which real-life situations might be judged. Many people were open to persuasion and argument, evidence was often open to interpretation, and whether a given proposition about an alleged witch was accepted or not might depend on a variety of local factors.

Nonetheless, some broad generalisations are possible. One important point is that the late medieval and early modern period in Europe saw the emergence of a specifically Christian conception of witchcraft. Witchcraft belief, and laws against witchcraft, had existed long before this. But from the fifteenth century onwards, important people within the late medieval Church began to accept the idea that witches were evil and genuinely powerful servants of the devil, and could therefore be punished as a species of heretic. Perhaps the most important texts here are the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) of Institoris and Sprenger and the decree made by Innocent VIII, which lent papal authority to the subsequent witch-hunts in Germany.² Always controversial, always contested, this idea nevertheless spread through Europe and led to a period of intense witchcraft persecution, peaking in the late sixteenth century. This conception of witchcraft is described in a variety of theological, medical, and philosophical writings and constitutes an important part of the body of work known as demonology. Demonological views of witchcraft frequently form the intellectual context of this study.

A second important point to make about witchcraft belief is that it was to a considerable extent based on fiction, and not merely in the sense that stories about witches were not true. These stories were

² As Diarmaid MacCulloch points out, the *Malleus* was taken seriously by Protestants as well as Catholics throughout Europe: *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 686.

also frequently drawn from literary sources. Characters who could be described as witches feature in some of the best-known works of classical literature, including the *Odyssey*, the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius and Ovid and Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Stories derived from classical sources found their way into demonological literature, which routinely refers to Circe, for example, as if she had been a historical person. Other stories told about witches had less exalted origins. One frequently recurring story, which appears in several slightly different versions, concerns the witch's transformation into the shape of an animal. The witch is injured while in animal form, and can be identified and captured because she displays the same injuries when she has turned back into human form. This type of story, according to George Lyman Kittredge, can be found in English sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and is probably of folkloric origin.³ A particular version of it is incorporated into the *Malleus*, a text whose authors seem to have been willing, as Walter Stephens points out, to use virtually anything to back up their argument.⁴ Probably taken from this purportedly factual source, it made its way into a play in the seventeenth century, *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634).⁵

At a later date, another version of the story turns up as evidence provided by eyewitnesses in a criminal trial presided over by Sir Matthew Hale in the 1660s.⁶ Even more striking is the case of the 1592 witchcraft pamphlet mentioned by Marion Gibson, which 'plagiarized a long extract from a play, Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, inserting incidents from it into the story of a Middlesex farmhand'.⁷ Stories about witchcraft move easily between

3 George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 41.

4 Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 304.

5 Another possible source of this incident is discussed in Brett D. Hirsch, 'Werewolves and Severed Hands: Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Heywood and Brome's *The Witches of Lancashire*', *Notes and Queries* 53:1 (March 2006), 92–94; see also Chapter 5 on *The Late Lancashire Witches*.

6 Anon., *A Tryal of Witches Held at the Assizes at Bury St. Edmonds* (London, 1682), pp. 6–7. See also John Stearne, *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft* (London, 1648), p. 19 (these and other examples are briefly discussed in Kittredge, pp. 176–79).

7 Marion Gibson, 'Understanding Witchcraft? Accusers' Stories in Print in Early Modern England', in *Languages of Witchcraft*, edited by Stuart Clark (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 41–54 (p. 43). For more detail, see Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 153–56.

fiction and reality at this time, and in some cases the status of a given text (as either fictional or purportedly true) is unclear.

Historians have recognised that the pamphlets which constitute the richest source of information about contemporary beliefs about, and attitudes towards, witchcraft are not only frequently unreliable as factual records of events; they are also very often literary, or at least rhetorical, in character. Pamphlets, which only exist for a small and probably unrepresentative minority of cases of alleged witchcraft, tended to be published at least partly in order to justify the condemned witch's conviction and punishment. They both depended on and perpetuated what Gibson has described as 'a narrational stereotype' of the witch: an old, impoverished, and vindictive woman – usually a widow – seeking revenge on her neighbours.⁸ There is at least one individual case in which this stereotype, used in a pamphlet account to describe a convicted witch, sits uncomfortably with independent evidence of the accused witch's character.⁹ Any relationship that the pamphlets bear to historical reality is tenuous at best, and caution should be exercised before accepting anything in them – including elements that are, on the face of it, entirely plausible – as historically accurate.

These considerations point to witchcraft as a historical phenomenon especially open to literary analysis, and one in which, as Gareth Roberts pointed out, some of the theoretical premises of New Historicism acquire concrete support.¹⁰ This is a field in which it can be difficult to distinguish between text and history, fiction and reality, literary work and historical document. The history of witchcraft is one in which literary and quasi-literary texts, from ancient myth to cheap news pamphlet, influenced real events just as much as events influenced the texts. Literature – not least in the form of the supposedly factual witchcraft pamphlets' formulaic plots and characters – was employed in an attempt to influence opinion, while real events – or the literary representation of those events – were

8 Gibson, 'Understanding Witchcraft?', p. 46.

9 The case in question is that of Joan Cariden of Faversham in Kent, discussed by Malcolm Gaskill, 'Witchcraft in Early Modern Kent: Stereotypes and the Background to Accusations', in *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology*, vol. 3, edited by Brian Levack (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 173–203 (pp. 182–85).

10 Gareth Roberts, 'The Descendants of Circe: Witches and Renaissance Fictions', in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, edited by Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester, and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 183–206 (p. 186).

used to inspire new, and more explicitly fictional, works of literature. Literature or, more broadly, the literary impulse – the urge to tell stories – is therefore far from innocent in the history of witchcraft.

Theatre and witchcraft have a good deal in common, as a number of eminent literary critics have observed.¹¹ The stress laid on the deceptive nature of witchcraft and the frequent use of magic as a metaphor for stagecraft in early modern drama suggest a degree of sympathy for witchcraft (if not for actual witches) on the part of the theatre. Several scholars of witchcraft drama have suggested that seeing witches on stage may have helped to produce scepticism about witchcraft. These suggestions have sometimes been made in relation to specific plays.¹² While the storytelling impulse was certainly implicated in perpetuating and spreading witchcraft belief, the stage representation of witchcraft, according to many critics, may have undermined that belief by its very artificiality.

The phenomenon of witchcraft therefore highlights both the need to believe in stories and the capacity to see through them. This study explores the role played by the theatre in both reflecting and generating belief and scepticism about witchcraft, but it will also reveal that scepticism and credulity are ideas inseparable from the idea of witchcraft, and the idea of a witch, in early modern Europe. The first step in understanding the role played by these opposing impulses is to look at the developing notion of scepticism itself in the Renaissance. Scepticism re-emerged at this time as a powerful driver of intellectual and cultural change, and the debate about witchcraft needs to be set in this broader context. Doing so leads to an understanding that the categories of scepticism and belief are a good deal more complex than might at first be assumed, and that these attitudes are not static and inflexible positions, but are amenable to being utilised for various argumentative purposes. Controlled

11 See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare Bewitched' in *New Historical Literary Study*, edited by Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 127; Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 182–83.

12 Diane Purkiss writes that the stage 'certainly contributes to the growth of the kind of scepticism that eventually ensures the end of the successful prosecution of the witch' (*The Witch in History*, p. 283). Frances Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), suggests that plays 'might ultimately have helped to spare women's lives' (p. 217). Lisa Hopkins, *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), makes the case for *The Witch of Edmonton* specifically (p. 98), while Greenblatt makes similar claims for *Macbeth*.

scepticism can be used to generate belief, while even the most radical scepticism tends to conceal an underlying and unquestioned set of beliefs. Within the debate that took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries about the nature of witchcraft, belief, and scepticism were employed by all writers on the subject. They also found their way into dramatic representations of the subject to an increasing degree as the seventeenth century progressed.

In view of the centrality and complexity of the issue of scepticism and credulity, the first chapter is devoted to examining Renaissance scepticism, both in general and in relation to witchcraft specifically, and to the earliest plays to feature witches, which date back to before the Elizabethan criminalisation of witchcraft. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the Elizabethan and the Jacobean representation of witches on stage. The conventional division of the period according to the reigning monarch is appropriate in this case, as the witch dramas are noticeably different after 1603, and the identity of the monarch is a relevant factor in explaining this difference. Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to a play each: *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches*. These plays have been given a prominent place in the study owing to their close connection to the historical cases of witchcraft which inspired them.

Chapter 6 moves past the Civil War and Interregnum period, during which the theatres were closed, dealing instead with the Restoration witchcraft debate and its connection to the theatre of the time. This period has often been neglected by scholars of witchcraft theatre, which is unfortunate since witches and witchcraft, along with other supernatural phenomena, are particularly well represented in the theatre of the second half of the seventeenth century. The final chapter focuses on Thomas Shadwell's play *The Lancashire Witches* in detail. While this play is not based on a recent case of witchcraft, as were *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches*, it is certainly a play with great topical relevance. It is also a play which engages with witch-hunting in the broader sense, as well as with witchcraft.

Previous book-length studies of witchcraft in English drama have often touched on the question of scepticism towards the phenomenon. The folklorist Katherine Briggs's ground-breaking study, *Pale Hecate's Team* (1962), frequently draws inferences about popular belief, using dramatic literature partly as evidence of it. Briggs's very wide scope and range of interests limits the depth of her study somewhat, although the extensive reading behind it makes it very useful. In a fairly similar vein is Anthony Harris's *Night's Black Agents* (1980),

although his book is focused specifically on drama. Harris discusses many of the plays he covers in terms of their belief in or scepticism towards the phenomenon of witchcraft, but again this is largely on the level of drawing inferences about whether the plays encourage or discourage belief in witchcraft. Harris tends to regard the earlier plays, in particular, as credulously reinforcing witchcraft belief.

Feminist and gender-related perspectives have, for obvious reasons, been important in studies of the literature of witchcraft. Diane Purkiss's *The Witch in History* (1996) seeks to recapture women's perspectives on witchcraft and, in the process, produces a more nuanced argument than that of Harris. Purkiss recognises the close and complex relationship between literature and reality in the case of witchcraft and poses both historical and literary questions. In terms of drama, she tends to regard the effect of the plays, and perhaps of the institution of the theatre itself, as increasing the scepticism of the watching audience and of society in general. Deborah Willis's *Malevolent Nurture* (1995), another cross-disciplinary work, also pays close attention to the gendered aspects of witchcraft, exploring the idea of witches as perverted 'mothers' to their spirit familiars. Like Purkiss, Willis tries to approach the concerns of ordinary women at the level of village accusations of witchcraft, and she also utilises theatre as part of her argument. Willis suggests that comic representations of witches may have generated scepticism about witchcraft, but avoids drawing more general conclusions in favour of focusing exclusively on Shakespeare's plays. Willis's interpretations of Shakespearean witchcraft draw on psychoanalytic concepts and highlight the witch characters' disruption of accepted gender norms.

Heidi Breuer's *Crafting the Witch* (2009) is another gender-focused study covering a longer time period, moving from the early Arthurian literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, where Breuer finds witches to be peripheral figures, through to later medieval romances and the sixteenth-century continuation of the romance tradition in Malory and Spenser. Breuer goes on to consider Shakespeare's dramatic representations of magic and witchcraft, before looking at the persistence of witchcraft imagery in present-day culture. Like Willis, Breuer regards witches as being 'anti-mothers',¹³ although she also finds more sympathetic representations of witchcraft emerging in recent years. Frances Dolan's *Dangerous Familiars* (1994), a study covering a range of 'domestic' crimes including witchcraft,

13 Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 11.

finds an inverse relation between the centrality of witch characters in plays and the seriousness with which they are taken: in other words, witches that are genuinely powerful are kept in the margins of the action, while witches that are present throughout a play are trivialised. As noted above, Dolan also finds that the theatre ‘participated in the cultural process that gradually marginalised and discredited belief in witchcraft’.¹⁴

Scepticism plays a more prominent role in Ryan Curtis Friesen’s study of *Supernatural Fiction in Early Modern Drama and Culture*.¹⁵ This monograph, as the title suggests, covers more than just witchcraft, and sets out to deal with writings not normally considered fictional – such as the occult writings of Giordano Bruno, Heinrich Agrippa, and John Dee – alongside the theatre of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Middleton. Friesen studies a range of such texts for evidence of scepticism or duplicity on the parts of the authors, but while his readings of the dramatic texts are focused on magic and witchcraft, they do not specifically address the questions of scepticism and belief. A shorter work which is also concerned with scepticism and belief, and the theatre’s role in it, is Stephen Greenblatt’s important essay on *Macbeth*, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’. Greenblatt points to the imaginative sympathy between witchcraft and the theatre, both of which are concerned with illusion, as well as recognising that narrative strategies were employed by those who sought to encourage or perpetuate witchcraft belief. Like many other critics, Greenblatt finds Shakespeare not guilty of collusion in the persecution of witches.

While the question of scepticism and belief in relation to witchcraft always surfaces at some point in discussions of literary witchcraft, none of the studies described above has made this question its organising principle, nor have many of them focused on the issues of scepticism and belief as they are presented within the plays themselves. In much of the work described here, there has been a tendency to treat drama as a type of historical evidence which casts light on the sceptical or credulous attitudes of playwrights or audiences. This is one important aspect of the issue, and one which this study does not neglect; but it is also important to recognise that scepticism and belief are often of central concern within the plays themselves, albeit in widely differing ways. This book traces the development

¹⁴ Dolan, p. 217.

¹⁵ Ryan Curtis Friesen, *Supernatural Fiction in Early Modern Drama and Culture* (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2010).

of the stage representation of witchcraft and its connections with the society and the theoretical writings about witchcraft of the time. The relationship between the two is complex, but the issues of scepticism and belief are central to both the theatre and culture more generally, not only in relation to witchcraft but also in relation to wider questions of an epistemological and theological nature. In witchcraft drama, scepticism and belief are constantly recurring, constantly conjoined, and constantly shifting themes; they are never absent, but their significance is rarely as straightforward as it seems.