

## Witchcraft in Jacobean drama

The accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne was once seen as the beginning of a period of severe witchcraft persecution in England. Largely based on the published opinions of the new monarch, this view always had its critics – an early defender of James’s record was the historian of witchcraft and Shakespeare scholar George Lyman Kittredge – and it has since been discredited on the basis of the more empirical approach pioneered by C. L. Ewen and developed further by Alan Macfarlane.<sup>1</sup> James’s public attitude to witchcraft was, in practice, a good deal more complex than *Daemonologie* would make it appear, and his later involvement in exposing fraudulent cases of demonic possession by witchcraft is well documented.<sup>2</sup>

But while fewer witches were brought to trial under James than under his predecessor, witches do appear to have become more important on stage, and this change is likely to have been a direct response to his accession to the throne. James is often described as having an ‘interest’ in witchcraft, which makes his engagement with the phenomenon sound very harmless and scholarly. It would be more accurate to say that the new king had a track record of putting witchcraft belief to political and polemical use. James’s writings on witchcraft, and his interventions in cases of it, made a significant contribution to the image of a wise and benevolent king which he attempted, with mixed success, to project. James’s later activities in exposing ‘impostures’ constitute a continuation of, rather than a break with, his previous encouragement of witch-hunting in this

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1 Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics*, pp. 47–53; Kittredge, pp. 276–328; Ewen, *Witchcraft Hunting and Witch Trials*; Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*.

2 Kittredge, pp. 319–23; Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter* provides a book-length case study of one well-documented example.

respect. The theatrical representation of witches in the early part of James's reign can be seen to complement (and compliment) his highly political interest in witchcraft, in view of the significance of the witch characters within the plays in which they appear. Above all, it is the way these characters become associated with, or opposed to, the court, and their connection with royal and aristocratic characters, that makes them newly important – and newly serious, in contrast to the predominantly light and comical Elizabethan witches.

If James's reign did not, as was once believed, lead to higher levels of persecution, it does seem to have inspired a theatrical mini-genre which could be termed the royal witch play. Beginning with either Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) or John Marston's *The Wonder of Women*, better known as *Sophonisba* (1606), this type of play was characterised by the use of witchcraft in association with, and in contrast to, the idea of divinely ordained monarchy. There are, as I have argued, Elizabethan precedents for this juxtaposition in some chronicle history plays; but they differ from the Jacobean examples considered here. The Jacobean plays' use of witchcraft is much more stylised, aiming for a clarity of contrast between witchcraft and royalty that is absent in the Elizabethan examples, and they also make more extensive use of learned demonology. These distinctive features are at their most visible in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609), in which the contrast between witchcraft and royalty is built into the dramatic structure – masque versus anti-masque – of the entertainment.

Scepticism and belief in witchcraft itself is not always easy to detect directly in the Jacobean witchcraft drama, because it is not often at issue in these plays. The plays are not in any real sense *about* witchcraft; they are really about kingship and tyranny, or good and bad rule.<sup>3</sup> All of the plays seek to draw a line between rightful kings and tyrants, or between order and chaos. *Macbeth* and the *Masque of Queens*, in particular, serve to glorify James's court in rather obvious ways. But even *Sophonisba*, which is not known to have been performed at court, seems to flatter the king indirectly by combining two of his intellectual interests: demonology and political theory. (James's works on these subjects had recently been made available in England when *Macbeth* and *Sophonisba* were first performed: *Daemonologie*, *The True Law of Free*

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3 For a general study of the stage tyrant in early modern drama, see Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

*Monarchies* and *Basilikon Doron* were all published in London in 1603.) Witchcraft plays a vital part in these plays on royal authority, by highlighting everything that royal authority is not.

However, if kings are diametrically opposed to both tyrants and witches, opposites can sometimes look rather similar. As Stuart Clark points out, with reference to the practice of touching for the 'king's evil', or scrofula:

For all the huge disparity in moral value, kingcraft and witchcraft displayed, in this instance, certainly a gestural, but also a conceptual affinity. Armed with the categories of Weber and the findings of political anthropologists, we are apt to stress the similarities and treat the differences as a matter of cultural taste. But ... contemporaries too realized that the actions of kings and witches could be sufficiently cognate for them *both* to be suspected of demonism. In seventeenth-century England it was reported as a popular belief that scrofula was called the 'King's Evil' because the king caused, rather than cured it.<sup>4</sup>

The plays discussed here, like the kingship theorists discussed by Clark, are obviously concerned with the distinction between witchcraft and king- or queencraft. But the success of the plays in demonstrating this distinction is tempered by the fact that the monarch's role also contains traces of the supernatural. The quasi-magical nature of the idea of divinely ordained kingcraft, as James and several playwrights understood it, left it vulnerable to a satirical attack which, rather than stressing the differences between witchcraft and kingcraft, highlighted the similarities. This attack came in the form of a brilliant satire by Thomas Middleton, whose play *The Witch* (1615–16?) exploited the previous dramatic associations of court and witch in ways which were considerably less flattering to the former.

### *Sophonisba*

John Marston's *Sophonisba* may have been written and performed shortly before *Macbeth*, as some scholars have speculated;<sup>5</sup> the two plays are at any rate very close in date. Marston's play is discussed first here because it is, in one sense, more conventional in its representation of witchcraft; it follows the pattern, already well established in the Elizabethan theatre, of using witches based on classical models which were far removed from the witch stereotype

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<sup>4</sup> Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 666.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Harris, p. 64, and Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 274, footnote 39.

familiar from trial pamphlets. Marston's Erictho borrows heavily from the classical witch of the same name in Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Once dismissed as an extraneous distraction from the main action of the play, Erictho has more astutely been recognised as an important symbol of, and complement to, the tyrant Syphax's reckless depravity.<sup>6</sup>

Lucan's Erictho provided some inspiration for Greene's depiction of Medea in *Alphonsus*, but Marston uses the source much more extensively: some passages of the play, including the quotation below, are translations of it. Unlike Greene, who keeps his depiction of Medea quite dignified, Marston exploits some of the most lurid parts of Lucan's description of the Thessalian witch:

she bursts up tombes  
 For half rot searcloathes, then she scrapes dry gums  
 For hir black rites: but when she findes a corse  
 New gravd whose entrailes yet not turne  
 To slymy filth, with greedy havock then  
 She makes fierce spoile and swels with wicked triumph  
 To bury hir leane knuckles in his eyes.  
 Then doeth she know the pale and or'egrowne nailes  
 From his dry hand: but if she find some life  
 Yet lurking close she bites his gelled lips,  
 And sticking her blacke tongue in his drie throat,  
 She breathes dire murmurs, which inforce him to beare  
 Her banefull secrets to the spirits of horror.<sup>7</sup>

This drastic change in tone from the comparatively gentle Elizabethan witches makes Erictho a more horrifying witch than any previous or subsequent theatrical depiction. (*Macbeth's* witches are, of course, also gruesome in some of their speeches, probably not coincidentally.) Even Joan in *1 Henry VI*, probably the most malevolent of Elizabethan stage witches, is a very different order of witch compared to the demonic Erictho. The extreme nature of Erictho's evil is in keeping with the exaggerated characterisation in *Sophonisba* as a whole. As an editor of the play has pointed out,

Sophonisba is not merely a good woman; she is the perfect woman. Syphax is not merely evil in a conventional political or ethical sense; he is completely depraved ... The logic of the play is the logic of

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6 Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (eds), *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 12–13.

7 John Marston, *Sophonisba*, edited by William Kemp (New York: Garland, 1979), iv.1.111–23. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses.

the excluded middle; there is the divine and the satanic, but not the human, so that the characters become prototypical, even allegorical.<sup>8</sup>

Erictho is a fitting partner for the tyrant Syphax, who is presented as even more evil than the witch. In Marston's play, Erictho's necrophilia is projected onto Syphax as well. When Sophonisba threatens suicide in order to avoid rape, Syphax tells her: 'Doe strike thy breast, know being dead, Ile use, / With highest lust of sense thy senselesse flesh' (iv.1.58–59). Syphax's lust anticipates, and is associated with, Erictho's own.

In Marston's source, Erictho is visited by the general Sextus Pompey, who wishes to know the outcome of his coming battle in the ongoing civil wars (an incident closely resembling the story of Saul and the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28). In *Sophonisba*, however, Syphax comes looking for a love charm. Had Marston followed his source, this would have been easy enough for Erictho to provide. Lucan writes that

A Thessalid's spell can make passion unintended  
by Fate flow into hardened hearts, make crabbed old men  
burn with illicit flames. Theirs is a skill beyond mere  
noxious concoctions [...] Couples bound  
neither by conjugal bliss nor by sweet beauty's allure—  
these they have tied with the mystic spinning of a twisted thread.<sup>9</sup>

Lucan's standpoint is ancient rather than early modern, of course, and it has been suggested that literary attitudes to love magic had changed by the time of Marston's play. Anthony Harris claims that the idea that love magic was impossible was an 'established concept',<sup>10</sup> but it is not difficult to think of dramatic exceptions to this supposed rule (among them *Fedele and Fortunio*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Witch*, and *The Late Lancashire Witches*). It is far from clear that love magic was widely agreed to be impossible outside the theatre either.<sup>11</sup> In any case, Marston's play departs, in terms of witch lore, from a classical source which it closely follows in terms

8 Marston, p. 23.

9 Lucan, vi.452–60.

10 Harris, p. 67. Dipsas in *Endymion* and Erictho in *Sophonisba* provide some support for Harris's contention.

11 According to Richard Bernard, witches 'can worke vpon the minde of men and women to stirre vp lusts and ill passions' (p. 159); Roberts's *A Treatise of Witchcraft* refers to witches stirring up passions including lust, hatred and love (p. 17).

of verbal resemblance. The departure from the source seems to be based on greater scepticism towards witchcraft – but it is a qualified scepticism.

Erictho does not help Syphax, instead tricking him by magically disguising herself as Sophonisba and sleeping with him herself.<sup>12</sup> Later, having revealed her trickery, Erictho chides Syphax for imagining that she could help him: ‘Why foole of kings, could thy weake soule imagin / That t’is within the graspe of Heaven or Hell / To inforce love?’ (v.1.4–6). In this play, love magic is impossible – and Syphax’s credulity in believing in it is mocked. This particular example of scepticism, however, limits rather than denies the witch’s power, and in doing so makes Erictho more credible for an early modern audience. Erictho is instead given the essential witch’s power, from an early modern demonological perspective – the power to deceive – which is not characteristic of Lucan’s Erictho. Erictho deludes Syphax into thinking she is Sophonisba, but even more importantly she succeeds in persuading an impious man of her great power: Syphax places his faith in her and is thereby led into the sin of idolatry.

After the witch has disappeared, Syphax, having decided that after sleeping with Erictho he ‘can no lower fall’, offers a prayer to unnamed evil spirits at ‘an Aultar sacred to black powers’ (v.1.38, 27). Syphax invokes these powers in order to predict the outcome of a battle. Having dealt with a witch, Syphax turns to some form of witchcraft or conjuring himself. Erictho has won a royal convert to the devil, which is the purpose of early modern, rather than ancient, witchcraft. After Syphax’s invocation the ghost of Sophonisba’s father, Asdruball, appears to him. Asdruball predicts that Syphax will suffer more but, despite being asked, does not predict the outcome of the coming battle, claiming to be ignorant of anything but his own suffering. This is another departure from Marston’s source, and again one which reflects early modern rather than ancient beliefs about magic: the author of the Harley MS referred to in previous chapters mocks the idea of asking for advice from the dead, pointing out that it is ‘foolyshe to aske councill wher none ys to be had’.<sup>13</sup> The effects of the changes are to downplay the

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12 Anthony Harris contends that Erictho uses ‘straightforward trickery’ rather than magic. While her face is veiled, she re-enters, according to the stage direction, ‘in the shape of Sophonisba’, which to my mind suggests illusion rather than disguise. See Harris, pp. 66–67.

13 MS Harley 2302, fols 86<sup>v</sup>–87<sup>r</sup>.

efficacy of magic while emphasising the degeneracy of the witch and her client. Scepticism about witchcraft operates within a particularly lurid view of it as threateningly demonic.

A final point to make about the summoning of Asdruball's ghost is that the status of the apparition is also questionable, and also suggests a demonological reading of the scene. While Erictho herself is said to work with the spirits of the dead, Syphax has not specifically asked for Asdruball to appear. Instead, he calls on apparently demonic forces: 'thou whose blasting flames / Hurle barren droughes upon the patient earth' and 'Hot-brained Phebus'.<sup>14</sup> When the ghost of Asdruball appears, Syphax asks: 'What damn'd ayre is form'd / Into that shape?', rejecting the idea that the apparition is really the ghost of Asdruball. The phrase 'damn'd ayre' makes it clear that an evil spirit has taken the shape of Sophonisba's dead father.<sup>15</sup> These words lend subtle support to the orthodox view that necromancers cannot really summon the spirits of the dead, only demonic illusions. *Sophonisba* therefore hints at a set of underlying assumptions very much in tune with the demonological position of King James.<sup>16</sup>

While Sophonisba is the 'perfect' character in the play – the wonder of women – characters in the play repeatedly describe her perfection as excessive, and even threatening, as Rebecca Yearling has pointed out.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Sophonisba is described in language which might raise some concern in a play which associates witchcraft with demonic evil. When Syphax is captured by the Roman general Scipio after his defeat by Massinissia, he explains his treachery to Rome by blaming Sophonisba:

T'was Sophonisba that solicited  
My forc'd revolt, t'was hir resistles sute,  
Hir love to hir deare Carthage 'tic'd mee breake  
All faith with men: t'was shee made Syphax false,  
Shee that lov's Carthage with such violence  
And hath such moving graces to allure  
That shee will turne a man that once hath sworne  
Himselfe on's fathers bones hir Carthage foe

14 As mentioned in the discussion of *Alphonsus, King of Aragon* in Chapter 2, this is not the first play to connect Apollo with demonic forces.

15 On the connection between air and spirits, see Chapter 6.

16 The first topic to be discussed in James's *Daemonologie* is the witch of Endor, and by p. 4 James has established that the apparition summoned by the witch was an 'vnclean spirit' and not the ghost of Samuel.

17 Rebecca Yearling, 'John Marston, Stoic?: *Sophonisba* and the Early Modern Stoic Ideal', *Ben Jonson Journal* 18:1 (2011), 85–100 (p. 93).

To be that citties Champion and high friend.  
 Hir Himeneall torch burnt downe my house.  
 Then was I captivd when hir wanton armes  
 Threw moving claspt about my neck. O charmes  
 Able to turne even fate.  
 (v.2.70–82)

Syphax is, of course, a villain making excuses for himself, and his criticism of Sophonisba need not be taken seriously in one sense. However, the language in which he frames his excuses is significant. Sophonisba, he claims, has ‘solicited / My forc’d reuolt’ – creating the rebellion that is, according to 1 Samuel 15:23, the sin of witchcraft. She – not Erictho – has made him ‘false’ and a breaker of his faith. Sophonisba is described as being possessed of ‘charmes / Able to turne even fate’. Obviously, these ‘charms’ are those of beauty rather than magic – but the word nonetheless recalls ‘Hels charmes’, with which Erictho cannot seduce Syphax (v.1.16). Sophonisba’s ‘charms’ are actually more powerful than those of Erictho, who is forced instead to fall back on mere trickery, or ‘Braine sleightes’. Erictho’s boast to Syphax that she can command charms which ‘Ioue dare not heare twice’ is an empty one; unlike her ancient namesake, she has much more limited powers than she claims. The inability of Erictho’s magic to command love serves the purpose of demonstrating that the powers of the virtuous princess, Sophonisba, are greater than those of the evil witch. But such a comparison can only be made by aligning the two characters, and describing them both in similar terms, problematising the otherwise sharp distinction drawn between the good and the evil characters.

### *Macbeth*

The association of witchcraft and tyranny in *Sophonisba* is established even more clearly in *Macbeth*, and with greater personal relevance to King James. The issue of whether or not *Macbeth* is a ‘royal play’, in Henry Paul’s phrase, has divided critics.<sup>18</sup> Sandra Clark, one of the editors of the recent Arden edition of the play, is sceptical about such claims and provides a long list of critics who have disputed the idea that *Macbeth* would have been flattering to James.<sup>19</sup>

18 Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (New York: Macmillan, 1950).

19 Sandra Clark, ‘The Critical Backstory’, in *Macbeth: A Critical Reader*, edited by John Drakakis and Dale Townshend (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 18–54 (pp. 48–50).



But while Paul's conclusions and, more recently, Alvin Kernan's<sup>20</sup> may seem disappointingly straightforward to scholars in search of fresh readings, there are very good reasons for understanding *Macbeth* as a play written with a royal audience at least partly in mind.

*Macbeth* is almost universally dated 1606 on the basis of the numerous topical references within the play, and Alvin Kernan follows Paul in suggesting that it was 'probably' written especially for performance during a visit by the King of Denmark to England.<sup>21</sup> Some scenes – most notably the procession of kings, but also the praise of James's supposed ancestor, Banquo, in the third act – are best understood as flattery of the new king. The reference to 'Norwegian' banners, in place of the Danish invaders described in Shakespeare's source, is also suggestive of attention tactfully being paid to the sensitivities of a specific audience.<sup>22</sup> If, as Kernan believes, the play was written specifically with a court performance in mind, the inclusion of witches in the play – and, especially, their association with a rebellious nobleman – was of obvious relevance to its royal auditors, in view of their own first-hand experience of alleged witchcraft.

The series of events that has become known as the North Berwick witch-hunt are, from the beginning, tied up with the marriage of James VI of Scotland to Anne of Denmark in 1589.<sup>23</sup> Anne's planned voyage to Scotland was plagued by various mishaps, and eventually called off altogether, while in Scotland storms led to the drowning of Jean Kennedy, who was to have been one of Anne's gentlewomen. James then decided to sail to Norway, where Anne had been left stranded. Having finally married Anne in Oslo, James and his new wife went on to Denmark, where they stayed for six months as the guests of Christian IV. Just after the royal couple had arrived safely in Scotland in May 1590, a witch was convicted in Denmark, having confessed to using magic to interfere with the ships that had originally been intended to take Anne and her party to Scotland; the extraction

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20 Alvin Kernan, *Shakespeare: The King's Playwright* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 71–88.

21 Kernan, p. 76. Paul is much less circumspect than Kernan, and simply states this as a fact (p. 1). There is no direct evidence for this claim, likely though it may seem.

22 Paul, pp. 343–44; Kernan, p. 76.

23 The brief summary that follows is heavily indebted to the account given in Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), especially pp. 29–49.

of this confession seems to have formed part of an attempt by Danish officials to avoid being blamed for the fiasco. News of the Danish trial reached Scotland in July. What happened in the cases of witchcraft in Scotland is less clear, but by the end of 1590, Agnes Sampson had confessed, under torture and apparently in James's presence, to acts of *maleficium* and to knowledge of the devil's involvement in preventing the arrival of the Queen. Soon afterwards, a group of witches were accused of attempting to harm the King through magic. One of the accused witches, Donald Robson, had specifically mentioned 'my Lord Bothwell' as providing food and money to the group.<sup>24</sup>

Francis Stewart, fourth Earl of Bothwell and James's cousin, had a troubled relationship with the King – especially after having plotted an armed uprising against him in 1589. Whether or not there was any truth to the confessions made by the various witches is impossible to determine, but the accusation certainly played into a well-established political narrative in early modern Scotland.<sup>25</sup> Accusations of witchcraft had frequently been used as a political weapon, and Bothwell's subsequent defence of his conduct blamed his political enemies, especially James's chancellor, John Maitland. When Bothwell was finally tried, an observer reported that 'divers honest men of Edenbroughe ... deposed that Richard Greyme [one of the accused] said to theme that he must eyther accuse the Erle Bothwell falselye, or els endure such tormentes as no man were able to abyde'.<sup>26</sup> According to Bothwell's version of events, he was the victim of a conspiracy, one which used the emerging witch-hunt as an opportunity to settle old scores.

The similarities between Bothwell's alleged involvement with witches and Macbeth's have frequently been noted.<sup>27</sup> Bothwell might well have become king had James died without an heir, as Macbeth does after Duncan's death and his sons' flight. Bothwell also possessed the kinds of 'virtues' associated with Macbeth – he was bold, bloody, and resolute. At the age of 21, according to one contemporary report, Bothwell attacked three members of the rival Hume family, killing all three and hacking one of the men 'all to pieces'.<sup>28</sup> Even

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24 The examinations and depositions are reproduced in Normand and Roberts, pp. 135–41, 158–63.

25 Normand and Roberts, p. 41 and p. 51, note 80.

26 Quoted in Normand and Roberts, p. 128.

27 See, for example, Harris, pp. 42–43; Kernan, pp. 85–87.

28 Normand and Roberts, p. 39.

after he had been declared a rebel for his alleged part in the witches' activities, he continued to enjoy support; and he posed a serious threat to James's reign, launching a series of violent attacks on James's household. In 1593 he even staged what Normand and Roberts describe as 'a successful coup'. It was after this that his trial finally took place, at his own request, and unsurprisingly he was cleared of the charges of witchcraft. (Bothwell was later out-maneuvred by James – who by this time hated him implacably – and was in the end banished from Scotland.) That the eponymous villain of *Macbeth* is an accomplished and daring soldier need not be seen as mitigating his villainy – certainly not from the perspective of James, whose motto was 'blessed are the peacemakers'.

James's identification of opposition to him with witchcraft necessitated a kind of anti-witchcraft, the ascription of supernatural power to the rightful monarch – James himself. Following his marriage, James insisted on an elaborate coronation ceremony, complete with the anointing of Anne, in the face of opposition from much of the Protestant clergy, who regarded this as superstition. As Normand and Roberts point out,

[m]onarchy here uses the resources of theatre – ceremony, costume, action, words – to perform its power and demonstrate its legitimacy, but it is not theatre as illusion. The theatrical elements of the ceremony perform a kind of royal magic. The queen completes the ceremony by speaking the oath of allegiance to, and entering into a covenant with, God, whose power, present in the ceremony, has effected her transformation into a consecrated queen.<sup>29</sup>

Just as witchcraft (and rebellion) is a pact with the devil, true monarchy is a pact with God, and just as witches have magical powers, so do kings. This aspect of James's theological and political thought finds dramatic expression in *Macbeth* in the various partly idealised portraits of kingly characters – Duncan, Banquo, Malcolm, and Edward the Confessor – who collectively present an alternative vision of just kingship, in opposition to the tyranny of Macbeth.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Normand and Roberts, pp. 37–38.

30 The flaws of Duncan in particular have often been pointed out, but these flaws are notably absent in Macbeth's description of Duncan: throughout the play the tyrant and his speeches are used to emphasise the goodness of the good king.

If the rhetorical purpose of the witchcraft in *Macbeth* is fairly clear, the precise nature of it is much less so. *Macbeth* is by far the best-known play to deal with witchcraft; but demonologically speaking the play seems a mess, and the status of its witches has provoked much debate. It might even be asked whether there are any witches in *Macbeth*. The three characters who are described as witches in the Folio's stage directions are never referred to as such by any character in the play, although one of them reports that she was *called* a witch by another woman – the 'rumpe-fed Ronyon' who never appears on stage. The 'witches' are most frequently called the 'weird sisters' in modern editions of the play, and their exact nature and identity is a matter for debate by the characters on stage – Banquo and Macbeth – as well as for critics of the play. The critics – like the characters – have been unable to agree on anything much in relation to the weird sisters. They may not even be 'weird' sisters: the Folio text consistently describes them as 'weyard' or 'weyward': most modern editions render this word as 'weird', but Davenant's adaptation of the play calls the witches 'wayward' rather than weird.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, *Macbeth* provides plenty of evidence for anyone wishing to make the argument that the sisters, whether weird or wayward, are merely metaphorical – that they represent Macbeth's state of mind or his repressed desires, for example. The witches suddenly 'vanish' according to a stage direction, they anticipate Macbeth's thoughts, some of their speeches are verbally close to his, and they arguably have no real effect on the outcome of events. Nonetheless, while arguments for the unreality of the witches have been made,<sup>32</sup> they have always been oddly implausible even in modern-day performances of the play. Audiences tend to feel the witches to be real within the framework of the dramatic fiction, as do a large majority of critics. This is not to say that the witches are *not* symbolic of Macbeth's state of mind, merely that they are also real.

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31 Harris suggests that this might indicate 'contemporary double syllabic pronunciation' of the word 'weird' (pp. 33–34). However, Macbeth himself is described as a 'wayward Sonne' by Hecat in III.5.

32 See, for example, Margaret Lucy, *Shakespeare and the Supernatural* (Liverpool: Shakespeare Press, 1906), p. 16. More recently, Ryan Curtis Friesen has suggested that 'the reality of the witches beyond Macbeth's psyche is questionable' (p. 125).

When they first appear to Banquo and Macbeth, the witches resemble the Fates of Greek myth, or similar beings from other mythological traditions, as has often been observed:

MAC. Speake if you can: what are you?

1. All haile Macbeth, haile to thee Thane of Glamis.
2. All haile Macbeth, haile to thee Thane of Cawdor.
3. All haile Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter.<sup>33</sup>

Here the sisters, identified in the Folio text only by numbers, present three brief glimpses of past, present, and future: Macbeth is already Glamis, is in the process of becoming Cawdor, and will eventually become king. In this respect the wayward sisters most closely resemble the Norns of Norse mythology: three sisters who are respectively associated with the past, the present, and the future. However, regardless of what their reply might suggest, the witches do not actually answer Macbeth's question, so there is no explicit indication of what the witches 'are', and their characters appear in a very different light in other passages of the play.<sup>34</sup>

Just before delivering their prophetic greeting to Macbeth, the witches have been discussing their recent activities – including 'killing swine' and begging for chestnuts. The trivial nature of their concerns undermines their later representation as Norns or Fates. The point is strengthened by the first witch's desire for revenge on the sailor's wife who has refused her charity. This connection to the stereotypical motive of the witch identifies the weird sisters as 'ordinary' witches. But while the conclusion that the wayward sisters are witches seems fairly obvious in terms of a typical seventeenth-century audience member's frame of reference, it is not the conclusion reached by Macbeth and Banquo. In fact, neither Macbeth nor Banquo reaches any firm conclusion. Banquo suggests that the witches might be 'bubbles' in the earth, or perhaps hallucinations, but he does not consider the apparently obvious answer.

The ambiguous representation of the witches has led to a variety of interpretations. The theory that the witches are in fact Norns,

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33 William Shakespeare, 'Macbeth', in *Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (London, 1623), I.3, p. 132. Further references to the Folio text are given parenthetically.

34 Another perspective on this exchange is offered by Laura Kolb, who interprets the witches' greeting as an answer: 'The suggestion that the witches somehow *are* Macbeth reverberates throughout the play. The weird sisters' prophetic speeches are coextensive with, if not indistinguishable from, Macbeth's own ... thoughts' (p. 346).

originating with Fleay in the nineteenth century, has already been mentioned. A. C. Bradley disagreed, arguing that there is ‘not a syllable in *Macbeth* to imply that they are anything but women’.<sup>35</sup> (Perhaps the oddest comment on the nature of the witches is offered by Harold Goddard, who asks himself whether the witches are women before answering, ‘[o]f course – and who has not seen and turned away in horror from just this malevolence in some shrunken old crone?’)<sup>36</sup> W. C. Curry argued that the witches are demons pretending to be witches.<sup>37</sup> Henry Paul argued that the weird sisters are distinctively Scottish witches, which are more serious than the ‘stupid and vulgar’ stories about English witches.<sup>38</sup> This view steers a middle course between the mundane, swine-killing witches and the apparently omniscient Fates or Norns, but in doing so cannot account satisfactorily for either. More recently, Diane Purkiss starts by claiming that the play is a sensationalist mess, before arguing that the ‘indeterminacy’ of the witches is precisely the point: their lack of a stable identity aligns them with chaos and disorder.<sup>39</sup> Neat though this argument is, it seems to me to miss an important point about the witches – which is what the wayward sisters are.

The witches are only treated seriously, or rather only present themselves seriously, when others are present, and this is because their appearance before Banquo and Macbeth is a carefully prepared performance. It is evident from the opening scene of the play that the witches are expecting to meet Macbeth. Immediately before the entrance of Banquo and Macbeth, the witches chant: ‘Peace, the Charm’s wound vp.’ It is unclear what this charm is, or whether it has any effect on subsequent events, but the word ‘peace’ commands silence, as the witches turn from their own affairs to the business

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35 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, first published 1904); p. 299.

36 Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), II, p. 127.

37 W. C. Curry, *Shakespeare’s Philosophical Patterns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1937), pp. 60–61.

38 Paul, pp. 256–57. For more recent variations on this argument see Mary Floyd-Wilson, ‘English Epicures and Scottish Witches’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 57:2 (Summer 2006), 131–61 (pp. 147–48) and Alisa Manninen, ‘The Charm’s Wound Up’: Supernatural Ritual in *Macbeth*, in *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage*, edited by Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 61–74 (p. 67).

39 Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 211. Deborah Willis also refers to the ‘hybridity’ of the witches (*Malevolent Nurture*, p. 215).

at hand. Quiet now, he's coming, the witches seem to tell one another – it is time for them to stop their relaxed, backstage chat and get into character. Like their charm, the witches themselves are 'wound up' and ready to perform.

While the witches among themselves relax into informality and speak in doggerel and prose about their everyday activities, their language when speaking to Macbeth is markedly different. As well as slipping almost entirely into pentameter, the witches' tone is noticeably elevated when they are making their prophecies. They even address Macbeth and Banquo as 'thou', placing themselves above the noblemen by using the familiar pronoun rather than the more respectful 'you'. When they speak to Banquo, the witches revert back to tetrameter, perhaps allowing their masks to slip a little, but they are successful enough as performers to conceal their nature from both of their baffled auditors. Curry's view of the weird sisters – which sees them as demons impersonating witches – seems to me to have it backwards; the witches are not more but *less* powerful and mysterious than they appear. Evil is actually weak, not strong, and it puffs itself up to disguise its weakness. Purkiss describes the witches as 'Macbeth's missing comic sub-plot',<sup>40</sup> but they could equally be described as a rather subtle play within the play.

This view of the witches would have been entirely in keeping with King James's documented scepticism towards mythological and folkloric creatures. In his *Daemonologie*, James had discussed the nature of various kinds of spirits. He divides spirits into four types for convenience, but is careful to point out that

although in my discoursing of them, I deuyde them in diuers kindes, yee must notwithstanding there of note my Phrase of speaking in that: For doubtlesie they are in effect, but all one kinde of spirites, who for abusing the more of mankinde, takes on these sundrie shapes, and vses diuerse formes of out-ward actiones, as if some were of nature better than other.<sup>41</sup>

James goes on to give short shrift to the concept of good and evil genii, an idea which is dramatically represented in *Dr Faustus* and taken seriously later in the seventeenth century by Joseph Glanvill. James's own position is reductive: all such spiritual phenomena are manifestations of the devil, and any appearance of diversity is merely a trick to deceive the unwary. He goes on to make a similar point

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40 Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 214.

41 James I, p. 57.

in relation to fairies, as noted in Chapter 2. The witches in *Macbeth*, like all servants of the devil, mimic their master's strategies: they pretend to be powerful and mysterious, but when the audience sees them in Macbeth's absence, they are revealed to be no more than ordinary witches.

That the witches might wish to present themselves as agents or personifications of a non-Christian fate or destiny, with the ability to see into the future, is in keeping with what a later author suggested about the devil's tactics. Arguing that the devil's ultimate aim is to persuade humans of the non-existence of any god, Thomas Browne writes that

[w]here hee succeeds not thus high, he labours to introduce a secondary and deductive Atheisme, that although they concede there is a God, yet should they deny his providence ... to promote which apprehensions ... he casteth in the notions of fate, destiny, fortune, chance and necessity ... Whereby extinguishing in mindes the compensation of vertue and vice, the hope and feare of heaven or hell, they comply in their actions unto the drift of his delusions.<sup>42</sup>

The witches in *Macbeth* could be read as a theatrical representation of how the devil actually carries out a plan resembling the one Browne ascribes to him. They persuade Macbeth that they can tell him his 'destiny', and after meeting the witches he specifically mentions his indifference to the afterlife.

While the witches are not mythological Fates or Norns, it is nonetheless true that they are seemingly able to predict the future. James addressed this question in *Daemonologie*, arriving at the conventional answer that the devil is often able to make accurate predictions based on his great learning and ability to observe events unseen.<sup>43</sup> These predictions are passed on to Macbeth for the purpose of sealing his fate, but the choice of Macbeth is not made at random. Part of the devil's cunning is that he chooses his targets well. The play hints that Duncan's murder has already been conceived of before the witches are encountered. Macbeth's reactions to the witches' prophecies make little sense otherwise: having been promised the kingship, Macbeth might not need to do anything to bring the prophecy about, as he himself realises – 'If Chance will haue me King, / Why Chance may Crowne me, / Without my stirre' (1.3, p. 133). But this sounds like wishful thinking. Macbeth realises it will

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42 Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (London, 1646), 1.10, p. 38.

43 James I, pp. 21–22.



not in fact happen without his ‘stirre’ because he has already contemplated Duncan’s murder, and has guessed how he is to become king. This being the case, he learns from the witches that his murder will be successful – something that the devil correctly judges to be very likely. The devil’s instruments would not make the prophecy if they did not realise that the decision to murder Duncan was ready to be taken.

The witches are, therefore, both allied to Macbeth and the trigger for his self-destruction, and this is because the instruments of darkness are also the instruments of God. The devil was frequently described as God’s executioner,<sup>44</sup> and could only torment or test human beings with God’s permission – and even then, only within the limits set by God. What happens in *Macbeth* is God’s destruction, using the instruments of darkness, of a man who has been deservedly marked out for hell. The involvement of supernatural forces contributes to the sense of inevitability, present from the very start, about the outcome of the play. The idea that the forces of hell are genuinely in control is part of Macbeth’s delusion – Malcolm, in pointed contrast, ascribes Macbeth’s coming downfall to ‘the Powres aboue’ (iv.3, p. 148).

Reading the witches as tricksters, who pretend to much greater power than they in fact have, suggests a reading of Hecat as the devil, pretending to be a pagan deity.<sup>45</sup> While there is nothing in the text that makes such a reading of the Hecat scene explicit, it is unlikely that auditors with a grounding in demonology (such as James I) would have needed any prompting in order to reach this conclusion. An interesting parallel is provided by the interpretation of the biblical story of the witch of Endor, in which Saul consults a witch (or, strictly speaking, a pythoness) who summons the spirit of Samuel for him. The appearance of Samuel was frequently interpreted (especially in Protestant Europe) to be a story about demonic illusion, including by James I, despite the fact that the

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44 Johnstone, p. 70.

45 Hecat’s appearance at the end of the third act has struck many critics of the play as anomalous, and is frequently ascribed to Middleton. The question has been debated by Gary Taylor and Brian Vickers; see Taylor’s introduction to *Macbeth* in the *Collected Works* of Middleton and the essay in the accompanying *Textual Companion* and Vickers, ‘Disintegrated’, *Times Literary Supplement* (28 May 2010), 14–15. Taylor responded in his article ‘Empirical Middleton: *Macbeth*, Adaptation and Microauthorship’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 65:3 (2014), 239–72.

biblical text itself gives no grounds for such an interpretation.<sup>46</sup> In his discussion of the witch of Endor, James maintains that what appeared to be the ghost of Samuel was in fact an ‘unclean spirit’. James goes on to conclude that the devil was, in this instance, permitted by God to trick Saul for his sin in consulting a witch:

God will not permit him so to deceiue his own: but only such, as first wilfully deceiues them-selves, by running vnto him, whome God then suffers to fall in their owne snares, and justlie permittes them to be illuded with great efficacy of deceit, because they would not beleue the truth.<sup>47</sup>

This logic can be applied to both Macbeth and the witches themselves; having deserved to be deluded by trusting in demonic forces, they are fooled by the devil throughout the play. As Clark points out, the parallels between the story of Saul and the story of Macbeth would have been hard for contemporary audiences to miss, so it seems reasonable to suppose that interpretation of Hecat in *Macbeth* might have been guided by interpretations of the witch of Endor story.

Equivocation – the act of simultaneously speaking the truth and deceiving – is an important theme of the play, and the fact that evil often speaks the truth does not mean it does not also set out to deceive. The witches frequently do this, most famously in the prophecies given in the cauldron scene; but Macbeth also equivocates once he has become a servant of the devil himself. After the murder of Duncan has been revealed, Macbeth expresses his anguish:

Had I but dy’d an houre before this chance,  
I had liu’d a blessed time: for from this instant,  
There’s nothing serious in Mortalitie:  
All is but Toyes: Renowne and Grace is dead,  
The Wine of Life is drawne, and the meere Lees  
Is left this Vault, to brag of.  
(II.3, p. 138)

As Bradley pointed out long ago, this is both disingenuous and true: although he seeks to deceive the other noblemen, the murder really has ruined Macbeth.<sup>48</sup> His declaration of despair is repeated, this time with unambiguous sincerity, later in the play, when Macbeth declares that ‘my way of life / Is false into the Seare, the yellow

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<sup>46</sup> Stuart Clark discusses the connections between Macbeth and Saul in *Vanities of the Eye*, pp. 240–44.

<sup>47</sup> James I, *Daemonologie*, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Bradley, p. 314.

Leafe' (v.3, p. 149). Macbeth is not a witch any more than Saul was,<sup>49</sup> but he is certainly witch-like in important respects: himself deluded, he attempts to trick others, and he deceives even when speaking the truth.

Lady Macbeth is not a witch in the literal sense either, but she too is linked to witchcraft. Like her husband, she is both a deceiver and a self-deceiver, deluding herself that Duncan's murder can be carried out without consequences, and deceiving others as to her guilt. She also invokes the aid of infernal powers, as does her husband. It is not clear that anything results from Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits – just as it is not clear that the witches' prophecies actually affect Macbeth's actions – but the mere speaking of the words constitutes an act of blasphemy and expresses trust in the power of evil spirits to aid Lady Macbeth's nefarious purposes. In this respect, she makes precisely the same mistake as her husband – trusting in hell rather than heaven. Both Lady Macbeth and her husband are brought down by their credulity, in the sense that they foolishly hope that evil forces can help them to achieve their aims, when in fact these forces merely seal their fate.

But while the Macbeths seem to be brought down by their credulity, they also display inappropriate scepticism. Macbeth, having decided on Duncan's murder, famously sees a ghostly dagger pointing to Duncan's bedchamber. What is most interesting about Macbeth's encounter with the dagger is his interpretation of it. When Macbeth asks the dagger:

Art thou not fatal Vision, sensible  
To feeling, as to sight? or art thou but  
A Dagger of the Minde, a false Creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed Braine?  
(II.1, p. 136)

Macbeth does not seem to consider the possibility that there might be anything supernatural about the dagger: that it might, for example, be a warning sent by God, or a further incitement to crime sent by the devil. Instead he thinks that the dagger must either be real or that it is a hallucination with a physiological basis, which would seem to be a purely naturalistic explanation. Most critics of the

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49 For a recent argument to the contrary, see Wills, p. 74. Paul also claims that Macbeth is a 'conjuror' (p. 279). If nothing else, Macbeth's apparent invocation of the spirits that appear late in the play bears some resemblance to Syphax's less ambiguous prayers to evil spirits in *Sophonisba*.

play, including those with an interest in demonology, have assumed Macbeth to be correct.<sup>50</sup> This ignores the possibility, outlined by Browne, that the devil, seeking to conceal his own existence, ‘maketh men believe that apparitions, and such as confirm his existence are either deceptions of sight, or melancholly depravements of phansie’.<sup>51</sup> Like the writing which appears to Faustus as he signs his soul over to Mephistophilis, the vision of the dagger may be evidence of the involvement of infernal forces, and it is certainly a final opportunity for Macbeth to turn back from the murder he is about to commit. Instead, he ascribes the opposite purpose to the dagger, telling it, ‘Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going, / And such an Instrument I was to vse.’ Also like Faustus, Macbeth fails to heed the warning; blood appears on the dagger, but Macbeth dismisses its significance, and it disappears. The dagger scene is not there to display the great imaginative power with which some critics have credited Macbeth,<sup>52</sup> but to point to his inability to interpret the supernatural apparitions by which he is tormented.

Throughout the play, Macbeth consistently wishes for less awareness, less sensory perception, rather than more. He wants the eye to wink at the hand, the stars to hide their fires, and later in the dagger speech he makes a plea for the sense of hearing to be suspended:

Thou sowre and firme-set Earth  
 Heare not my steps, which they may walke, for feare  
 Thy very stones prate of my where-about,  
 And take the present horror from the time,  
 Which now sute with it. Whiles I threat, he liues:  
 Words to the heat of deedes too cold breath giues. [A Bell rings.]  
 I goe, and it is done: the Bell inuites me.  
 Heare it not, Duncan, for it is a Knell,  
 That summons thee to Heauen, or to Hell.  
 (II.1, p. 136)

50 Paul, for example, confidently states that both the dagger and Banquo’s ghost are ‘purely imaginary’ (p. 69).

51 Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, I.10, p. 42.

52 A. C. Bradley was the most influential exponent of this view, crediting Macbeth with ‘the imagination of a poet’ (p. 308), although he went on to acknowledge the limited nature of Macbeth’s imagination. Harold Bloom continues this tradition; see his ‘Introduction’ in *William Shakespeare’s Macbeth* (New York: Infobase, 2010), pp. 1–7. Clark rightly points out that Macbeth is ‘a man who cannot see properly’ (*Vanities of the Eye*, p. 257).

Macbeth asks both the earth and Duncan not to hear, but he also seems to wish not to hear anything himself, preferring deeds to words. Macbeth's senses provide him with ample warning – the whole world seems to scream at him not to do what he has set out to do – but he wilfully blinds and deafens himself to the most vivid of portents. Macbeth is a doer, not a seer; he cannot bear to look at Banquo's ghost and tells his wife that 'Strange things I haue in head, that will to hand / Which must be acted, ere they may be scand' (III.4, p. 142). Not only vision and hearing, but even the passing on of information seems to trouble him by the end of the play: 'Bring me no more Reports' he tells his servants before the battle in which he is defeated, turning his back on sensory evidence entirely and placing all his trust in the witches' prophecies.

Stories about Edward the Confessor – one of the idealised monarchs in *Macbeth* – provide a counter-example to Macbeth's demonstration of how not to respond to a vision. According to an anonymous biographer, Edward was reluctant to collect taxes, but his advisers eventually prevailed upon him to do so, and proceeded to extort as much money as they could from the country. When they brought the proceeds to Edward in a chest, he astonished them by declaring that he saw the devil sitting on top of the chest, and demanded that they return all of the money to the people they had collected it from.<sup>53</sup> None of Edward's advisers were able to see the devil, but there is no suggestion in the text that it was not really there – Edward, the best of kings, was simply able to perceive the supernatural, which ordinary people cannot. Macbeth, the worst of kings, also does so, but he is not able to respond as he should, and in fact dismisses the visions he is subject to – even after he is terrified by Banquo's ghost, he calls it an 'Vnreall mock'ry' (III.4, p. 142).<sup>54</sup>

Lady Macbeth is even more sceptical of the evidence of her husband's senses, dismissing the significance of the 'Ayre-drawne Dagger' and the ghost of Banquo. Her attitude towards the sights

53 The story is told in the anonymous *Lyfe of saynt Edwarde confessor and kynge of Englande* (London, 1533), sig. A4<sup>v</sup>–B1<sup>r</sup>.

54 Early modern audiences probably perceived such apparitions to be real within the fictional work, and were likely to accept the ghost's selective invisibility. A passing reference to ghosts appears in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607), in which Jasper threatens to haunt Venturewell as a ghost 'Invisible to all men but thyself' (London: J. M. Dent, 1913; v.1.27).

produced by her and her husband's actions is rather different from Macbeth's: instead of being unable to look at the murdered body of Duncan, she dismisses the reality of what she will soon see:

the sleeping, and the dead,  
 Are but as Pictures: 'tis the Eye of Child-hood,  
 That feares a painted Deuill. If he doe bleed,  
 Ile guild the Faces of the Groomes withall,  
 For it must seeme their Guilt.  
 (II.2, p. 137)

Once life has left Duncan's body, Lady Macbeth reasons, there is nothing left to fear. 'Pictures' – visions and appearances – can safely be ignored, as there is no reality behind them. Lady Macbeth might seem to have a point in relation to the dagger and the ghost of Banquo, but why the sleeping and the dead should be considered mere 'pictures' is less clear. Her words seem to call into question the reality of the world she sees, at a moment when the seriousness of her actions demands a vivid appreciation of it. The speech evokes not merely scepticism about the supernatural but a broader philosophical scepticism towards an external reality existing behind sensory phenomena. Having dismissed the importance of appearance, Lady Macbeth immediately reaffirms it, declaring that she will transfer the appearance of guilt to the grooms, by 'gilding' their faces with Duncan's blood. There is a touch of moral relativism in her speech, with its easy transfer of guilt, and the reference to a 'painted Deuill' hints at the possibility that she may not believe in a real devil, despite her invocation of evil spirits. As noted in Chapter 2, such a seemingly contradictory combination of scepticism and credulity is expressed by Faustus, who summons demons while advancing the opinion that hell is a fable. Like her husband, Lady Macbeth would seem to be prepared to 'iump the life to come' (I.7, p. 135) – if she believes in an afterlife at all.

Macbeth and his wife both have a relationship with the instruments of darkness, but their experiences move them in opposite directions. Lady Macbeth calls, unprompted, on evil spirits but does not encounter them, while Macbeth meets the witches without having invoked them. While Macbeth has visions – of the dagger and Banquo's ghost – Lady Macbeth does not, and dismisses her husband's visions as illusions or delusions. She herself starts to hallucinate later in the play, seeing blood on her hands, but only after Macbeth's visions have stopped. Although they do so in markedly different ways, both characters see both too much and too little. Most

importantly, they both display misguided credulity *and* misguided scepticism, trusting the things they should be wary of and dismissing the warnings they should heed. The impious scepticism that Macbeth displays when he ignores the visions he should know how to interpret is the consequence of his foolish credulity.

The reading of the witches and other instruments of darkness given here is based on a conventional early modern demonology like the one expressed in James's own work (although that need not have been a direct source for the play). Together with the apparent rhetorical purpose of *Macbeth* – to highlight the contrast between kingship and tyranny in a manner particularly appealing to the King at the time – this would seem to require that the witches are taken as seriously, and with as little scepticism, as possible. This might raise a problem, since scepticism about witchcraft and the supernatural in general does exist in *Macbeth*. Both Macbeth and Banquo express scepticism in relation to the witches' very existence; and Macbeth and his wife display scepticism about the other apparitions in the play. All these expressions of scepticism, however, are part of a wider sense of unreality; as Stephen Greenblatt has put it, much of the action of the play 'transpires on the border between fantasy and reality'.<sup>55</sup> The potential unreliability of the senses, perhaps even of all knowledge, has long been recognised to be a major theme of the play. That the reality or otherwise of the apparitions – the dagger and Banquo's ghost – is never explicitly clarified and remains open to debate is typical of the play's indeterminate representation of supernatural phenomena.

But while Greenblatt argues that 'Shakespeare's theatre ... is on the side of a liberating, tolerant doubt',<sup>56</sup> he also acknowledges that Shakespeare's work is not written from the perspective of a Scotian sceptic. In fact, it is precisely the aspect of the play described – that its epistemology is so doubtful – that prevents *Macbeth* from being a sceptical play in this sense. Scotian scepticism is anything but doubtful – Scot himself is convinced of his position, and presents naturalistic explanations in order to dismiss any apparently supernatural event. This certainty is what is lacking in *Macbeth*: Macbeth and Banquo's conversation about the witches contains more *disbelief* than genuine *unbelief*, the kind of disbelief anyone might feel when presented with events completely outside the scope of their previous experience. The type of naturalistic explanation Scot would demand

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55 Greenblatt, p. 124.

56 Greenblatt, p. 127.

– such as that offered by ‘physic’ – is thrown to the dogs. It is precisely the great uncertainty felt by Macbeth and Banquo about the witches’ nature, and even their very existence, that makes the witches so credible as dramatic creations.

Of course, not all critics share the view that the witches are credible: this is probably why the wayward sisters’ scenes have so frequently been dismissed as spurious. Diane Purkiss outlines her case against the witches on these grounds:

[T]he witch-scenes brazenly refuse any serious engagement with witchcraft in favour of a forthright rendering of witches as a stage spectacular. These all-singing, all-dancing witches bear about as much relation to the concerns of village women as *The Sound of Music* does to women’s worries about childcare in the 1990s ... Learned interpretations of the play which eagerly make sense of the witches and relate their activities cogently to the main action are untrue to the play’s unbridled sensationalism.<sup>57</sup>

According to Purkiss, witchcraft in *Macbeth* should not be taken seriously, because the ‘all-singing, all-dancing’ nature of the witches’ performance undermines any sense of reality about them. Although Purkiss approaches the play from a very different angle from that of those Victorian Shakespeare scholars who disputed Shakespeare’s authorship of the insufficiently serious (and worryingly superstitious) witchcraft scenes, the feelings behind these two different objections are perhaps related: the witches are just not serious enough.

But Purkiss’s objection seems misguided to me, particularly in blaming the singing and dancing of the witches for undermining their seriousness in *Macbeth*. It is surprising for Purkiss to criticise the play on these grounds, since her own ground-breaking work highlights the fact that ‘real’ witchcraft could be all-singing and all-dancing, too. Quoting from *Newes from Scotland*, Purkiss points out that the North Berwick witches confessed to playing music and dancing in the kirk – the kinds of activities that were reminiscent of the witches’ sabbat as it was often represented in other parts of Europe, but that English witches did not usually engage in.<sup>58</sup> These accused witches were said to sing ‘all with one voice: Commer ye

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57 Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 207.

58 Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 199. James Sharpe, ‘In Search of the English Sabbat: Popular Conceptions of Witches’ Meetings in Early Modern England’, *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 2 (2013), 161–83, has recently suggested that the sabbat, while largely absent from demonological writings, legislation and trial pamphlets, may have existed in some form in the



go before, commer go ye / If ye will not go before, comer let me.<sup>59</sup> (It is tempting to detect a faint echo of this in the Folio's 'Come away, come away &c.') Purkiss also draws attention to James's demand, as reported by the pamphlet, that one of the accused witches, Gillis Duncan, dance for his entertainment. The witches' songs and dances in *Macbeth*, and the stage directions calling for 'Infernall Musique' in *Sophonisba*, would appear to be a case of art imitating life – or at least, life as it appears in a piece of Stuart propaganda.<sup>60</sup> The singing witches point to a new development in the representation of the stage witch. Apparently taking its cue from *Newes from Scotland*, *Macbeth* imports a literary view of witchcraft from Scotland into England.

*Macbeth* is unusual for a play featuring witches in that witchcraft itself is not subjected to an examination of any kind. No limits are explicitly set on the powers of witches; there is little in the way of discussion of what they can or cannot do. While *Macbeth*'s witches recite a list of magical ingredients, like many other stage witches before them, they do not reveal what these ingredients are actually for. *Macbeth* raises no questions about the nature and extent of witches' powers in the manner of, for example, *The Witch of Edmonton*, nor does it present a strong sceptical voice on the question within the play like *The Late Lancashire Witches* or *The Lancashire Witches*. Unlike these plays, *Macbeth* is not in any sense about witchcraft. The witches are real within the action of the play, but they are only important for the light they throw on Macbeth and his crime; the audience may be deceived by them along with the characters. In *Macbeth* as in 1 Samuel 15:23, rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and it is the rebel, not the witch, who is always in focus.

This is not to say, however, that rhetorical scepticism is irrelevant to *Macbeth*. In fact, *Macbeth* could be said to take its scepticism further than any other witchcraft play. The world of the play is one in which all knowledge is undermined – a world in which nothing is, but what is not. Within such a world, witches and witchcraft are hardly even surprising, let alone impossible; almost everything in *Macbeth* is shrouded in mystery in order to create a suitable backdrop for the supernatural. *Macbeth* avoids regurgitating

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popular imagination (pp. 164–66). It is striking that the earliest piece of evidence Sharpe presents for this view is *Macbeth*.

59 *Newes from Scotland*, reprinted in Normand and Roberts, p. 315.

60 Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 200.

demonological debates through the medium of characters' speeches, in favour of bringing to life the deceptive power of the devil. The sheer scale of the doubt raised by the play, in fact, comes dangerously close to overwhelming its apparent purpose of glorifying the king, whose divinely ordained power hardly seems adequate to take control of such an uncertain world.

### *The Masque of Queens*

Discussions of Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609) often touch on or even revolve around the question of whether the entertainment flatters the King at the expense of the Queen, flatters the Queen at the expense of the King, or attempts to achieve a balance between these two possibilities.<sup>61</sup> But regardless of how it was perceived by individual members of the royal family, there can be little doubt that flattery is the masque's primary function. The means by which this end is achieved is contrast: *The Masque of Queens* was the first masque to present a fully fledged anti-masque as part of the entertainment, with a group of witches (played by men) ultimately defeated by the eponymous queens, whose parts were performed by the Queen and various noblewomen. Once again, the contrast with royalty is provided by witches. If the formal innovation – the anti-masque – which *The Masque of Queens* introduced was indeed suggested by Anne, as Jonson's preface claims, this would hardly

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61 Stephen Orgel's 'Jonson and the Amazons', in *Soliciting Interpretation*, edited by Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 119–39, points out that the queens are ultimately subordinate to the male figure of Heroic Virtue and the King, while Barbara K. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), stresses Anne's personal involvement in and influence over the masque, which she regards as subtly subversive of James's patriarchal authority (pp. 24–38). Lawrence Normand, 'Witches, King James, and *The Masque of Queens*', in *Representing Women in Renaissance England*, edited by Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), offers a similar reading, while Peter Holbrook, 'Jacobean Masques and the Jacobean Peace', in *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, edited by David Bevington and Peter Holbrook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 67–87, claims that 'Jonson ... plainly found it necessary to bear in mind Anne's views about gender and politics while at the same time producing a public entertainment that would not openly offend the King' (p. 79).

be surprising.<sup>62</sup> Her husband had periodically used witches as the backdrop for his divinely ordained kingship since shortly after their marriage.

The focus of the masque, as its title suggests, is not on the King but on the feminine virtue of queens, a point of contrast with *Macbeth's* focus on masculinity. Consequently, there is no need to associate the witches with a male tyrant, as happens in *Sophonisba* and *Macbeth*: they are directly opposed to the queens. The witches, who appear on stage before the queens, are an odd mixture of stage witch and personified vice. The head witch is simply called the Dame, but her followers are, in order of appearance, Ignorance, Suspicion, Credulity, Falsehood, Murmur, Malice, Impudence, Slander, Execration, Bitterness, Rage, and Mischief. While the witches are said to be 'all differently attired' by the published text of the masque,<sup>63</sup> the description of the costumes does not individuate them, but emphasises their chaotic and disharmonious nature. The witches are not characters so much as a collective principle of chaos. Their names can readily be associated with stereotypes about witchcraft: they deceive (Falsehood, Slander, Mischief, Murmur), they are themselves deceived (Ignorance, Credulity, Suspicion), and they are motivated by an angry desire for revenge (Malice, Bitterness, Rage, Execration, Impudence). But the names can also be read as politically threatening, in that they suggest a potential for the creation of popular disorder.

Once again, witchcraft is not represented for its own sake, but as a symbol of something else. In the case of this entertainment, however, the witches do not represent tyranny so much as anarchy. The witches are 'differently attired', they make 'a confused noise' and 'strange gestures' (ll.27–30); they eventually perform a 'dance full of preposterous change and gesticulation' (328). Order is restored only by the appearance of Heroic Virtue and the queens, who at their first appearance are seen 'sitting upon a throne triumphal erected in the shape of a pyramid' (340). The throne – monarchical power – restores order and drives away an evil that has been portrayed in terms of an unnatural lack of control over vices – vices associated in elite circles both with the populace in general and with witches

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62 Anne's patronage of the theatre and her involvement in the masque are discussed by Lewalski, esp. pp. 24–28.

63 Line 27. References, given in parentheses hereafter, are to the text in *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*, edited by Stephen Orgel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

in particular (especially Ignorance and Credulity). The conquered vices are later shown bound to the chariots ridden by the queens. Royal power over the unruly populace is the happy resolution of the threat presented by the anti-masque. The key to this victory is reputation, and consequently power over information.

Heroic Virtue – the only male character – appears dressed as Perseus and describes himself as the father of Fame.<sup>64</sup> Monika Smialkowska shows that ‘Fame’, in an early modern context, is a highly equivocal term; by no means straightforwardly ‘good’, it is sometimes equated with the idea of rumour. As Smialkowska also notes, this important point is acknowledged, briefly but explicitly, in the masque.<sup>65</sup> Line 368 makes reference to ‘all rumours and reports, true or vain’ existing in the palace of Fame. Both ignorant and suspicious witches and virtuous queens give rise to fame, it is just that they create fame of different kinds. The good Fame created by Virtue is opposed to the kind of false fame that is motivated by Malice, Suspicion, and all the rest. It is difficult not to perceive a response to dissatisfaction with Stuart rule in the allegory of the masque.

Fame, for queens, is an unavoidable condition, one way or another. As the masque puts it, Fame ‘only hangs great actions on her file’ (370), and the actions of the great are always, by definition, great actions, whether they become famous or infamous. The ambiguity of fame need not be seen as implying criticism of the queens; it could simply derive from a recognition that Ignorance, Credulity and other vices, as well as the virtues of the heroic queens, can create reputations too – bad ones. It is often noted that Jonson points to the poet’s role in preventing this by creating and eternising good reputations for royal patrons; indeed, as Orgel points out, this function of poetry was communicated by the architecture of the set.<sup>66</sup> In a world where ‘all rumours and reports, true or vain’ abound, there is an obvious need for a strong voice to ensure that the ‘true’ reports – or the most convenient ones – are heard above

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64 Orgel, ‘Jonson and the Amazons’, discusses the significance of Perseus in detail, pp. 128–31.

65 Monika Smialkowska, “‘Out of the authority of ancient and late writers’”: Ben Jonson’s Use of Textual Sources in *The Masque of Queens*’, *English Literary Renaissance* 32:2 (2002), 268–86 (p. 276).

66 Orgel, ‘Jonson and the Amazons’, p. 131. The façade featured statues of great heroes, underneath which were statues of great poets. As Orgel points out, ‘the heroes’ fame is supported and preserved by the immortal poets’.

the clamour of witch-like Suspicion. Anything or anyone that seeks to cast aspersions on Queen Anne – unpopular in England as a result of her poorly concealed Catholicism – is not only deluded but demonic.

However, the glory of the queens is less clearly distinct from the evil of the witches than at first appears. The queens, supposedly historical characters, are in some cases associated with the use of magic; others were supposedly responsible for extreme acts of violence, all of which is made clear by Jonson's own notes. As Kathryn Schwarz puts it, 'the drama of masque and antimasque opposes two myths of female power, and the visible result ... is not difference but assimilation'.<sup>67</sup> This blurring of the apparently sharp distinction between good and evil power follows from the difficulty of distinguishing between witchcraft and kingcraft (or, in this case, queencraft).

A masque, by its nature, is a highly artificial form of entertainment, and the artificiality of Jonson's witches renders the question of scepticism and belief in witchcraft moot. An attitude from outside the dramatic fiction does, however, shine through in Jonson's extensive marginal notes. Jonson is clearly interested in displaying his own expertise, which he does by reference both to classical myth and to early modern demonology. He also adopts a demonologically orthodox attitude towards witchcraft. Throughout his notes, Jonson's statements about witches are worded as statements of fact. Jonson writes about what witches (really) do, and what they (really) believe. To take one brief example, he writes, in reference to actions related by the witches in the main text, that: 'This throwing vp of ashes, and sand, with the flint stone, crosse sticks, and burying of sage &c. are al vs'd (and beleev'd by them) to the raising of storme and tempest.'<sup>68</sup> While Jonson may be dubious about this specific power of witches, his doubt is compatible with more general witchcraft belief. Whatever the precise extent of their powers, Jonson never implies that witches do not, in fact, exist. He also attempts to identify ancient witches with modern witches,<sup>69</sup> an attitude which aligns him with those demonologists who wrote to encourage the persecution of witches, rather than with the sceptics. Given that masques are always allegorical, a witch in a masque is not really a

67 Kathryn Schwarz, 'Amazon Reflections in the Jacobean Queen's Masque', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 35:2 (1995), 293–319 (p. 308).

68 Jonson's note to line 249.

69 Smialkowska, 284.

witch at all (she is, instead, Ignorance or Credulity). But Jonson's notes allow the printed text to emphasise that the topic of witchcraft, though necessarily symbolic or allegorical in the masque itself, is not merely fictitious.

But as well as citing Ovid and Del Rio, Jonson makes use of less serious sources in explaining his witches' declarations: he would not have been aware, when writing the performance version of the masque, that his sources would later have to be revealed in the annotated holograph that Prince Henry requested of him.<sup>70</sup> As Smialkowska points out, Jonson

sometimes uses hearsay, popular stories, or even gossip alongside the more 'respectable' sources, yet he is slightly embarrassed by this: 'Of the green cock we have no other ground (to confess ingenuously) than a vulgar fable of a witch that with a cock of that color and a bottom of blue thread would transport herself through the air, and so escaped, at the time of her being brought to execution, from the hand of justice. It was a tale when I went to school' (annotation to l. 59).<sup>71</sup>

There is nothing unusual about Jonson's use of gossip and hearsay, given the precedent set by supposedly respectable demonological sources like the *Malleus Maleficarum*. But Jonson's admission that the green cock mentioned in the masque is taken from a story he heard as a schoolboy is made with a degree of sheepishness. Jonson's embarrassment might be heightened by the irony that a work which attacks rumour and slander, and associates it with witches, nevertheless uses similarly groundless gossip as if it were possessed of authority. Ignorance and Credulity might be the villains of the masque, but they also seem to have helped to write it. *The Masque of Queens* is left in the uncomfortable position of both relying on and rejecting popular rumour and 'credulity', suggesting a double-edged quality to the Jacobean theatre's rhetorical and propagandistic use of witchcraft.

As noted, the opposing forces of kingcraft and witchcraft have much in common. The opposition of witchcraft to the court which James had done so much to inspire carried risks. One such risk is evident in *The Masque of Queens*. The masque treats queenly virtue

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70 Lynn Sermin Meskill, 'Exorcising the Gorgon of Terror: Jonson's *Masque of Queens*', *ELH* 72:1 (2005), 181–207 (p. 181).

71 Smialkowska, 285.

as indissolubly linked to feminine reputation, or good fame, a connection made explicit in the following lines:

Sing then good Fame that's out of Virtue born,  
For who doth Fame neglect doth Virtue scorn.  
(487–88)

The appearance of virtue is so important that it can almost be equated with virtue itself. A bad reputation is in itself evidence of lack of virtue, since virtuous people – especially, perhaps, virtuous women – take care of their reputation. But as well as being a particular view of what feminine virtue consists of, the lines are a call to action. Fame, the words imply, must not be neglected, and this is the function of the poet. The Ignorance and Credulity of the people will listen to any Falsehood or Slander, and this threat must be countered. In the masque this is an easy matter, with the virtue of the queens banishing the witches as soon as they appear on stage. In reality, however, the witchcraft of Suspicion and Murmur were not so easily defeated, and Impudence, in the person of Thomas Middleton, was to take the dramatic representation of witchcraft in a new direction. In doing so, Middleton was inspired by the activities of one of the queens in the masque – not the pseudo-historical character, but the performer: Frances Howard, Countess of Essex, who appeared alongside Queen Anne on stage. The concluding lines of the masque are triumphant:

Force greatness all the glorious ways  
You can, it soon decays,  
But so good Fame shall never:  
Her triumphs, as their causes, are forever.  
(523–26)

Frances Howard, however, was soon to demonstrate that ‘good Fame’ could decay quite rapidly, and that a ‘queen’ could easily turn into a witch. The connections between witchcraft, reputation, and rumour remain important in the next major Jacobean work of witchcraft drama, Middleton’s *The Witch*.

### Frances Howard, court scandal, and *The Witch*

Frances Howard, daughter of the Earl of Suffolk, had married the Earl of Essex when both were in their early teens, but they did not live together as a couple until several years later. When the time came for this to happen, at around the same time as Frances danced

in Jonson's masque at court, the marriage proved not to be a success. Eventually Frances, having become romantically and politically linked to the King's favourite Robert Carr, sought an annulment of the marriage, with Essex's acquiescence. The couple claimed that the marriage should be annulled on grounds of non-consummation, and that, despite their best efforts, the marriage not only had not been but could never be consummated, because Essex suffered from selective impotence. He was unable to have sexual intercourse with his wife, although he suffered no such impediment with other women. It was claimed, although not very confidently or consistently, that this infirmity was the result of witchcraft.

Despite considerable opposition, the annulment had James's personal support and was eventually granted. Soon afterwards, Frances Howard and Robert Carr were married, amid lavish celebrations, including a performance of the *Masque of Cupids* (1613), written especially for the occasion by – ironically, in view of what was to come – Thomas Middleton. The text of the masque is unfortunately lost.<sup>72</sup> Another masque written in celebration of the wedding is Thomas Campion's *Masque of Squires* (1613), which features 'curst Enchanters' and enchantresses named Error, Rumor, Curiosity, and Credulity, presumably in reference to the scandal that had preceded the marriage.<sup>73</sup> Campion's use of these characters would seem to owe something to *The Masque of Queens*, and the continuing concern of this elite genre with public discontent, reflected in the depiction of such discontent as a form of evil magic, is evident.

While popular unrest could figure as witchcraft in elite drama, actual cases of witchcraft among the populace were the subject of more frequent, and sceptical, intervention in James's reign. James's relish for unmasking fraudulent cases of demonic possession has already been referred to, and state papers reveal a number of pardons given for witchcraft, as well as a warrant 'to pay ... such sums as the Earl of Salisbury shall require, for the charges of two maids suspected to be bewitched, and kept at Cambridge for trial'.<sup>74</sup> But

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72 A thorough discussion of the masque is provided by M. T. Jones-Davies and Ton Hoenselaars, 'Masque of Cupids', in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, edited by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1027–33.

73 Thomas Campion, *The Description of a Maske: Presented in the Banqueting Roome at Whitehall, on Saint Stephens Night Last at the Mariage of the Right Honourable the Earle of Somerset: And the Right Noble the Lady Frances Howard* (London, 1614).

74 CSPD, xiv, 21 May 1605.



what appears to have been a generally sceptical attitude on the part of James and his councillors towards cases of witchcraft in the populace at large was not displayed towards the claim that Essex had been bewitched. In the case of this claim, it was the populace that seems to have been sceptical, while James personally wrote to the most outspoken critic of the nullity, George Abbot, Archbishop of Canterbury, in order to argue that this particular type of maleficent magic was possible, pointing out that ‘if the Devil hath any power, it is over the flesh, rather over the filthiest and most sinful part thereof, whereunto original sin is soldered’.<sup>75</sup> Elite scepticism about popular witchcraft was replaced by belief – sincere or otherwise – when it was the elite themselves who were threatened by it. A dramatic analogy can be seen in the treatment of witchcraft in most of the plays discussed so far. Where witchcraft is taken seriously, it is only because it is dignified by the involvement of royal or aristocratic characters.

A large proportion of the general public, frequently depicted (and not only in *The Masque of Queens*) as credulous and ignorant, seem to have been outraged by the Essex divorce, and their views were represented by Abbot who, in his objections to the nullity, took aim at what he seems to have regarded as the weakest part of the case – the claim that Essex’s impotence was caused by maleficent witchcraft:

[A]mongst a million of men in our age, there is but one found in all our country, who is clearly and evidently known to be troubled with the same. And if there should be any which should seem to be molested, we are taught to use two remedies, the one temporal physic, the other eternal ... Now admit the earl might be imagined to be troubled with *maleficium versus banc*; I demand what alms hath been given, what fasting hath been used, and what prayers have been poured forth to appease the wrath of God towards him or his wife; or what physic hath been taken, or medicine hath been applied for three years together? Not one of these things: but the first hearing must be to pronounce a nullity in the marriage.<sup>76</sup>

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75 T. B. Howell (ed.), *A Complete Collection of State Trials* (London, 1816), vol. 2, p. 801. James’s argument finds support in the most famous of witch-hunters’ manuals, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which claims that God gives permission to the devil to hinder ‘the sexual act, through which the first sin is spread’. The *Malleus* also allows for the dissolution of a marriage in cases of selective impotence in an unconsummated marriage: see II.2.161D–163B (pp. 421–24). If James did base his argument on this (Catholic) authority, he does not mention it to Abbot.

76 *State Trials*, p. 795.

Considering that Abbot is addressing himself to the King, his tone is surprisingly blunt. His scepticism about the witchcraft claim is close to the surface; he is barely willing to concede that the Earl of Essex can even be ‘imagined’ to be bewitched. The failure to try to find any kind of remedy, Abbot feels, makes a mockery of the institution of marriage, and in other sections of his written opinion he worries about the precedent that will be set.

The annulment of the Essex-Howard marriage was eventually granted without explicit reference to *maleficium versus hanc* in the text of the decision, which referred instead to ‘some secret, incurable, binding impediment’.<sup>77</sup> *Maleficium* seems to have been abandoned as a convincing rationale for the nullity, probably because of the widespread scepticism with which the claim seems to have been greeted by the public. The topic seems to have induced considerable mirth, as well as anger, and people associated with the nullity proceedings were reportedly held in ‘perpetual scorn’ afterwards.<sup>78</sup> Abbot’s written thoughts on the decision, which in the end were not read out in public, show him to have been aware of the embarrassment caused by the witchcraft claim, but unaware that it had been quietly dropped:

[I]n the very sentence which is this day to be given, it falleth directly upon the description of ‘maleficium versus hanc.’ So that what should I think of this case of my lord’s, which is built on such a foundation as no man will stand to? We are on it, and off it, and avow it we dare not, yet fly from it we will not.<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this undelivered speech is that the Archbishop of Canterbury – the highest clergyman in England, writing on a matter of national importance for an audience including the monarch and the assembled nobility – felt it appropriate to include a crude joke about erectile dysfunction, describing *maleficium versus hanc* as something that ‘no man will stand to’. As is so often the case, scepticism about witchcraft is accompanied by ridicule and laughter. The scepticism towards this particular alleged instance of witchcraft may have been exacerbated by the dithering of those who sought the nullity, which Abbot mocks with gusto.

But the public response to the Essex nullity was not straightforwardly sceptical; it also included a great deal of credulity. Many people, judging by the rumours that circulated, were sceptical about

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77 *State Trials*, p. 804.

78 *State Trials*, p. 833.

79 *State Trials*, p. 848.

the claims made by the elite in support of the nullity, but highly credulous in their attitudes to alternative explanations. To take one example, the grounds for the divorce were supported by the testimony of a panel of midwives and noblewomen, who were said to have conducted a physical examination of Frances Howard and declared her to be a virgin. Rumours suggested that the panel had been tricked, and that the person examined was not, in fact, Frances Howard. Doubting whether the examination had taken place at all would be a purely sceptical response to this news. Claiming that the examination had indeed taken place, but that the panel had been subjected to an elaborate deception is not (or not only) scepticism but (also) a form of credulity – the kind that would now be called a conspiracy theory.

Furthermore, not everybody doubted the involvement of witchcraft. One manuscript verse libel on the subject claimed that:

Letchery did consult with witcherye  
 how to procure frygiditye  
 upon this ground a course was found  
 to frame unto a nullaty.<sup>80</sup>

In this poem, the claims of *maleficium versus hanc* are taken seriously; but rather than supporting James's desire to grant the nullity, Frances is accused of having procured her own husband's impotence by magical means. One major weakness of the claim made in support of the Essex nullity was that it diagnosed witchcraft without identifying the witch; as far as I am aware, this is a unique circumstance in the history of English witchcraft cases. In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that Frances herself was identified as, if not the witch, then the witch's client – particularly in view of rumours about her marital infidelity and her alleged involvement with a cunning woman from Norwich.<sup>81</sup>

The public credulity demonised by the masques of Jonson and Campion reached new heights after further developments in the growing scandal around Frances Howard. Soon after her marriage to Robert Carr, her new husband's fortunes changed. A new favourite – George Villiers, later to become Duke of Buckingham – rose to prominence, threatening his position at court, and Carr and his

80 Anon., 'Letchery did consult with witcherye', *Early Stuart Libels*, [www.earlystuartlibels.net/htdocs/essex\\_nullity\\_section/F2.html](http://www.earlystuartlibels.net/htdocs/essex_nullity_section/F2.html) (accessed 16 August 2016).

81 Anne Somerset, *Unnatural Murder: Poison at the Court of James I* (London: Orion, 1998), pp. 119–21.

wife became entangled in accusations of murder. Carr's associate Sir Thomas Overbury, who had been imprisoned by James after refusing a diplomatic post, had died in the Tower before the marriage of Carr and Howard, and in 1615 rumours that he had been poisoned began to be investigated. A number of people were convicted of, and executed for, involvement in Overbury's murder. The final trials were of Frances and Robert Carr. Frances pleaded guilty, while her husband maintained his innocence, but both were convicted. Unlike their accomplices, neither Frances nor Robert Carr was executed, however, as James pardoned them both. As Alastair Bellany has shown, the evidence suggests that James's pardon of the murderers was both unexpected and shocking to many people.<sup>82</sup>

Following the revelation of Overbury's murder, the rumours circulating about Frances and Carr increased in both variety and implausibility. This was partly the result of the investigation into the murder, which was led by the Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, Sir Edward Coke. According to the Spanish ambassador, Coke had been chosen with Carr's blessing as his 'creature and intimate friend', but quickly became associated with Carr's enemies.<sup>83</sup> In fact, Coke's zeal in investigating, prosecuting, and executing those involved in the Overbury murder may have been the reason for his eventual replacement by Francis Bacon; a later manuscript account of Coke's role in the prosecutions claims that he angered James by 'peeping in to the secrets of his Prince, & making publick diuers contents pickt out of such letters as Somerset not only minion but principall Secretary of State had in his custody at the time of his apprehension'.<sup>84</sup> The same source says of Carr that 'if posterity mesur his fallt by the gretnes of the Judge Cocks hiperbolicall & reduckulus Crimenations thay say more to his charge then possibly he desarved'.<sup>85</sup> Certainly, Coke did little to play down some of the wilder rumours that circulated concerning Overbury's murder. In open court, he declared:

The eye of England never saw, nor the ear of Christendom never heard of such poisoning so heinous, so horrible ... You my masters,

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82 Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 244–45.

83 S. R. Gardiner, 'On Certain Letters of Diego Sarmiento de Acuna, Count of Gondomar', *Archaeologia* 41 (1867), 151–86 (pp. 169–70).

84 BL Add MS 25348, fol. 17<sup>v</sup>. See also Somerset, pp. 427–28.

85 BL Add MS 25348, fol. 4<sup>r</sup>.

shall hear strange, and stupendous things, such as the ears of men never heard of ... God is my witness, and whether it hath brim or bottom I yet know not, I yet cannot find it.<sup>86</sup>

Coke whipped up public concern by linking the Overbury murder to widespread fears of Catholic Spain, a strategy which exploited Carr's recent political manoeuvres. Carr undoubtedly became a part of the pro-Spanish grouping in court by November 1613 – against the wishes of his friend Overbury – and had been the leading voice in attempts to arrange a marriage between Prince Charles and the Spanish infanta.<sup>87</sup> His marriage to a member of the notoriously Catholic and pro-Spanish Howard family cemented these allegiances, and after the murder of Overbury was revealed, it was rumoured that he would be charged with treason as a Spanish spy.<sup>88</sup> Coke fuelled such rumours by referring in court to the attempted Spanish invasion of 1588 and the gunpowder plot, and one of the accused, James Franklin, added to the intrigue by hinting at a larger conspiracy, probably in an attempt to delay his execution. The implausibility of the rumours peaked with stories of a Catholic plot to poison the entire royal family. To this end, it was said that Frances had faked her pregnancy so that the poisoning could be carried out at a banquet celebrating the birth of the baby (which would be borrowed). After the murder of the royal family, English Catholics would have risen up in support of 'King Carr', and the Tower of London was to be taken over by 500 Spaniards who would set London on fire. Mass would then be said, following which Protestants throughout the country would have been massacred. The ultimate goal of this supposed Popish plot was the total destruction of the Protestant religion throughout Europe.<sup>89</sup>

Frances Howard's association with witchcraft was strengthened by such tales. The involvement of poison was significant. Poison was frequently associated with witchcraft in early modern England; and like witches, poisoners were said to have been taught 'cunning' by the devil during the Overbury trials.<sup>90</sup> In the trial of Frances

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86 Quoted in Bellany, p. 181.

87 Bellany, p. 63.

88 Bellany, p. 192.

89 Bellany, pp. 185–91. The real and perceived threat of various 'Popish plots' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries connects with the history of witchcraft drama both at this time and in the case of Thomas Shadwell's *The Lancashire Witches* (1681) – see Chapter 7.

90 *State Trials*, p. 912.

Howard's accomplice Anne Turner, magical paraphernalia such as 'pictures of a man and woman in copulation' and a black scarf 'full of white crosses' were displayed in court – with unfortunate results:

At the shewing of these, and enchanted papers and other pictures in court, there was heard a crack from the scaffolds, which caused great fear, tumult and confusion among the spectators, and throughout the hall, every one fearing hurt, as if the devil had been present, and grown angry to have his workmanship shewed, by such as were not his scholars; and this terror continuing about a quarter of an hour, after silence [was] proclaimed.<sup>91</sup>

This incident, trivial though it may have been, reveals the genuine fear that witchcraft was capable of generating. During the same trial, Coke ordered that the defendant's conjurations were not to be read out, apparently for fear that the devil might appear.<sup>92</sup>

Following all this excitement, the eventual result of the investigation and trials must have been an anti-climax. While their low-born accomplices were executed, Carr and his wife were found guilty but pardoned, and spent the rest of their lives in relatively comfortable disgrace. Coke, and to a lesser extent Bacon after him, had sought to portray the activities of the poisoners as witch-like, in opposition to the divinely ordained kingship of James. In doing so, they not only followed a narrative of providential deliverance, as Bellany points out,<sup>93</sup> but also an opposition between monarch and witchcraft that had been established in James's own association of his enemy Bothwell with witches – an association which had by this time been reinforced by the theatre. Ultimately, however, such an opposition could not be maintained in the face of the royal pardon and the closeness of the Carrs to the King himself.

The Overbury affair coincided with, and probably caused, a spike in public interest in witchcraft, and three significant English works on the subject were published very soon after the trials: Alexander Roberts's *Treatise of Witchcraft* (1616), John Cotta's *The Triall of Witch-craft* (1616), and Thomas Cooper's *The Mystery of Witchcraft* (1617). Roberts's book was inspired by the trial of Mary Smith in King's Lynn in Norfolk, and would seem to have no connection with the Essex or Overbury scandals (although it

91 *State Trials*, p. 932.

92 David Chan Smith, *Sir Edward Coke and the Reformation of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 132.

93 Bellany, p. 206.

does contain an intriguing metaphorical use of the word ‘nullity’).<sup>94</sup> Cotta’s book, however, is dedicated to Sir Edward Coke, suggesting that the impetus for its publication may have been the Overbury trials. The dedication could have been a miscalculation on Cotta’s part. By June 1616 at the latest, Coke had fallen from favour,<sup>95</sup> and it may be that, by the time the book was actually completed, Cotta had become aware of this. He appears at times to strike a balance between flattering Coke – as he does in his reference to the importance of ‘the learned, prudent, and discerning Iudge’ in protecting the nation from the threat of witchcraft – and acknowledging that some cases will never be solved, and that this has to be accepted with ‘patience and sobriety’.<sup>96</sup> Coke had not displayed these qualities in seeking to portray the Overbury affair as a vast and sinister conspiracy. Cotta’s book avoids any direct reference to the Overbury affair, but there is at least one passage towards the end of the book which might have seemed rather pointed to its original readers:

[I]t is not onely the sauing duety of all priuate men to take more diligent and warie notice thereof, thereby to eschew and flye from it, according vnto Gods expresse charge and command; but it is the charge of Princes & Magistrates also, to fulfill therby the commanded execution of Gods holy wrath and vengeance vpon it.<sup>97</sup>

King James had disappointed public opinion by *not* executing vengeance on the two main culprits in the Overbury case. Cotta says nothing in the passage above that the King could have disagreed with, since James had made similar points himself in *Daemonologie*, but for readers in 1616 the sentiment might have taken on a new layer of meaning.

Thomas Cooper’s *The Mystery of Witchcraft* makes no claim to originality. Cooper states that ‘I am not ashamed to acknowledge, that which thou canst not but discern; That *I have borrowed most*

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94 Roberts, p. 4.

95 Somerset, p. 427. Cotta’s book was entered into the Stationer’s Register on 26 November 1615, a month which saw four other titles directly related to the Overbury scandal entered into the register, as well as a copy entitled *The reward of the adulterer and adulteresse paid by GODs owne hand* – another topic with obvious potential for application to the Carrs. See Edward Arber (ed.), *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London* (London, 1875), vol. 3, pp. 266–67.

96 Cotta, p. 18.

97 Cotta, p. 127.

of my Grounds'.<sup>98</sup> Cooper credits a number of previous writers on witchcraft, including James, but despite his apparent humility there are a number of unusual features of his work – many of which seem much less flattering to the King than Cooper's explicit mention of him would suggest. On one point, Cooper follows James's lead, as he argues for the possibility of witchcraft causing selective impotence.<sup>99</sup> But Cooper also peppers his work with critical references to the court and to the powerful and wealthy. These references are never to specific people from Cooper's England; but read in the light of the Overbury scandal – probably the most sensational event to take place in England since the gunpowder plot – his attitude towards the social and political elite is revealing.

One of Cooper's more surprising positions on witchcraft is his claim that witches are more devout in their loyalty to the devil than some Christians are to God.<sup>100</sup> Comparing Christians, unfavourably, with witches is an unusual rhetorical strategy for a writer on witchcraft, and Cooper goes on to attack those clergymen who 'leauē the Flocke, and attend the Courts of Princes, or their Hounds and Hawlkes, or worse'.<sup>101</sup> Cooper's dissatisfaction with insufficiently zealous clergymen is maintained throughout his text, and it is significant that he chooses to link them to 'the Courts of Princes'. Cooper's frequent attacks on court corruption and worldly power

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98 Cooper, p. 363.

99 Cooper, pp. 260–61: 'though the party may haue ability to others, yet to serue one, for the like reasons, he may be impotent, not able to performe the worke of Generation, and so deny that duety of marriage, and so happily [i.e. haply] produce a nullity thereof; vnlesse by *Phisicke*, or some spirituall means his power [i.e. the devil's] may be ouerruled, for which some time is to be graunted, and meanes vsed'. Cooper thus attaches important qualifications to his support for James's position on the nullity, similar to those put forward by Abbot.

100 Cooper asks rhetorically: 'Is *there not more hope of the saluation euen of these Witches* ... then of many thousands in the world, who are *lulled asleepe in securitie*, and fatted vp. without all sense of danger, euen to vtter destruction?' (pp. 100–1).

101 Cooper, p. 113. The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, later become notorious for accidentally killing a man while out hunting with his friend Lord Zouche, an incident which raised questions about whether it was lawful for bishops to hunt. Cooper's reference to hunting suggests that, despite his solid Calvinism and his opposition to the nullity, Abbot's close association with the court might have exposed him to criticism from some quarters ('George Abbot', *ODNB*).



might well have raised very specific associations in the minds of Cooper's readers, as might his insistence that justice ought to be carried out 'without respect of persons'.<sup>102</sup> This point, in this context, is unusual, since witches were normally described as dwelling at the bottom of the social scale.<sup>103</sup>

Another unusual claim of Cooper's is that witches may receive real help from the devil – not just in hurting others, but in achieving their own aims and desires. Cooper writes that the devil binds his servants to him 'by his *familiar & carefull dealing* with them, in furnishing them with all meanes, to become maisters of their desires'.<sup>104</sup> Again, this is unusual because most writers on witchcraft stress that witches are, almost without exception, extremely poor and wretched. The devil's bargain, typically, is a trick: he will promise pleasure, wealth, and plenty, but he never delivers it.<sup>105</sup> All the devil is really able to provide is the pleasure of revenge, by harming, or appearing to harm, one's enemies. But if a person like Frances Carr, who had very publicly become mistress of her desires, was to be regarded as a witch, this standard demonological position needed to be modified.

Cooper's attitude to the wealthy and the powerful is hostile throughout his text. In describing the eventual corruption of the early Church, Cooper puts the blame firmly on the influence of secular power:

[E]uen thus it befell with the deare *Spouse of CHRIST* [i.e. the Church], that as her former afflictions, had now fitted her to some rest, which shee attayned by the meanes of *Constantine*: so this rest and ease, accompanied with *outward honour* and *acceptance* with the greatest: instead of *Godlie simplicitie brought in carnall pompe and wisdom of the flesh*.<sup>106</sup>

102 Cooper, p. 314. The point is a conventional one in itself, as God is 'no respecter of persons' according to Peter in Acts 10:34 and many other passages in both the Old and New Testaments. Roberts also stresses that all offenders must be punished, regardless of their social position (p. 75).

103 The exceptions to this rule, according to many English authors, are usually found in the papacy: William Perkins, for example, mentions a number of witches who rose to the position of pope (p. 10).

104 Cooper, p. 112.

105 Cooper is not consistent in his unusual position, elsewhere making the more conventional claim that witches are 'fed with shadowes in steed of substance, with cold and dead delights, in steed of reall contentment of the flesh' (p. 122).

106 Cooper, p. 190.

Corruption is associated with the powerful, and the emperor who brings rest and ease is blamed for the eventual transformation of the virtuous early Church into the Roman Catholic Church, which Cooper, like many Protestants at the time, regards as the Antichrist. The warnings not to seek ‘the fauour of earthly Princes’, and to avoid ‘*looseness and profaneness*’ and ‘*worldly pompe and glorie*’,<sup>107</sup> are frequently repeated; and while James is never named, he also prided himself on having brought ‘rest and ease’ by ending what had seemed to be an interminable war with Spain in 1604. The ‘looseness and profaneness’ of his court, as well as its ‘pompe and glorie’, were well known by 1617.

Some of Cooper’s claims about the devil’s trickery in dealing with witches also seem to be more widely applicable:

[H]e thereby *Puffs them up with a conceit of some extraordinarie fauour with God* that gives them such power ouer Satan ... And so *prouoketh to horrible blasphemie, and Idolatrie*, to aduance themselues in Gods steed; to saue life and to destroy it at pleasure: And therevpon infers a further securitie of their estates; That they which can thus dispose of others estates, they are wise enough to secure their owne.<sup>108</sup>

Again, this is unusual language with which to describe witches, who were not typically regarded as believing themselves to be in favour with God (or with anyone else). The Carrs, however, would certainly have regarded themselves as blessed by ‘*extraordinarie fauour*’, which was derived mainly from God’s representative on earth, King James. Their exalted position enabled them to commit many of the crimes Cooper ostensibly ascribes to witches, in particular that of destroying life ‘at pleasure’, and their downfall represented a clear case of a misplaced sense of security in their estates.

While Cooper does write about witchcraft in a more conventional way for much of the treatise, his attention frequently wanders on to other topics. Recurring themes include Catholicism, the sinfulness of Christians who merely pay lip service to religion, and the importance of serving God rather than earthly power. Witchcraft is not Cooper’s only, nor perhaps even his primary, concern in this text, despite the fact that it is its ostensible subject. It is often treated as a kind of moral yardstick with which to compare a range of other sins – some of which, like the complacency of the ‘politike’ Christians for whom Cooper reserves particular ire, are far more heinous.

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107 Cooper, pp. 192–93.

108 Cooper, p. 83.

Cooper's rhetorical use of witchcraft is both similar to and sharply distinct from the way witchcraft is used in *Macbeth* and other early Jacobean witchcraft plays. In these plays, witchcraft is not essential; it is a largely peripheral element presented in order to sharpen the contrast between good and evil. Cooper's text also locates witchcraft within a wider discussion of good and evil; but he does not depict witchcraft as occupying the extreme end of the scale. There are worse sins than witchcraft for Cooper, who even argues (following William Perkins) that some witches may belong to the ranks of God's elect, and so may eventually repent.<sup>109</sup> Witchcraft, for Cooper, is not the epitome of evil: the Catholic Church fills that role. Nor is it clear that witchcraft is necessarily opposed to secular (or church) authority. In fact, the authorities seem more likely to be on the devil's side than God's.

The attitudes present in Cooper's text make it a valuable point of comparison with Middleton's play *The Witch*, a text which has its own place in the tangle of legal, religious, and literary discourse about the scandals surrounding the Carrs, as Anne Lancashire showed in an important article on the play.<sup>110</sup> It cannot seriously be doubted that the play makes reference to the scandals, as even a cursory glance at the events of the drama shows. A wife – Isabella – remains a virgin, despite having two husbands. The second of these husbands, Antonio, is rendered impotent by a witch's spell, but only in relation to Isabella; he is still able to have sex with the courtesan Florida. Another courtier, the relatively low-born Almachildes, buys a love charm from the witch, and seems set to become the second husband of an aristocratic lady. The same aristocratic lady, having committed outrageous crimes, is magnanimously (or preposterously) forgiven by the ruler on the grounds of her supposed repentance – of which the audience sees no evidence until after she is caught. Some of these features, particularly the jarring final scene of reconciliation, struck earlier critics of the play as crippling flaws, which explained its supposed fate as a stage flop. But the ending of *The Witch* can more convincingly be read as satirical, rather than as incompetent.

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109 Cooper, p. 279; cf. Perkins, who states that 'some one or more of them [i.e. witches] may belong to Gods election and therefore albeit for causes best knowne to himselfe, he may suffer them for a time to be holden in the snares of Satan, yet at length in mercie he reclaimes them' (pp. 216–17).

110 Anne Lancashire, 'The Witch: Stage Flop or Political Mistake?', in *Accompanying the Players: Essays Celebrating Thomas Middleton, 1580–1980*, edited by Kenneth Friedenreich (New York: AMS Press, 1983).

At the same time, it is also clear that *The Witch* is not just a straightforward dramatisation of the Essex and Overbury scandals. No single character in the play is identifiable as a dramatic representation of a historical person. Lancashire describes Sebastian as ‘partially’ Carr, since he wins his wife, Isabella, back from her second husband (Antonio) whose magically induced impotence has prevented him from consummating the marriage. But Sebastian could also be understood to represent Essex; after all, he married Isabella first, stating at the very start of the play that ‘[s]he is my wife by contract before heaven’, despite the fact, pointed out by Fernando, that ‘[a]nother has possession’.<sup>111</sup> This is not to say that Sebastian ‘is’ Essex any more than he ‘is’ Carr. The play develops its satire carefully, by incorporating into its plot a series of vignettes which evoke but do not replicate the events of the scandal. Despite the somewhat coded nature of the play’s references to the Overbury scandal, it seems very likely, as Lancashire has shown, that performances of the play were put to an end by official interference.<sup>112</sup> Middleton hints at this himself, writing that ‘Witches are, *ipso-facto*, by the law condemned and that only, I think, hath made her lie so long in an imprisoned obscurity’ in the dedicatory epistle to the play.

Margot Heinemann’s depiction of Middleton as a playwright propagandising on behalf of a purported ‘Puritan faction’ at court, once very influential, is now regarded with greater caution.<sup>113</sup> But while Heinemann may have overstated her case, it is clear that, as a dramatist, Middleton exploited widespread discontent with what were regarded as pro-Spanish policies and a pro-Spanish faction at

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111 Thomas Middleton, *The Witch*, edited by Elizabeth Schafer (London: A. & C. Black, 1994), i.1.3–6. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically. The marriage is valid and legally binding, and even has Fernando as a witness (iv.2.4–5), although this was not necessary for the creation of a valid marriage – all that was necessary for a so-called spousal was the consent of both parties: see B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, *Shakespeare, Law and Marriage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 13–14. Schafer claims that the marriage was ‘not legally recognised’ because it was not consummated, but as the case of Frances Howard demonstrates this is inaccurate. Non-consummation could provide grounds for the annulment of a marriage, although even this was controversial, but did not automatically invalidate it.

112 Lancashire, p. 161.

113 Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre*. For a detailed critique of Heinemann’s position see N. W. Bawcutt, ‘Was Thomas Middleton a Puritan Dramatist?’, *Modern Language Review* 94:4 (1999), 925–40.

court. Middleton's credentials as a Calvinist – established by his religious work *The Two Gates of Salvation* (1609)<sup>114</sup> – as well as his employment with the consistently Protestant city authorities make it unsurprising that he chose to align his work for the theatre with anti-Spanish sentiment: Spain was frequently regarded as the secular wing of the Catholic Church by early modern English Protestants. Middleton's positioning of himself as a populist, Protestant, and anti-Spanish playwright culminated in a warrant being issued for his arrest after performances of *A Game at Chess* (1624) provoked complaints from the Spanish ambassador for its portrayal of his predecessor in the post, Count Gondomar.

*The Witch* was written a little earlier than the works recognised as Middleton's 'Spanish' plays.<sup>115</sup> But while *The Witch* is nominally set in Ravenna, it could be said that it is much more convincingly 'set' in both Spain and England. Most of the characters' names are either Spanish or more evocative of Spain than Italy: Florida, Francisca<sup>116</sup> (rather than the Italian Francesca), Sebastian and Fernando, for example. Meanwhile, the references to contemporary English politics, the jokes aimed at London audiences, and especially the incongruous Scottish messenger sent by Antonio's 'bonny lady mother' (II.1.171) locate the play in contemporary England. The messenger's Scottishness suggests that Antonio might originally have come from over the border himself – which would naturally have brought Robert Carr's situation to the minds of a contemporary audience. The combination of Spanish and Anglo-Scottish elements in the setting of the play might have added to its politically dangerous nature, implying that Spain was achieving an unhealthy degree of influence in the English court – just as *A Game at Chess* was to do later, even more bluntly.

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114 See Lori Anne Ferrell's introduction to the text in the *Collected Works* of Middleton.

115 Trudi L. Darby, 'The Obsession with Spain', in *Thomas Middleton in Context*, edited by Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 144–50.

116 The name Francisca is also notable for its audible similarity to Frances Carr, as Elizabeth Schafer and others have pointed out (Introduction to *The Witch*, p. xvi). Another parallel between Francisca and Frances is that Francisca is pregnant and gives birth in secret during the play; Frances Carr was thought to be pregnant during 1616 (Somerset, p. 429). When she actually had been pregnant, in 1615, the pregnancy was rumoured to be faked.

Middleton's play does not merely make use of the actual events of the Overbury scandal. *The Witch* also uses rumour, hinting even at some of the wildest stories that circulated at the time of the Carrs' trial. The Carrs were said to be at the head of a poisoning plot, aimed at the King himself, and in the play the Duke of Ravenna is supposedly poisoned – although it eventually transpires, in the implausibly happy ending, that the poison was merely a sleeping potion. As with the rest of the play, events in the drama and the events predicted by rumour do not match precisely, but the assassination of the monarch is a shared theme. *The Witch* is both sceptical and credulous: utterly sceptical of the court and the moral authority of the ruler, it is at the same time wilfully credulous in its acceptance and recapitulation of rumour – any rumour scandalous enough to fill a theatre. In this respect the play is aligned with the kind of rumour and suspicion castigated in *The Masque of Queens* as the forces of disorder.

*The Witch* also features rumour and popular discontent in its plot, just as *The Masque of Queens* did, although in a concrete rather than an allegorical fashion. The Duchess, who is the closest thing to a queen in Middleton's play, so provokes the people of Ravenna that they become restive and unwilling to accept her as their ruler. Concerned for her safety, the duchess decides to murder Almachildes and find a new protector:

My great aim's  
At the lord governor's love; he is a spirit  
Can sway and countenance; these obey and crouch.  
My guiltiness had need of such a master,  
That with a beck can suppress multitudes,  
And dim misdeeds with radiance of his glory,  
Not to be seen with dazzled, popular eyes.  
(iv.1.47–53)

The duchess has dark secrets which she is anxious to hide from 'popular eyes' – the eyes of the people. Jonson's masque had suggested that queenly virtue might banish the Ignorance and Credulity of the populace, but Middleton's duchess wishes instead to dazzle and deceive. The anger of the multitude seems justified, despite Almachildes' claim to the contrary (iv.1.18), and the Lord Governor even explains the 'people's tumult' as the result of the 'rankness of long peace' (iv.1.64–65) in what might be a dig at King James's foreign policy. The populace is not exactly celebrated in *The Witch*, but neither is it characterised as witch-like. It is the

duchess who wishes to deceive the people, not their own credulity and ignorance.

The play and Cooper's demonological work both treat witchcraft as one sin among many, and describe a world in which witches are neither the only nor the worst of the devil's servants. Both texts are hostile to the rich and powerful; Cooper unfavourably compares privileged and hypocritical Christians to witches, and Middleton also uses a witch to comment on wealthy people with ugly secrets to hide. Referring to the witch Stadlin's ability to raise storms, Hecate boasts that she

[f]lies over houses and takes *Anno Domini*  
 Out of a rich man's chimney – a sweet place for't!  
 He would be hanged ere he would set his own years there;  
 They must be chambered in a five-pound picture,  
 A green silk curtain drawn before the eyes on't,  
 His rotten diseased years.  
 (1.2.135–40)

In a sudden digression from the powers of witches, Hecate describes the rich man as someone with secrets to hide, events that, represented metonymically by the years of his life, are said to be 'rotten' and 'diseased'. The dark truth is revealed by an expensive portrait 'chambered' behind closed doors and concealed by silk curtains, like a seventeenth-century Dorian Gray. The obvious, rather comical evil represented by Hecate is considerably less sinister than the concealed evil of the rich man she describes.

Hecate, despite her occasionally gruesome language, is not a particularly frightening witch, and this has prompted some critics of the play to look elsewhere for the 'real' witch referred to in the play's title. As mentioned, representing Frances Howard as a witch became a fairly common satirical practice at this time. She might also be understood to be the witch lurking behind the scenes of Middleton's play. Margot Heinemann argues along these lines in suggesting that Francisca is the 'real' witch, describing her as a dramatic representation of Frances Carr.<sup>117</sup> This view has the similarity of names in its favour, but Marion O'Connor's excellent introduction to the play in the recent *Collected Works* of Middleton argues persuasively for a more sophisticated interpretation. The Hecate of Greek myth, as opposed to the Hecate of the play, is a 'triple goddess', with different aspects representing virginity, maternity,

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117 Heinemann, p. 111.

and sterility.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, Isabella, Francisca, and the duchess can be understood to represent three different aspects of Frances Howard's fractured public persona. More broadly, the three characters can be seen to represent what might be called the three ages of woman, of which Isabella sings to Antonio and Francisca:

In a maiden-time professed,  
Then we say that life is best.  
Tasting once the married life,  
Then we only praise the wife.  
There's but one more state to try,  
Which makes women laugh or cry –  
Widow, widow.  
(II.1.127–33)

These three stages of a woman's life are presented on stage by the three major female characters: Francisca is the maid (except that she is not, because of her affair with Aberzanes), Isabella is the wife (except that she is not, because neither of her two marriages is consummated), and the duchess is the widow (except that she is not, because her husband is still alive). As O'Connor points out, the only women who are what they seem to be are Florida and Hecate – the whore and the witch.<sup>119</sup> Witches are conventionally supposed to be deceivers, but in Middleton's play it is the courtly characters who are not what they seem. Middleton suggests that there are always dark secrets to be found behind the outward finery of the powerful, about whom the play encourages its audience to believe the worst.

Another possible witch in the play – and another possible representation of Frances Carr – is Florida. Her portrayal is a reminder that the line between whore and witch had become increasingly blurred by the Overbury affair, with Frances depicted as exemplifying both stereotypes. In *The Witch*, Florida is witch-like in that her purpose is to entrap others in order to win more souls for the devil. Encouraged by Sebastian to use her 'cunning' and 'art' – words highly evocative of witchcraft – to deceive Isabella, Florida replies:

What need you urge that  
Which comes so naturally I cannot miss on't?  
What makes the devil so greedy of a soul

118 Marion O'Connor, Introduction to *The Witch*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, edited by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1127.

119 O'Connor, p. 1128.





drunk, knocking over Stadlin and Puckle. Puckle ends up with her ‘clothes over her ears’ (I.2.187–88) and Firestone considers an attempt to ‘throw the cat upon her to save her honesty’ (180). For his part, Almachildes, so far from being reverent or afraid, comments scornfully: ‘Call you these witches? / They be tumblers, methinks, very flat tumblers’ (193–94). It has been argued that the servants of the devil are required to be both powerless and deluded (so that they can be seen as vastly inferior to the servants of God) and at the same time dangerous (so that they constitute a real, not merely an imagined, threat). From this point of view, the witches represented in *The Witch* are all wrong. They are possessed of virtually limitless power, but somehow remain unthreatening to both the other characters and the audience.

The play therefore tends to suggest scepticism about the possibility of witchcraft, but there is one scene which presents an exception. In this scene, the only character to treat the witches with any degree of respect is also the only character to express any doubts about the efficacy of their magic, and the only one for whom they fail to deliver. The duchess, asking Hecate to provide a fast-acting poison with which to murder Almachildes, asks her:

DUCHESS Canst thou do this?  
 HECATE Can I?  
 DUCHESS I mean so closely.  
 HECATE So closely do you mean too?  
 DUCHESS So artfully, so cunningly?  
 HECATE Worse and worse! Doubts and incredulities!  
 They make me mad.  
 [...]  
 DUCHESS I did not doubt you mother.  
 HECATE No? What did you?  
 My power’s so firm, it is not to be questioned.  
 DUCHESS Forgive what’s past – and now I know th’ offensiveness  
 That vexes art, I’ll shun th’ occasion ever.  
 (v.2.14–36)

Despite the obvious effectiveness of witchcraft within the play, the duchess expresses doubts about the possibility of Hecate making a poison – which is far from implausible by any standards (Hecate does not, in the event, successfully poison Almachildes; this part of the plot is simply dropped). The duchess really ought to know that magic works, having briefly been the victim of a love charm herself (II.2.82–104); but her questions might be regarded as expressions of anxiety rather than of sceptical doubts about witchcraft. In any

case, the duchess is browbeaten by Hecate, who recites Ovid to terrify her,<sup>120</sup> after which the duchess starts to address Hecate respectfully as ‘mother’. The sight of the haughty duchess behaving with humility before Hecate can only emphasise Hecate’s power. But even in this scene, the point is not to create a fearsome witch character; this is merely the means to a more important end, that of accentuating the duchess’s guilt. That she places her faith in witches, as Frances Carr was reputed to have done, condemns her as much as anything else.

Witchcraft in the early Jacobean theatre is always positioned in relation to the court. At the beginning of James’s reign, perhaps before many of his subjects had had time to become discontented with the new king, witches are on stage to provide flattery. Witchcraft performed a rhetorical function; it constituted the anti-masque (literally so in Jonson’s *Masque of Queens*) which made the virtues of the court shine all the brighter. In *The Masque of Queens*, the witches’ connection to vices evocative of popular discontent suggests a court already feeling itself beleaguered and in need of reassurance, a reassurance provided by the characterisation of critical attitudes to the throne as witchcraft. Just a few years after the *Masque of Queens*, however, witchcraft had become a measure for the court’s corruption, in comparison with which the court was made to appear monstrous. Middleton’s treatment of the Overbury scandal may have been largely responsible for the end of the early Jacobean witch play. After *The Witch*, a play attempting to represent court ladies as moral paragons in opposition to a group of evil witches would probably have been laughed off the stage.

The Overbury trials failed to deliver on all the excitement that they had promised. What had been presented as a sensational plot threatening the security of the country ultimately appeared as a fairly straightforward case of murder. After all of Coke’s dark hints and exaggerated claims about the nature of the plot, this was understood by those courtiers still sympathetic to the Carrs as an exposure of Coke’s credulity. Others, though, regarded the result as further evidence of a conspiracy: it was suggested that Coke had been disgraced because he had discovered too much. There were even suggestions that the King himself had been involved in the murder.<sup>121</sup> In its imagery of dark secrets and corruption in high

120 The passage, omitted above, is from the *Metamorphoses*, vii.199–207.

121 Somerset, p. 428.

places, the play aligns itself with the forces of popular rumour: from the perspective established in Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, the play is witch-like in its alliance with Ignorance and Credulity. It is striking that Middleton's dedicatory epistle refers to the play itself as a witch, telling Thomas Holmes that '[f]or your sake alone she hath thus far conjured herself abroad and bears no other charms about her but what may tend to your recreation'.

For the rhetoric of witchcraft to be turned against the Jacobean court is ironic in view of the theatre's previous use of witchcraft to flatter the King. However, the tension in the idea of demonic witchcraft standing in opposition to divinely ordained monarchy had been present from the start. Sophonisba, for all her (excessive) moral virtue, is presented as a disruptive force in the world of her play, and the murderous and witch-like nature of several of the queens represented in Jonson's masque has been pointed out. The pervasive uncertainty of *Macbeth*, too, threatens to overshadow its support of the monarch. In a world in which fair is foul and foul is fair, distinguishing between the demonic and the divine is no easy matter, as Macduff finds out when Malcolm baffles him with his list of pretended vices. The royal witch play was always potentially vulnerable to the kind of satirical inversion to which Middleton subjected it.

Witches did not disappear from the stage after *The Witch*. Not many years afterwards, in fact, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley wrote their play *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), inspired by a real-life witchcraft case. But while this play also features a witch, Mother Sawyer is a far cry from Middleton's Hecate. The representation of witchcraft in *The Witch of Edmonton* is, or purports to be, grittily realistic; classical references like those of *Sophonisba* are gone entirely. Just as significantly, king and court are conspicuously absent. The social setting of the play shifts down to the level of the village witch – a character type who, despite her prominence in pamphlet accounts of witchcraft, had yet to appear on stage.