

## The Lancashire Witches

By far the most surprising and controversial use of witchcraft as a dramatic symbol came towards the end of the Restoration in Thomas Shadwell's play *The Lancashire Witches* (1681). This play was staged at a time of political crisis, with Charles II's regime struggling to contain the so-called Popish plot and the increasingly rancorous debate about the succession to the throne which grew out of the plot. *The Lancashire Witches* is above all a political play – perhaps inevitably so, given its immediate context – and one whose use of witchcraft both extends and departs from the earlier Restoration plays discussed in Chapter 6.

Shadwell's play has not received much critical attention in the present day, largely because of its author's poor reputation following Dryden's attacks on him, but perhaps also because it has often been perceived to be unoriginal. *The Lancashire Witches* draws on previous witchcraft plays, including *The Late Lancashire Witches*, *The Witch of Edmonton*, and *The Masque of Queens*. The situation of the Shacklehead and Hartford children resembles that in Lyly's *Mother Bombie*, in that the intelligent children of two prominent families are expected to marry two fools. But instead of leading to a marriage between two characters who had believed themselves to be siblings, as in *Mother Bombie*, the play concludes with the daughters marrying Doubty and Bellfort, young Yorkshire gentlemen who are worthy of them. The resort to a marriage outside of the local area, I argue, is also politically significant.

The character of Sir Edward Hartford owes a great deal to previous witchcraft drama. Sir Edward is obviously derived from Generous in *The Late Lancashire Witches*; at one point the text of the play seems to acknowledge this explicitly, when Doubty tells Sir Edward, '[y]ou are Generous beyond expression Sir'.<sup>1</sup> Sir Edward, like Generous,

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1 Shadwell, *The Lancashire Witches*, v.669. References to the play, given parenthetically hereafter, are to this edition.

is the old-fashioned, sensible, and hospitable country gentleman, a figure that became a stock character in Restoration drama. Sir Edward also aligns himself with Generous in his attitude towards witches, which echoes the earlier play when Sir Edward refers to ‘Dreams, meer Dreams of Witches’ (1.350; cf. *The Late Lancashire Witches* l. 286). Doubty, on the other hand, is not similar in character or function to Doughty in Heywood and Brome’s play, apart from his name. The changed spelling of the name, however, does seem significant, hinting at the scepticism of the play towards witchcraft.

This use of scepticism, I argue, is closely tied to the play’s politics. But while *The Lancashire Witches* raises serious doubts about the possibility of witchcraft, it ultimately employs this scepticism to encourage credulity about witch-hunting in another sense. It is a play which proudly displays the kind of outlook that is often thought of as distinctively modern – that is, a materialist outlook – and one that is intolerant of what it depicts as superstition. And yet, not coincidentally, it is at the same time a highly credulous play, in that it seeks to encourage belief in improbable claims about the world for ideological reasons. Indeed, the play refuses to entertain any doubt about some claims, and this refusal is expressed in a manner that is reminiscent of some of the more dogmatic witchcraft theorists. But before moving on to the politics of the play, this chapter begins with a discussion of its many sceptical elements, not least the attitude explicitly presented in the author’s preface to the printed version of the play.

### Scepticism in *The Lancashire Witches*

In his preface, Shadwell makes it clear that despite the content of the play, he does not believe in witchcraft:

I am (as it is said of *Surlly* in the *Alchymist*) somewhat costive of belief. The Evidences I have represented are natural, viz. slight, and frivolous, such as poor old Women were wont to be hang’d upon. For the Actions, if I had not represented them as those of real Witches, but had show’d the Ignorance, Fear, Melancholy, Malice, Confederacy, and imposture that contribute to the belief of Witchcraft, the people had wanted diversion, and there had been another clamor against it, it would have been call’d Atheistical.

Shadwell distinguishes between ‘Evidences’ and ‘Actions’, and makes it clear that while the play presents witches who are real within the fictional world of the play, this should not be taken to imply anything

about the world beyond the play. Shadwell also outlines his reasons for making the witches appear real within the play. One issue is the vital question of entertaining the audience. The play, like Brome and Heywood's before it, makes use of the opportunities for spectacular visual effect. According to Richard Steele's mention of a revival of the play in 1711, 'the Actors have flown in the Air, and played such Pranks, and run such Hazards, that none but the Servants of the Fire-office, Tilers and Masons, could have been able to perform the like'.<sup>2</sup> The stage directions included in the printed version suggest that similar feats were also achieved in the first performances of the play.

Having established that he does not believe in witchcraft, Shadwell goes on to complicate this stance, writing that

Witchcraft, being a Religion to the Devil (for so it is, the Witches being the Devil's Clergy, their Charms upon several occasions being so many offices of the Witches Liturgy to him,) and attended with as many Ceremonies as even the Popish Religion is, 'tis remarkable that the Church of the Devil (if I may catachrestically call it so) has continued almost the same, from their first Writers on this Subject to the last.

Coming immediately after Shadwell's denial of the reality of witchcraft, this passage is a little jarring. It is possible that Shadwell is using the word 'witchcraft' to mean 'the witchcraft that people have mistakenly believed in'. But if this is what Shadwell means, he chooses not to say so. Shadwell's manner of referring to witches in this passage seems to presuppose their existence and confirm their status as servants of the devil. It is at this point that Shadwell mentions the Catholic Church, which he compares to the 'religion' of witchcraft. The final reference to the 'Church of the Devil', as a result, has a touch of ambiguity about it: the phrase seems to refer to witchcraft, but it might also refer to Catholicism. Witchcraft may not be real, but a 'Religion of the Devil' certainly is.

While *The Late Lancashire Witches* is the source for many of the spectacular incidents in Shadwell's play – witches transforming themselves into cats, disappearing hares, and so on – there are significant differences in the way the magical elements are presented. *The Late Lancashire Witches* supports abstract belief in witchcraft while treating actual witchcraft accusations as matter for comedy.

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2 Richard Steele, Review of *The Lancashire Witches*, *The Spectator* 141 (11 August 1711).

Shadwell's play also treats witchcraft as matter for comedy, and its plot also rests on the reality of the witches' magic. Paradoxically, however, the play simultaneously (and strenuously) denies the reality of witchcraft altogether. In other words, it establishes the *fictional* reality of the witches that appear on stage while at the same time making a clear case that witches do *not* exist in the real world, just as Shadwell argues in his preface. This is the most sceptical representation of witchcraft to be presented in the English theatre during the period in which witchcraft was a criminal offence.

*The Late Lancashire Witches* opens with a debate about the reasons for the disappearance of a hare, and a similar debate takes place in *The Lancashire Witches*. In the later play the discussion is much shorter:

SIR JEFF. Now, Sir *Edward*, do you see, the Hare is vanish'd, and here is the Hag.

SIR EDW. Yes, I see 'tis almost dark, the Hare is run from your tired Dogs, and here is a poor old Woman gathering of sticks.  
(1.386–89)

Shadwell merges a detail from *The Late Lancashire Witches* (the disappearance of the hare) with a detail from *The Witch of Edmonton* (the witch is first encountered gathering sticks). As in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the sceptical argument – in this case, Sir Edward's – is wrong. The woman, named as Mother Demdike in the text, is indeed a witch, and later comments gleefully that she has 'fooled these fellows' (1.423). Nevertheless, the fact that Sir Jeffrey turns out to be right – discovered later on by the audience – pales into insignificance in the face of Sir Edward's superior credibility and argument in this earlier exchange. To use Shadwell's distinction, Sir Edward is wrong about the 'Action' but right about the 'Evidence'. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, Arthur's witchcraft explanation was presented as satisfyingly complete compared to the vague and unlikely natural explanations offered by Bantam and Shakestone; but here it is Sir Jeffrey who clutches at straws, while Sir Edward's explanation of events is the reasonable and comprehensive one.

This pattern is repeated throughout the play: Sir Edward may be wrong, but he is a good deal more convincing than Sir Jeffrey. As Katherine Briggs points out, Sir Edward and the other sensible characters never change their minds about the existence of witchcraft, despite being proved wrong by the onstage action.<sup>3</sup> The closest any

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3 Briggs, p. 105.

sensible character ever comes to acknowledging the existence of the witches is in the following passage:

- BELL. 'Tis a little odd; but however, I shall not fly from my Belief, that every thing is done by Natural Causes, because I cannot presently assign those Causes.
- SIR EDW. You are in the right, we know not the powers of matter.
- DOUBT. When any thing unwonted happens, and we [do] not see the cause, we call it unnatural and miraculous.
- PRIEST. By my Shoule you do talke like Heretick-Dogs, and Aathiests. (IV.460–66)

As in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the sceptics in this play cling to their faith in a natural explanation in spite of empirical evidence to the contrary. In the earlier play, the irrational sceptics are contrasted with the reasonable and unbiased Arthur who believes, justifiably and correctly, in the reality of witchcraft. In *The Lancashire Witches*, however, the contrast is not with reasoned belief but with religious fanaticism. The Catholic priest, Tegue, wishes to see all who refuse to accept the authority of the Pope burned for heresy at Smithfield (III.326); he is prepared to die for his cause and gleefully discusses the possibility of being martyred and idolatrously 'worshipped' after his death (III.124–26). Sir Edward's popishly inclined chaplain, Smerk, also wishes to burn 'Hobbists and Atheists' at Smithfield (II.418–19).<sup>4</sup> Doubting the supernatural explanation, even in the absence of a satisfactory natural explanation, is no longer a weak position, as it was in *The Late Lancashire Witches*. Instead, it is the common-sense view accepted by all the reasonable characters in the play. Bellfort argues that entirely natural causes may simply be hidden, for now, from human knowledge. Sir Edward goes even further than this, assigning everything to 'the powers of matter' – that is, to the workings of an exclusively material universe of the kind described by Hobbes. Sir Edward suggests that any supernatural explanation relies on the existence of a non-material spirit world, and that such a world is not something he is prepared to believe in. Sir Edward is committed to a recognisably modern and materialistic understanding of the universe that precludes the existence of witches.<sup>5</sup> It is also one which – as Tegue recognises – might be understood to preclude the existence of God.

4 The last execution for heresy carried out at Smithfield took place in 1612, which indicates how extreme an opinion is attributed to Smerk in this passage.

5 For a discussion of the relevance of Hobbesian thought to Shadwell's works in general see Thomas B. Stroup, 'Shadwell's Use of Hobbes', *Studies in Philology* 35:3 (1938), 405–32. *The Lancashire Witches* is discussed on pp. 423–25.

The ‘bad’ characters Smerk and Tegue vehemently object to any such Hobbesian and materialist view, and they repeatedly use the term ‘Hobbist’ – common at the time – to refer to the opinions of their enemies. Despite their credulous belief in witchcraft and their paranoid suspicions of a Presbyterian plot, Tegue and Smerk are correct about this. The view expressed by Doubty in the passage above closely resembles that of Hobbes, expressed in *Leviathan*: ‘they that see any strange, and unusuall ability, or defect in a mans mind; unlesse they see withal, from what cause it may probably proceed, can hardly think it naturall; and if not naturall, they must needs thinke it supernaturall’.<sup>6</sup> Such a belief is consistent with what can be inferred about Shadwell’s own views. Shadwell left his edition of Hobbes’s works to his son in his will – with a warning about Hobbes’s authoritarian political views – and he was frequently accused by his political enemies of atheism, sometimes by way of dramatic caricatures.<sup>7</sup>

Shadwell claims in his preface that the play would have been attacked on the grounds that it supported atheism if it had denied the reality of witchcraft. This claim seems reasonable at first sight, given the long-standing association between scepticism about witchcraft and atheism. But there is something rather peculiar about Shadwell openly revealing his lack of belief and assertively attacking the ‘Ignorance, Fear, Melancholy, Malice, Confederacy, and imposture’ underlying witchcraft belief, if he genuinely wished to avoid causing controversy on these grounds. Furthermore, there is no shortage of accusations of atheism within the play itself. All of these accusations come from the contemptible characters, Smerk and Tegue. They do not seem to strike fear into the heart of Sir Edward, who in the opening scene tells Smerk that he ‘scorn[s] the name of Atheist’ (1.43). Shadwell’s play courts accusations of atheism rather than avoiding them; throughout it, he sneers at those who use atheism as a rhetorical weapon.

Despite the reality of witchcraft, the foolish characters are frequently wrong to use it as an explanation. The play represents ‘witchcraft’ as imposture on several occasions, such as when the heroines disguise themselves as witches in order to drive Susan and Smerk away. Sometimes, as in earlier witchcraft plays, entirely natural problems are wrongly ascribed to witchcraft. Sir Jeffrey is mocked

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6 Hobbes, 1.8, p. 144.

7 See Christopher J. Wheatley, *Without God or Reason* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1993), p. 92 on Shadwell’s will, and pp. 93–94 on D’Urfey’s lampoon of him in *Sir Barnaby Whigg*.

particularly sharply when he attributes some personal difficulties to the actions of witches:

SIR JEFF. I tell you, Sir *Edward*, I am sure she is a Witch, and between you and I, last night, when I would have been kind to my Wife, she bewitcht me, I found it so.

SIR EDW. Those things will happen about five and fifty.  
(III.407–10)

Impotence magic was a well-known ability of witches, and this is another element of the play that seems to respond to *The Late Lancashire Witches*. In Heywood and Brome's play, the enchanted point is clearly identified as the cause of Lawrence's impotence. Shadwell's work, however, contains nothing to support Sir Jeffrey's attempt to blame his impotence on witchcraft. Sir Edward's response provides a much more plausible explanation, even within the context of a play in which witches are real.

Another factor which undermines the opinions of the believers in witchcraft within the play is their own testimony as to their methods. Sir Jeffrey, having caught a witch, explains how he will gather evidence against her:

[N]ow you shall see my skill, wee'l search her, I warrant she has biggs or teats a handful long about her parts that shall be nameless; then wee'l have her watched eight and fourty hours, and prickt with Needles, to keep her from sleeping, and make her confess, Gad shee'l confess any thing in the world then; and if not, after all, wee'l tye her Thumbs and great Toes together and fling her into your great Pond. (I.397–403)

In claiming that he can make the alleged witch 'confess any thing in the world' Sir Jeffrey is made to reveal the cruelty, unfairness, and absurdity of his own methods. It is apparent that the supposed witch has little to lose by confessing; it is already too late for her. The portrayal of Sir Jeffrey in this passage counters one of the most powerful arguments in favour of the existence of witchcraft: the claim that witches freely confessed their crimes to disinterested interrogators.

In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, Generous is proved wrong about witchcraft when he sees the magic bridle removed from his wife, resulting in her transformation from a horse back into a woman. Shadwell's play has an equivalent scene, in which Clod has a magic bridle removed by Tom Shacklehead. But the 'transformation' is handled very differently:

TOM SHA. What a Devils here! *Clod* tied by a Bridle and a Neighing!  
What a Pox ail'st thou? Const a tell? [*Tom. Shac.*  
*takes off the Bridle.*]

CLOD. Uds flesh, I am a Mon agen naw!  
 Why, I was a Horse, a meer Tit, I had lost aw  
 My speech, and could do naught but neigh;  
 Flesh I am a Mon agen.

TOM SHA. What a dickens is the fellée wood?  
 (III.697–703)

In Heywood and Brome's play, Mistress Generous's transformation leads to a suspension of comedy and one of the few serious scenes in the play. The equivalent transformation in *The Lancashire Witches* is not treated very seriously. Clod apparently believes himself to have been transformed into a horse, but Tom Shacklehead – the only witness to Clod's transformation back into a human – does not see it that way, wondering instead if Clod is insane. The implication is that no actual magic has taken place; Clod has simply lived up to his name.

In a later scene featuring the same two characters, Tom Shacklehead, on entering, makes a comment without any relevance to the plot: 'Byr Lady 'tis meeghty strong Ale, Ay am well neegh drunken' (IV.476–77). He and Clod discuss the events depicted in the earlier scene, and Tom makes fun of Clod, who still insists he had been transformed into a horse. Shortly afterwards they encounter the witches, one of whom is shot by Tom, and Clod proceeds to bridle her and ride away on her back. This time, Tom – and the audience – have seen a transformation occur, but Tom has previously pointed out that he is drunk, and he does not seem to trust his own perceptions, commenting that 'I cannot believe my Sences' (IV.502). Tom echoes an earlier comment by Sir Edward, who tells Sir Jeffrey: 'These are Prodigies you tell, they cannot be; your sences are deceived' (I.340–41). In the scene with Tom and Clod, the play carefully undermines its own Actions by compromising the Evidence.

Tom's comments echo a standard argument used by advocates of philosophical scepticism as well as by sceptics about witchcraft. The unreliability of the senses was one important aspect of the Pyrrhonian position that was so influential in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,<sup>8</sup> and it was also utilised by Scot and other sceptics in relation to witchcraft specifically. Discussing some of the more colourful aspects of witchcraft belief – the killing of children so that their corpses could be used to make potions – Scot comments that 'it is so horrible, unnaturall, unlikelie, and unpossible; that if I should behold such things with mine eies, I should rather thinke

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8 Popkin, p. 53.



my selfe dreaming, dronken, or some waie deprived of my senses; than give credit to so horrible and filthie matters'.<sup>9</sup> As has been remarked before, scepticism about witchcraft is not the result of a strictly empirical outlook. Instead, like witchcraft belief, it is a conviction which both precedes and guides the analysis of empirical evidence. Scot (and, in the play, Sir Edward and Tom Shacklehead) suggests the use of a sceptical argument about the reliability of sensory experience in order to maintain belief in the impossibility of witchcraft in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary.

Despite his own scepticism about witchcraft, Shadwell apparently considered it important to display his knowledge on the subject, and stressed in his preface that he based his witches on 'Authority'. Added to the printed text of the play were copious endnotes, justifying the inclusion of various pieces of witchcraft lore. At times this is done to justify the inclusion of material aimed at producing a laugh. When the witches summon their master – the devil – they have an unusual way of greeting him: 'Lo here our little Master's come. / Let each of us salute his Bum' (II.433–34). Shadwell's note to the second line explains:

Kissing the Devils Buttocks is a part of the homage they pay the Devil, as *Bodin* says Doctor *Edlin* did, a *Sorbon* Doctor, who was burn'd for a Witch. *Scot* also quotes one *Danaeus*, whom I never read, for kissing the Devils Buttocks. About kissing the Devils Buttocks, see farther, Guaccius in the forequoted Chapter.

Shadwell's tone in the note quoted is remarkably similar to that of a present-day academic paper, although he is unusually honest in admitting that he has not read one of his sources. While various elements of the play itself undermine and mock belief in witchcraft, its scepticism would be impossible to discern from reading the notes alone. This may be a consequence of the fact that Shadwell's notes are for the most part copied from Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, but the neutral and learned tone also lends Shadwell's notes an air of intellectual authority.<sup>10</sup>

This intellectual authority is, of course, denied to the believers in witchcraft. Sir Jeffrey, arguing with Sir Edward about the existence of witches, attempts to show off his learning:

SIR JEFF. No Witches? why I have hang'd above Fourscore. Read *Bodin*, *Remigijs*, *Delrio*, *Nider*, *Institor*, *Sprenger*,

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<sup>9</sup> Scot, III.12 (p. 59).

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Harris is one of several scholars who have pointed out the reliance on Jonson (p. 190).

Godelman, and More, and *Malleus Maleficarum*, a great Author, that Writes sweetly about Witches, very sweetly.

SIR EDW. *Malleus Maleficarum* a Writer, he has read nothing but the titles I see.

(I.359–64)

Like Generous in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, Sir Edward may not believe in witches, but he does have an intellectually sophisticated understanding of witchcraft. His scepticism – like Shadwell’s own – needs to be bolstered by the appearance of familiarity with, and understanding of, the theory of witchcraft, even though it is precisely that discourse that is being rejected and held up to ridicule.

### Good and bad witchcraft

Plays from earlier in the Restoration, such as *The Step-Mother* and *The Fatal Jealousy*, used stereotypes connected with witchcraft to signify human, rather than supernatural, evil, and in particular the sort of evil which sought to upturn the social order, as the civil wars had done. A character such as Pontia in *The Step-Mother* – while not depicted as an actual witch – was associated with witchcraft in such a way as to make clear that her rebellion against the social, sexual, and political order was unnatural and impious. But the associations evoked by witchcraft in *The Lancashire Witches* are considerably more complex. The evil aspect of witchcraft remains; but it is complicated by more benign, even heroic, connotations.

Michael Allsid points out that the play associates the heroines with the witches in various ways.<sup>11</sup> The connection between Isabella and Theodosia and the witches is clearest when they disguise themselves ‘with Vizors like Witches’ in order to trick and scare away some of the foolish characters (v.120), but there are also subtler indications of this affinity. Isabella’s vicious verbal attacks on her hapless fiancé Sir Timothy are particularly witch-like, given the close association between scolding and witchcraft in early modern England. Isabella also threatens to ‘tear thy Eyes out’ (II.332), shortly before another scene in which Mother Dickenson relates her exploits to the devil, which include the acquisition of ‘Eye-balls with my nails scoop’d out’ (II.464), a detail which originates with Lucan’s *Erictho*.

In fact, it is not only the heroines and Sir Timothy who are associated with the witches – the heroes are, too, although in a

11 Michael Allsid, *Thomas Shadwell* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 91.

more subtle manner. When Sir Timothy threatens to kick Belfort for holding hands with Isabella, he receives a peculiarly bloodthirsty response:

- BELL. If you do, you will be the fifteenth man I have run through the Body, Sir.
- SIR TIM. Hah! What does he say, through the body, oh.  
[ ... ]
- BELL. Yes Sir, and my custom is (if it be a great affront, I kill them, for) I rip out their Hearts, dry 'em to powder, and make Snuff on 'em.
- SIR TIM. Oh Lord! Snuff!  
(III.191–98)

Belfort's threat is curiously reminiscent of some of a witch's activities, including the witches in Shadwell's play.

In a later scene, when the young men discuss their excitement at the prospect of marrying the heroines, the language they use to describe their emotions is equally striking:

- BELL. My Dear Friend, I am so transported with excess of Joy, it is become a Pain, I cannot bear it [...] My Bloud is Chill, and shivers when I think on't.
- DOUBT. One night with my Mistress would outweigh an Age of Slavery to come.
- BELL. Rather than be without a Nights enjoyment of mine, I would be hang'd next Morning.  
(IV.507–15)

While this kind of hyperbole about romantic love is not uncommon for the period, chilled blood, slavery, and hanging are not the most obvious images to use in expressing amorous yearning. The trade-offs that the young men envisage in this conversation suggest the kind of Faustian pact supposedly made by witches; the 'age of slavery to come', in particular, might refer to the eternal punishment in hell that follows a witch's bargain with the devil (as well as the years of marriage following the honeymoon).

The contemptible characters in the play are also associated with witchcraft, but in a very different way. Isabella insults Sir Timothy, calling him 'uglier than any Witch in *Lancashire*' (II.308), repeatedly castigating him for his physical unattractiveness in terms that are evocative of the stereotypical witch: 'thou hast a hollow Tooth would Cure the Mother beyond *Arsa fetida*, or burnt Feathers' (II.317–19). Fits of the mother – believed at the time to be a condition of the womb – had been proposed as a naturalistic explanation for

cases of possession, most famously by Edward Jorden.<sup>12</sup> Sir Timothy's 'hollow tooth' is reminiscent of the variety of dental problems which were associated with witches,<sup>13</sup> and asafoetida or 'devil's turd' was recommended as a magical, as well as a medicinal, ingredient.<sup>14</sup> Isabella also mocks Sir Timothy for his 'shuffling' walk (III.238), another characteristic suggestive of the stereotypical Elizabethan witch.<sup>15</sup> Isabella's association of Sir Timothy with the threatening power of witchcraft is clearest when she says: 'I had rather be inoculated into a Tree, than to be made one Flesh with thee' (III.256–57). *The Tempest* was a popular play during the Restoration, and an operatic version had been produced by Shadwell himself in 1674, so the reference to the witch Sycorax's imprisonment of Ariel would have been obvious to most audience members.

The association with witchcraft is clearest in the case of the play's main comic villain, Tegue O'Devilly. Tegue's association with witchcraft harks back to a much older tradition within the witchcraft play genre. This is Tegue's cure for impotence:

I will tell you now, Joy, I will cure you too. Taak one of de Tooths of a dead man, and bee, and burn it, and taak dee smoke into both your Noses, as you taak Snuff, and anoint your self vid dee Gaal of a Crow, taak Quicksilver, as dey do call it, and put upon a Quill, and plaash it under de shoft Pillow you do shit upon, den maake shome waater through de Ring of a Wedding, by St. *Patrick*, and I will shay shome *Ave Maarias* for dee, and dou wilt be sound agen: gra. (III.411–19)

As Shadwell's note points out, this recipe is taken from Scot, so it is unsurprising that Tegue's cure is ridiculous, not to mention disgusting.<sup>16</sup> The cure is also reminiscent of the kinds of remedies offered by witch characters in Tudor plays such as *Three Laws* and *Thersites*. As I have argued, these plays were designed to attack what was regarded as Catholic superstition by closely associating Catholic ritual with magic. While Tegue's remedies are similar to

12 Edward Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (London, 1603). See also Chapter 5.

13 John Gaule describes a typical witch as having a 'gobber tooth' (p. 5); Scot refers to witches as 'toothles' (I.6, p. 13).

14 Russell, pp. 90–91.

15 Samuel Harsnett writes that the witch of the popular imagination walks 'like a bow leaning on a shaft' (*A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, p. 136).

16 Scot, IV.8, p. 82.

those of the witches, his own ‘magic’ – Catholic ritual – is shown to be powerless against the supernatural. As in *Dr Faustus*, where the Pope and his friars’ attempts to exorcise Faustus and Mephistophilis meet with ignominious failure, Tegue’s attempts to exorcise evil spirits with holy water and relics in *The Lancashire Witches* are comically ineffective.

The play goes still further than this when the witches, in the form of cats, scratch Tegue’s face. Scratching a witch’s face was considered by many to be a way to remove the ill effects of her magic.<sup>17</sup> That Tegue’s face is scratched can be taken to indicate that he, not Demdike, is the ‘real’ witch. As Anthony Harris points out, Tegue’s link to witchcraft is perhaps strongest when he actually sleeps with a witch, after being tricked by her in a scene which may have been modelled on Marston’s *Sophonisba*.<sup>18</sup> While Marston’s play links witchcraft to tyranny (because the witch Erictho tricks the tyrant Syphax), Shadwell links witchcraft to Catholicism by putting a priest in Syphax’s place.

That both sympathetic and unsympathetic characters are likened to the play’s witches is an indication of the dual function that witchcraft performs in the play. In relation to the unsympathetic characters, witchcraft represents superstition and delusion, ugliness and stupidity – and also a particular kind of authority that is absolutely rejected: that of the Catholic Church. This double aspect of witchcraft is reminiscent of the ambivalence present in the most important English sceptical text: Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, which vacillates between treating witches as innocent – or even heroic – victims of mindless prejudice, and as fools or tricksters deserving of contempt. Alssid points out that the heroines, unlike Tegue, only practise their ‘witchcraft’ ‘in the name of love and liberty’.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, at a time when the 1604 Act against witchcraft remained in force, the association of the sympathetic characters with witches does seem extraordinary. Moreover, the pursuit of liberty, in 1681, could have been understood to be a good deal less innocent than it now sounds. One important association of witchcraft that is of great relevance to the play is the idea of rebellion. As Stuart Clark points out, during the early modern period, ‘[i]t became usual to use the words “witch” and “witchcraft”

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17 A recent discussion of ‘scratching’ witches is in Darr, pp. 173–84. While there were male witches, Tegue is the only example of a man having his face scratched that I have come across.

18 Harris, p. 191.

19 Alssid, p. 91.

(or “enchantment”) when casting political opponents as disturbers of the established order, or when trying to deepen the seriousness of some perceived threat to the public peace’.<sup>20</sup> In *The Lancashire Witches*, the use of witchcraft as a metaphor with which to attack political opponents is turned on its head, as the play idealises some forms of rebellion against established authority. This aspect of the play is discussed in the following section.

### The play and the plot

It has often been noted that the play was staged at a time of political unrest, but its political significance has not always been recognised. Ian Bostridge argues that Shadwell’s play uses witchcraft as a ‘useful distraction’ from the political squabbles of the time, claiming that Shadwell ‘hoped to use witchcraft as a non-contentious piece of theatrical entertainment’.<sup>21</sup> In similar vein, Arthur Scouten and Robert Hume argue that the play represented an attempt to avoid politics:

The uproar attendant upon the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis naturally bred a spate of political plays ... Shadwell turned to safer and more romantic play-types in *The Woman-Captain* (1679) and *The Lancashire Witches* (1681).<sup>22</sup>

These readings of the author’s non-literary intentions would appear to be based entirely on Shadwell’s preface to the play which voices a protest, common at the time, about the invasion of the stage by politics. But Shadwell’s preface ought not to be taken at face value. Many of the claims he makes in it are strikingly at odds with the evidence of the play itself. The fact that the preface is misleading might be expected, given that it was written in defence of a play that was heavily censored in its stage version – precisely because it was far from ‘safe’ or ‘non-contentious’. As Susan Owen points out, the play is highly political.<sup>23</sup>

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20 Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 558.

21 Bostridge, p. 91.

22 Arthur H. Scouten and Robert D. Hume, ““Restoration Comedy” and Its Audiences, 1660–1776’, *The Yearbook of English Studies* 10 (1980), 45–69 (p. 53).

23 Susan J. Owen, *Restoration Theatre and Crisis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 185. In fact, even the preface is far from conciliatory in places, referring, for example, to ‘Impudent Hot-headed Tantiy Fool[s]’. The word ‘tantiy’ was frequently applied to the emerging Tory grouping, who were said by their opponents to be ‘riding tantiy [i.e. at a gallop] to Rome’.

One aspect of the play's controversial nature is its attitude to the Church. *The Lancashire Witches* is undoubtedly anti-Catholic, but it is also anti-clerical more generally. This anti-clerical element is often said to be the main reason why the play suffered stringent censorship in its stage version.<sup>24</sup> The printed version, owing to the temporary suspension of pre-print censorship after a divided parliament allowed the lapse of the Printing Act in 1679, restored all the censored lines, and italicised them in order to draw them to the readers' attention. Shadwell even altered Smerk's character, writing in the preface that 'I have now Ordained Smerk, who before was a young Student in Divinity'. This alteration, of course, can only have resulted in accentuating the implied criticism of the Anglican Church.<sup>25</sup>

The authority of the Anglican Church is controversially undermined and subordinated to the authority of the landed gentry in the play. But other kinds of authority are also undermined, most obviously by the fact that Sir Edward and Sir Jeffrey's daughters will not do what their parents want them to do. This is firmly established when Isabella and Theodosia discuss their parents' plans for the marriages:

ISAB. Well, we are resolved never to Marry where we are designed, that's certain. For my part I am a free English woman, and will stand up for my Liberty, and Property of Choice.

THEO. And Faith, Girl, I'll be a mutineer on thy side; I hate the imposition of a Husband, 'tis as bad as Popery.  
(1.272–76)

This rejection of parental authority is couched in terms redolent of political discourse: the ideal of Liberty is invoked, while the women describe themselves as 'mutineers', a significantly military and political metaphor. Furthermore, the personal situation of the heroines is once again linked to the combustible political issue of 'Popery', which they see as a kind of tyranny. The decision Isabella and Theodosia make in this scene is presented as an unambiguously good one in the play. The daughters find better husbands – Belfort

24 See, for example, Wheatley, p. 96.

25 The play was printed by John Starkey, a publisher with a 'reputation for printing factious texts', rather than Shadwell's regular publisher Henry Herringman: Judith Slagle, 'Dueling Prefaces, Pamphlets, and Prologues: Re-visioning the Political and Personal Wars of John Dryden and Thomas Shadwell', *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research* 21:1 (2006), 17–32 (p. 29).

and Doubty – for themselves than those their parents had arranged for them, and even Sir Edward accepts his new son-in-law's worth at the end of the play. Of course, challenging parental authority over the choice of a future spouse is not unusual in comedy at the time,<sup>26</sup> but the association of daughterly rebellion with political rebellion hints at the play's wider political commitments.

Several aspects of *The Lancashire Witches* reveal an engagement in contemporary constitutional debates which were closely linked to the major political crisis of the late 1670s and early 1680s. The so-called Succession Crisis reawakened fundamental questions about the relationship between the monarch and his people which threatened, once again, to destabilise the entire country. The play's political engagement tends to undermine the authority of the king over his subjects, a detail reflected in the political nature of the heroines' 'mutiny', since the authority of the king was frequently compared to that of a loving father. Most of the censored lines in the play are long sections of dialogue including Smerk, which show him in a particularly poor light, either presuming to demand that his master go through a form of confession or expressing sympathy with the Catholic Church. One exception, though, is a short speech of Sir Edward's. Having discussed the superiority of England to other nations (especially France) with Belfort and Doubty, Sir Edward concludes by declaring that

*I am a true English-man, I love the Princes Rights and Peoples Liberties, and will defend 'em both with the last penny in my purse, and the last drop in my veins, and dare defy the witless Plots of Papists.*  
(III.47–50)

It might seem puzzling that this passage was censored for the stage, but although the statement might sound to modern ears like a declaration of loyalty to the king, in the context of the early 1680s it was nothing of the kind. As Owen points out, this is 'an explicitly Whiggish passage'.<sup>27</sup> The statement presumptuously places 'the Princes Rights' on a par with the 'Peoples Liberties', and these two ideals could easily be understood to be in conflict in 1681.

26 Jessica Munns, 'Theatrical Culture I: Politics and Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650–1740*, edited by Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 82–103 (p. 91).

27 Owen, pp. 191–92. The attack on all things French might also be interpreted as hostile to the King, whose enthusiasm for French culture extended to the theatre (Maguire, pp. 54–55).



The question of the balance between liberty and authority was at the centre of the disturbances and debates connected to the Popish Plot and the Succession Crisis. The Popish plot was the name given to a supposed conspiracy to overthrow the government of England and restore the Church to the control of the Pope. Such a plot never existed in reality, but belief in and fear of it led to the execution of twenty-four English Catholics and the imprisonment of hundreds more. Fear of the plot also led to demands for an Exclusion Bill: a law preventing Charles II's brother James – who was known to be a Catholic – from becoming King. Apart from the testimony of a number of often quite shady witnesses,<sup>28</sup> no evidence of the existence of the plot was ever presented in court.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, widespread belief in the plot led to what has frequently and aptly been described as a witch-hunt.

The most important witness in the Popish Plot trials, Titus Oates, was at one stage reprimanded in Parliament for having expressed a sentiment very similar to that voiced by Sir Edward.<sup>30</sup> Oates's offending words were that '[t]he King holds his Crown by the same title I hold my liberty.' Even among his supporters in Parliament, this statement caused a great deal of consternation, especially when, after being reprimanded by the Speaker, Oates failed to give a satisfactory apology and added that 'it was my conscience, and it was truth; and though I may not say it here, I will say it elsewhere'. The immediate reaction to Oates's outburst, set down in parliamentary records, is illuminating:

Mr Secretary Coventry. Pray consider what this House will come to, if persons be permitted to speak here at this rate.

[...]

Sir Robert Peyton. It will be very hurtful to give any discouragement to the King's Evidence. It has already gone all over the city.

[...]

Mr Secretary Coventry. This language is like a woman indicted for being a whore, and she says, 'she is as honest as any woman in the highest place.' This is very indecent.

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28 Peter Hinds, *The Horrid Popish Plot: Roger L'Estrange and the Circulation of Political Discourse in Late Seventeenth-Century London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) points to the example of 'Captain' William Bedloe, 'a thoroughly disreputable con-man and thief' (p. 47).

29 Some letters purporting to be to, and from, Jesuits were shown to the Privy Council, but were never used as evidence in court; see John Kenyon, *The Popish Plot* (London: Phoenix, 2000, first published in 1972), pp. 77–80.

30 Kenyon, p. 173.

Sir Robert Howard. I know not but your safety depends upon what Mr Oates has to say of the Plot, and I would not discourage him.  
 Sir Thomas Lee. I am concerned to speak at this time. Could I sit still, I would. Though the words which fell from Mr Oates are very considerable, and though they were true, yet all truth is not to be said at all times. You can do no less than reprimand him for what he has said; yet, though he be great evidence, he is not to be privileged to say what he pleases. The Long Parliament, in the height of their discontents, &c. were very tender of any reflections upon the King, though Debates went high in the House. You can do no less than reprimand him.<sup>31</sup>

The responses by these MPs convey a sense of outrage at Oates's statement, which might be difficult for many twenty-first century readers to comprehend. Even his supporters seem exasperated by their star witness. Thomas Lee, who during these years formed part of the emerging Whig grouping, and who was a firm believer in the plot,<sup>32</sup> compares Oates's outburst (unfavourably) to the proceedings of the Long Parliament – the Parliament that actually waged war against King Charles I. Henry Coventry, by contrast, consistently opposed the Exclusion Bill, and would therefore come to be thought of as a Tory,<sup>33</sup> and he takes the opportunity to compare Oates to a prostitute, perhaps hinting that it is Oates who ought to be 'indicted'.<sup>34</sup> Oates's staunchest defenders only dared to argue that he ought not to be discouraged, urging the importance of dealing with the plot. This is true even of Sir Robert Peyton, a reckless man and a heavy drinker who was reputed to be a republican and an atheist, and was spied on by the government.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Peyton

31 Anchitell Grey (ed.), *Debates of the House of Commons*, vol. 7 (London, 1769), Tuesday, 25 March 1679, British History Online, [www.british-history.ac.uk/greys-debates/vol7](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/greys-debates/vol7) (accessed 28 January 2014).

32 M. W. Helms and Leonard Naylor, 'Lee, Thomas I', [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/lee-thomas-i-1635-91](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/lee-thomas-i-1635-91) (accessed 28 January 2014).

33 Edward Rowlands, 'Coventry, Henry', [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/coventry-hon-henry-1618-86](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/coventry-hon-henry-1618-86) (accessed 28 January 2014).

34 Such attitudes were being expressed, often cryptically, at a relatively early stage of the Popish Plot, for example in Richard Duke's biting sarcastic *Panegyrick upon Oates* (London, 1679), which includes the line 'Let Oates still hang before our eyes', as well as a pointed reference to the cropping of ears.

35 Eveline Cruickshanks, 'Peyton, Sir Robert', [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/peyton-sir-robert-1633-89](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/peyton-sir-robert-1633-89) (accessed 28 January 2014).

also indicates that Oates's scandalous remarks were already well known outside parliament: 'It has already gone all over the city.' Shadwell's play expresses, in somewhat more guarded language, a very similar sentiment to that of Oates, implying that the 'Princes Rights' and the 'Peoples Liberties' are of equal importance. Even many Whigs who, like Sir Thomas Lee, seem to have agreed with the principle would have balked at saying it. In Shadwell's play, Sir Edward is therefore located on the extreme 'Whig' end of the political spectrum in his attitude, or more exactly in his willingness to *express* his attitude, to royal authority.

The question of the succession to the throne is one which the play also appears to address, albeit in a more guarded manner. At the end of the play, Isabella marries Belfort and Theodosia marries Doubty. Sir Edward's son, Young Hartfort, the 'Clownish, Sordid Country Fool', is left without a bride. Sir Edward is at first distraught, and angry with Doubty, but after Young Hartfort expresses his relief and determination not to marry, Sir Edward uncharacteristically changes his mind, saying to his son: 'Eternal Blockhead! I will have other means to preserve my Name: Gentlemen, you are men of ample Fortunes and worthy Families – Sir, I wish you happiness with my Daughter, take her' (v.662–64). Sir Edward's change of heart is related to his realisation that there are other ways to ensure his estate can be passed on to the next generation: his daughter's marriage provides him with an alternative, and much more suitable, male heir from neighbouring Yorkshire.

The eventual solution to the problem of a Catholic monarch in a Protestant country was the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, in which James II was replaced by William of Orange, a Protestant monarch who had many years previously married James's daughter Mary – also a Protestant, unlike her father. The idea that William of Orange might rule in place of James was being proposed as early as 1678.<sup>36</sup> Shadwell's play, in the line of Sir Edward's quoted above, seems to anticipate such a solution, suggesting that a son-in-law might be a better bet than the rightful male heir. The closing scene of the play displays a concern with issues of succession and inheritance that were both resonant and highly sensitive at the time of its performance.

As J. Douglas Canfield points out, there are limits to the play's anti-authoritarianism. Canfield focuses on the play's limited

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36 Mark Knights, *Politics and Opinion in Crisis, 1678–1681* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 34.

questioning of patriarchal authority,<sup>37</sup> but more pertinent from the perspective of this study is the play's unambiguous acceptance of royal and parliamentary authority on one specific question: the existence of the Popish Plot. For the favoured characters in the play, no amount of evidence can ever be sufficient to prove the reality of witchcraft; but no evidence at all is needed to prove the reality of the Popish Plot. The play supports scepticism regarding the existence of supernatural phenomena in general, and witchcraft in particular. It is therefore ironic, to say the least, that the play does not support scepticism about the great witch-hunt of its own time.<sup>38</sup>

The resemblances between the Popish Plot and the phenomenon of witchcraft are numerous and striking. As has been pointed out, legislation against witchcraft was reintroduced by the Elizabethan regime as a result of a Catholic plot. During the Popish Plot, as at the height of witchcraft persecution, people were convicted on extremely flimsy evidence, in many cases no more than the testimony of patently unreliable witnesses. Resistance to the Popish Plot frequently took the form of mockery, as did resistance to witchcraft belief, and this was understood by the supporters of the persecution to be dangerous to their cause.<sup>39</sup> The alleged use of poison was a recurring and sinister theme in both the Popish Plot and beliefs about witchcraft. Another curious point of similarity was the age and infirmity of many of the accused. As Kenyon points out, 'the five Catholic noblemen singled out by Titus Oates in 1678 as the leaders of armed insurrection were all old or ageing men'.<sup>40</sup> Another of the accused, Sir Thomas Gascoigne, 'did not seem the stuff of which assassins are made; he was eighty-five years old, deaf, half-blind and lame, and he had not been south of the river Trent for thirty

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37 J. Douglas Canfield, 'Shifting Tropes of Ideology in English Serious Drama, Late Stuart to Early Georgian', in *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theatre*, edited by J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah C. Payne (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 217–18.

38 This aspect of the play does not seem to have been discussed previously in any kind of detail. The closest thing to an extended discussion of the play's politics is in Don R. Kunz, *The Drama of Thomas Shadwell* (Salzburg: Institute for English Language and Literature, 1972). Kunz refers in passing to 'the rather obvious parallels being drawn between witchcraft and Popish plotting' (p. 254), but says little else about these 'parallels'.

39 Hinds, pp. 50, 53.

40 Kenyon, p. 36.

years'. Gascoigne at least was found not guilty, but Nicholas Postgate, an 80-year-old priest, was less fortunate and was hanged.<sup>41</sup>

A further similarity between the plot and the phenomenon of witchcraft was the sense that belief in the plot was a matter of piety, and that a failure to take it seriously as a threat implied religious and moral heterodoxy. It was, according to the recollections of the Tory judge Roger North, 'not safe for anyone to show scepticism. For upon the least occasion of the sort, What, replied they, don't you believe in the plot? (As if the Plot were turned into a creed).' North even claimed, in another tellingly religious analogy, that 'one might have denied Christ with more content than the Plot'.<sup>42</sup> This kind of zealotry meant that merely criticising the persecution could lead to accusations of involvement even for Anglicans, who could be smeared as 'Popishly inclined', as Smerk is in the play. Even those who had themselves carried out the prosecutions were not exempt: the Whigs turned against the Lord Chief Justice, William Scroggs, after he presided over the acquittal of Sir George Wakeman. Despite the many convictions and executions of supposed plotters which he had enthusiastically overseen, Scroggs was accused of complicity in the plot. Articles of impeachment read in the House of Commons accused him of seeking 'to introduce Popery, and Arbitrary and Tyrannical Government against Law'.<sup>43</sup> When this 'creed' lost its hold over the judiciary, as it did in Scroggs's case, it was not abandoned immediately but replaced by a distinction between the general and the particular. Just as Joseph Addison would later say that he could not doubt the existence of witchcraft in general, and could not believe in any particular instance of it, people suspected of involvement in the Popish Plot began to be acquitted by judges who made a distinction between the existence of a plot in general, which they claimed not to doubt, and the defendants in the particular case.<sup>44</sup>

What links the Popish Plot most clearly to witchcraft persecution as presented in authors like Bodin and James I is the unquestioning faith required by its advocates. The 'good' characters in *The*

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41 Kenyon, pp. 225, 204.

42 Quoted in Kenyon, pp. 97–98, 111.

43 'Articles of Impeachment of Sir William Scroggs' (3 January 1681), repr. in Geoff Kemp (ed.), *Censorship and the Press, 1580–1720*, 4 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), vol. 3, pp. 194–97 (p. 194). Employing a similar tactic, Bodin and James I accused the defenders of alleged witches (Scot and Weyer) of being witches themselves.

44 Kenyon, p. 201.

*Lancashire Witches* also demand absolute belief in the existence of the Popish Plot:

- DOUBT. How now! Do not you believe a Popish plot?  
 SMERK. No, but a Presbyterian one I do.  
 BELL. This is great Impudence, after the King has affirm'd it in so many Proclamations, and three Parliaments have voted it, *Nemine Contradicente*.  
 SMERK. Parliaments, tell me of parliaments, with my Bible in my hand, I'le dispute with the whole House of Commons; Sir, I hate Parliaments, none but Phanaticks, Hobbists, and Atheists, believe the Plot.  
 (III.341–48)

Belfort makes no attempt to persuade Smerk of the existence of the Popish Plot by providing evidence of its existence. Instead, he points out the 'impudence' of doubt. Smerk is told that he is not *allowed* to doubt the plot. This surely cannot be a deliberate echo of the kinds of argument typical of witchcraft theorists, but the resemblance to, for example, Bodin is unmistakable. Bodin wrote that 'one must not doubt in any way ... one would be very impudent to try to deny that demons and evil spirits have carnal relations with women'.<sup>45</sup> Attacking the 'impudence' of those who doubt the existence of these secret crimes was one way of attempting to silence the opposition. The play refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of questions about the reality of the plot.

The play makes strenuous efforts to present the political opponents of the emerging Whig faction as cruel and irrational at a time when the Whigs themselves were encouraging a climate of extreme animosity towards Catholics – behaviour that could itself be described in precisely these terms. In fact, the persecution of those supposedly involved in the Popish Plot *was* described as cruel and irrational, not least by playwrights on the other side of the emerging political divide. As Owen points out, in the epilogue to Whitaker's play *The Conspiracy* (1680), written by Edward Ravenscroft, 'those who gloat over the Popish Plot executions are accused of barbarism'.<sup>46</sup>

At first, opposition to the persecution of Popish plotters was tentative. While Ravenscroft may criticise 'gloating' over executions, he does not venture to suggest that the executions themselves should not have happened. Peter Hinds points out that Roger L'Estrange, the leading sceptic in relation to the plot, made heavy use of irony

45 Bodin, p. 41.

46 Owen, p. 188.

and humour in his attempts to undermine belief in the existence of the plot rather than explicitly denying its existence.<sup>47</sup> But after the initial excitement died down, the Popish Plot started to lose momentum. Historians of the plot such as John Kenyon and, more recently, John Gibney identify the turning point as the acquittal of Sir George Wakeman in July 1679.<sup>48</sup> By the time Shadwell's play came to be performed in 1681, the Popish Plot was very much in decline. In fact, by the summer of 1681, Stephen Colledge, a Whig who was involved with some of those testifying against Catholics, was himself put on trial for high treason.<sup>49</sup>

Things also began to change in the literary representation of the plot. The most famous contribution to this controversy, Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, admitted the reality of a plot, but added that the truth had been 'dash'd and brew'd with Lyes / To please the Fools, and puzzle all the Wise'.<sup>50</sup> Not long after the first performance of *The Lancashire Witches*, Thomas D'Urfey's *Sir Barnaby Whigg* (1681), a play that could be interpreted as a response to Shadwell's, was put on at the King's Theatre.<sup>51</sup> The prologue of D'Urfey's play directly challenges the reality of the plot:

How long, alas! must our unhappy Stage  
Groan for the follies of this Plotting Age?  
When shall our doubts and anxious fears have end,  
That we may once more know a foe from friend?  
[...]  
Distraction rages now, and th' frantick Town,  
Plagu'd with Sham-plots, a very *Bedlam's* grown.  
Like *Lunaticks* ye roar and range about;  
Frame Plots, then crack your brains to find 'em out;  
Like *Oliver's* Porter, but not so devout.<sup>52</sup>

47 Hinds, pp. 269–70.

48 John Gibney, *Ireland and the Popish Plot* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 117. Kenyon discusses the trial in detail; pp. 192–201.

49 Kenyon, p. 276.

50 John Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel* (London, 1681), p. 5.

51 Hughes dates these plays to 'spring 1681' and 'summer 1681' respectively; pp. 230, 235.

52 Thomas D'Urfey, *Sir Barnaby Whigg* (London, 1681), sig. A4<sup>r</sup>. Oliver Cromwell's porter, referred to occasionally in the literature of this period, was Daniel, an inmate of the Bethlehem mental hospital, who was said to be 7 feet 6 inches tall and to have been driven mad by an excess of religious fervour; see Sean Shesgreen, *The Criers and Hawkers of London: Engravings and Drawings by Marcellus Laroon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 218.

This is a very forthright statement: the plot is identified as a ‘sham’, and the people responsible for ‘finding ’em out’ are accused of actually inventing (‘framing’) these ‘sham-plots’ in the first place. In a typical Tory line of attack, the Whig party is linked to ‘Oliver’ (Cromwell), and neatly added to this is the insinuated accusation of atheism that Sir Edward, in *The Lancashire Witches*, claimed to ‘scorn’. In contrast to the plaintive tone of previous dramatic comments from Tories on the plot, D’Urfey, by 1681, felt confident enough to be blunt about his scepticism. His prologue shows that doubts about the Popish Plot were being made public. Even Shadwell’s play acknowledges this development by presenting the audience with characters who openly express their scepticism about the plot: Tegue and Smerk. Shadwell’s play represents part of a wider Whig attempt to keep the Popish Plot alive.

The irony of the play’s stance towards the plot is that it depends on the audience’s prior belief in it. While Tegue and Smerk’s sceptical doubts are shouted down in the play by the ‘good’ characters (that is, those characters whose principles are Whiggish), they are never really disproved. There is no direct evidence on stage of Tegue’s involvement in any kind of plot; he makes frequent remarks about having been taught by the Jesuits, and expresses a readiness to take false oaths, but there is nothing on stage to suggest that he is actively plotting any crime, other than those crimes that, in 1681, were associated with the practice of his religion. At the end of the play, Tegue is arrested by a messenger:

MESS. I must beg your pardon Sir, I have a warrant against this *Kelly, Alias Tegue O Divelly* – he is accus’d for being in the Plot.

SIR EDW. My house is no refuge for Traytors Sir.

PRIEST. Aboo, boo, boo! by my shalvaation dere is no Plot, and I vill not go vid you. Dou art a damn’d Fanaatick, if dou dosht shay dere is a Plot. Dou art a Presbiterian Dogg.

MESS. No striving, come a long with me:

PRIEST. Phaath vill I do: I am Innocent as de Child dat is to be Born; and if they vill hang me, I vill be a shaint indeed. *My hanging Speech was made for me, long a go by de Jesuits, and I have it ready, and I vill live and dy by it, by my shoule.*

(v.686–96)

Sir Edward has not played any role in Tegue’s arrest: he is therefore freed from any implication of cruelty or zealotry. Nonetheless, Sir Edward is extremely quick to conclude – solely on the basis of an



accusation – that Tegue is guilty. Tegue himself never admits this, instead proclaiming his innocence. The censored lines at the end of his speech raise doubts about Tegue's innocence since they imply that the Jesuits have ordered him to maintain his innocence, even on the scaffold, despite his guilt. These lines, had they been permitted to be performed, would have been highly significant. All of the various people executed for taking part in the plot maintained their innocence to the end, despite the fact that they were offered incentives to confess.<sup>53</sup> As the executions mounted up, the continuing absence of even one confession presented a powerful argument against the reality of the plot – an argument which the play seeks to undermine in the censored lines.

In the preface to the play, Shadwell added further clarification as to Tegue's guilt. Here, he identifies the priest as 'Kelly (one of the Murderers of Sir Edmond-Bury Godfrey) which I make to be his feign'd Name, and Tegue O Dively his true one'. Sir Edmund Godfrey, the magistrate who first took Titus Oates's deposition, was later found dead in circumstances that remain mysterious.<sup>54</sup> His death provided much of the impetus for the investigation of the Popish Plot. Some of Godfrey's supposed murderers were convicted on the testimony of Miles Prance, who became another witness to this part of the plot. Prance was a Catholic gold- and silversmith, who was arrested after neighbours had informed on him for making 'ill-considered remarks in favour of the Jesuits', and eventually testified that he was party to a plot to murder Godfrey. Involved in this plot were three of his acquaintances, who were eventually executed, but the ringleaders were said to be two Irish priests, Fathers Girald and Kelly, who escaped capture.<sup>55</sup>

Audience members who had followed the trials would have been able to identify Tegue as Father Kelly without the benefit of Shadwell's preface from his early exchange with Sir Edward, in which he reveals that '[t]hey do put the Name of *Kelly* upon me, Joy, but by my fait

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53 Kenyon, pp. 206–07, describes evidence suggesting that the consistent denials and scaffold speeches of the people convicted – many of which were published – began to have an impact on public opinion.

54 Kenyon, pp. 88–89. Kenyon discusses a variety of theories which have been advanced, some of which are almost as outlandish as the plot itself, in an appendix; pp. 302–09.

55 Prance's story is told in detail in Alan Marshall, *The Strange Death of Edmund Godfrey: Plots and Politics in Restoration London* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), pp. 124–30.

I am call'd by my own right Name, *Tegue O Divelly*' (III.109–10). Sir Edward has previously said of Tegue that 'he may be out of the damn'd Plot, if any Priest was? Sure they would never trust this Fool' (III.101–03). Sir Edward's fault, it seems, is that he is too kind-hearted and trusting: he is by the end of the play revealed to be wrong about Tegue, whose alias would probably have been familiar to most, if not all, of the play's original audience.

Tegue's declaration that he is 'Innocent as de Child dat is to be born' also has contemporary significance, as it closely resembles a phrase used in a pamphlet account of one of the men convicted for the murder of Edmund Godfrey. Samuel Smith, the Ordinary of Newgate prison, wrote that Robert Green 'lookt upon himself as Innocent as the Child Unborn'.<sup>56</sup> According to the pamphlet, however, there was no doubt in Smith's mind as to Green's guilt: rather, he thought that Green considered himself innocent because he had received a 'Popish absolution'. This is probably the sense in which Tegue's statement was intended to be understood by contemporary audience members. Despite his arrest at the end of the play, Tegue reappears in another of Shadwell's plays, *The Amorous Bigotte* (1690). In this play, Tegue, having escaped to Spain, confirms that he was 'deep in our brave Plott'.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, within the onstage action, there is no clear evidence of Tegue's involvement in any plot, still less a murder. The audience is assumed to believe in his guilt before they have even arrived at the theatre. It would have been quite easy for Shadwell to provide more concrete evidence within the play – to demonstrate, unambiguously, that Tegue is guilty. Instead of appealing to evidence, however, the play relies on the authority of King and Parliament to establish the reality of the plot. Within the framework of a play that conspicuously rejects various forms of authority, this appeal seems eccentric. As noted, Shadwell distinguishes between 'Evidences' and 'Actions' in relation to the witches in his preface. The Evidence for witchcraft in the play is weak, even though the Actions are real; but in the case of the Popish Plot, there is little Evidence and no Action. The play seems unconcerned about whether Tegue's guilt can be proven or even if he is guilty at all; it demands his execution regardless.

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56 Samuel Smith, *An Account of the Behaviour of the Fourteen Late Popish Malefactors, whilst in Newgate* (London, 1679), p. 10. Marshall also refers to this pamphlet (p. 136).

57 Thomas Shadwell, *The Amorous Bigotte* (London, 1690), p. 3.

Shadwell's play appears at first sight to take a reasoned and sceptical attitude towards witchcraft. But on closer examination, it can be seen that the play relies not on evidence or reason but on faith: faith that there is always a natural explanation for the seemingly supernatural phenomenon of witchcraft, and faith in the existence of a Popish Plot. The former faith may be consistent with reason, but the latter is ultimately backed up by an appeal to authority and the threat implied by the accusation of 'impudence'. This appeal to authority – the authority of king (despite Charles's own scepticism towards the plot) and Parliament – is itself paradoxical, given the play's championing of 'the people's liberties' against the authority of Church and, implicitly, monarch.

*The Lancashire Witches* shows that scepticism about witchcraft need not be humane; it can be motivated by very different impulses. The play's unobvious attack on witchcraft belief serves the more important purpose of attacking Catholicism and Shadwell's political opponents, the Tories. Casting the Tory, High Church, Catholic, and crypto-Catholic characters<sup>58</sup> as the hunters of witches neatly reverses the situation outside the theatre. Sir Edward's expressions of sympathy for the 'poor old woman' persecuted so cruelly by Sir Jeffrey and his followers establish the Whig characters as the humane ones – but it was the Whigs, outside the theatre, who were at this point engaging in the bloodthirsty persecution of Catholics, while Tories such as Roger L'Estrange attempted to cast doubt on the reality of the Plot in an attempt to end such persecution and resist the growing demands for the Exclusion Bill.

The doubts of the rational characters about witchcraft are used to establish them as, like Shadwell himself, 'somewhat costive of belief'. These doubts confirm their credibility and good judgement, reinforcing the audience's faith in their conclusions about the plot. Scepticism about witchcraft therefore supports belief in the existence of the plot. This feature of the play is very similar to the kind of rhetorical scepticism that can be found in other witchcraft plays, such as *The Witch of Edmonton*. The difference in this case is that the scepticism about witchcraft itself is apparently genuine; nevertheless, this scepticism is used to reinforce belief in a witch-hunt of a similar kind.

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58 Sir Jeffrey can be identified as another character who is 'Popishly affected' by his use of the exclamation 'By'r Lady', and the clown character Clod also says 'by the Mass' and 'by'r Lady'.

The play identifies Catholics as the real witches, contrasting Tegue with the imagined witches of the title. Both priest and witches are arrested by the end of the play, but before this they exchange words:

PRIEST. Dost dou mutter? By my shoule I will hang dee Joy; a  
plaaque taak dee indeed.

M. DICK. Thou art a Popish Priest, and I will hang thee.  
(v.196–98)

The witch has the last word in this argument, and contemporary audiences cannot have been unaware that Mother Dickenson's threat was, in the world outside the theatre, much more likely to be realised than Tegue's: during the Popish Plot, many more Catholics were executed than alleged witches. Heywood and Brome's seemingly credulous play tends not to support the persecution of witches, suggesting instead the dangers of Doughty's unrestrained credulity. In Shadwell's play, despite the expressions of sympathy for supposed witches, there is no mercy whatsoever for the 'real' witches. For Shadwell, just as for John Bale almost 150 years earlier, those real witches are not malevolent old women, but Catholics and their sympathisers.