The Supernatural, the Demonic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern English Plays:

Macbeth, *The Witch*, *The Witch of Edmonton*, **and** *Doctor Faustus*

by

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THE SUPERNATURAL, THE DEMONIC, AND WITCHCRAFT

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During the early modern period of England, a number of playwrights explored themes of witchcraft, magic, and demonic pacts in their works. Contemporary religious persecution and superstition impacted literature during this time and this focus on the supernatural reflected a communal fear and anxiety towards pagan rituals. This uncertainty led people to search for explanations for the bleak and unanswerable tragedies of daily life, causing them to blame their misfortune on supernatural circumstances rather than the random, cruel nature of the world. *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1606) by William Shakespeare, *The Witch* (1616) by Thomas Middleton, *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) written by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, and *Doctor Faustus* (1589-1592) by Christopher Marlowe all contain different stage representations of the witch and the demonic. In this thesis, I aim to understand the cultural and social structures that enabled witchcraft accusations, not as a coordinated effort on behalf of the Church to kill women, but rather a progression of ideologies and religious beliefs regarding magic and how to maintain social hegemony. I aspire to challenge our modern tendency to explain witchcraft accusations as a conspiratorial result of patriarchal institutions attacking the bodies of women, and to frame these accusations as multi-faceted, organically growing phenomena that ensured small village communities adhered to a social order. While it is tempting to view representations of the witch through the lens of secular feminist resistance against patriarchy, it is important to reconstruct our readings of these works as being part of a theocratic society and as existing within a network of complex religious beliefs because these plays were originally seen by the credulous eyes of the early modern public.

There is an undeniable catharsis in building a shared narrative history in which the modern reader can project societal progress onto witch trials and accusations; these interpretations of witchcraft are often framed as an act of political resistance against tyrannical

institutions. The Church and English government are often seen as organized, co-operating forces whose wealth, influence, and resources were dedicated to turning the public against women who asserted independence, acted on their sexual desires, or otherwise fell from grace, and exterminating them on those grounds alone. That is not to say that the Church was outside of the realms of misogynistic practices that targeted women. On the contrary, it disseminated patriarchy in other ways, such as spreading the belief that women were more likely to be seduced by the devil or not allowing them to enter a church after giving birth before they were cleansed of bodily impurities. My goal is not to undermine systemic authority, but rather to assert that the social and economic conditions that led to witch killings were complicated, messy, and cannot be ascribed to a singular cause such as gender discrimination. On the other hand, this thesis will not in any way attempt to dispel the rhetorical potential of viewing witches as means of resistance in women's fight against patriarchal oppression. In modern literature, this portrait of the witch has molded and changed to reflect feminist sensibilities, where the witch has become an empowered, sometimes queer, sexually-liberated woman whose refusal to comply with a gender hierarchy makes her a compelling figure. However, the historical accuracy of viewing witch trials and accusations through this lens is dubious and even unfounded, and we must disentangle these modern feminist constructions of the witch from the early modern period. Viewing these works within this lens is to work within a realm of historical revisionism. The ideologies in these works function within a larger scope of demonology, and exist as nuanced and even ambiguous depictions of the social and the demonic as co-existing entities whose balance and social organization depended on the scapegoating of impoverished, isolated witches whose supposed acts of malice and ties to the devil invited the public's scrutiny and conviction.

The Decline of Magic

As argued by Keith Thomas in his acclaimed study *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, to understand religious belief systems and witchcraft accusations, we must first turn to England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To summarize Thomas's historical backdrop, during the early modern period (which roughly encompassed 1500-1800), England was a pre-industrial society and its population was sparsely distributed across rural areas. Around eighty percent of the populace were living in villages or hamlets, though it should also be noted that London's population was growing exponentially, which, of course, impacted the thriving theater scene. Landowners and professional classes, though only five percent of the population, had more national income than all of the lower classes (about fifty percent) combined, which meant vast wealth inequality and hardship (4). For the lower classes especially, infant mortality was extremely common and people were prone to sickness and early death. Many people were chronically suffering from ailments that may have been connected to their diets or lifestyles. The poor lacked access to foods that would nourish them and even the rich were ignorant of healthy nutritional habits (6-7). Mental health was frequently ignored, stigmatized, or linked to the uterus as some form of hysteria (15-16). Childbirth was often dangerous or fatal. There were very few surgical operations because there was no anesthetic, and mortality rates were high. Many people could not afford physicians and there were 30,000 deaths from the bubonic plague in 1603—just three years before Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. All kinds of phenomena such as amulets and preservatives arose to cure the plague, which was regarded as a mystery (11-12).

Medical science was essentially useless or nonexistent by modern standards; physicians believed in the four humors, meaning that they thought all illness was linked to the blood, yellow bile, black bile, or phlegm, and their attempts to cure disease would correspond to whichever

humor they deemed imbalanced. They were not willfully ignorant, but rather doing the best they could with the knowledge available to them (10). These medical theories are often attributed to Aristotelian medicine, and they lasted for over a thousand years. George Dunea wrote of Aristotle's impact on medicinal practices for *Hektoen International Journal*, saying that

> As late as 1620, Robert Burton would explain in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* that a humor is a liquid part of the body without which no living creature can survive. He defined blood as a hot, sweet, temperate, and red humor, prepared in the mesenteric veins; phlegm was cold and moist, designed to nourish and moisten the body; choler was hot, dry, and bitter, gathered in the gall; and melancholy was cold and dry, thick, black, and sour, "begotten of the most feculent part of nourishment and purged from the spleen." To these humors Burton added serum, the matter of urine, sweat, and tears; and spirit, providing a common tie between body and soul, as noted among others by Paracelsus; and these theories remained part of the medical corpus until well into the eighteenth century. (Dunea)

Despite these theories being untrue, it is evident that Aristotelian medicine was influential and widely cited by medical practitioners for thousands of years. Aristotle's leanings towards biological observations, dissections, and evidence-based medicine were influential in that they shied away from practices formed around superstition. The failings of what we would now consider scientific medicine pushed impoverished people to turn to herbalists, cunning folk, or wise men and women for their problems. These medical hobbyists were looked down upon by parliament and the rising institutional medical community (14). Some passed out pamphlets with genuine lore and knowledge about roots and herbs, while others did their patients severe or fatal damage.

Fire was a prominent risk and hazard in villages, as water supplies were unreliable and they had no way to project water to higher heights to douse the flames sufficiently (17-18), which meant that fire could have a disastrous economic effect as well as on human lives. People were left homeless or dead, and it would cost thousands in repairs, as it could spread and sometimes wipe out entire villages (19). Alcoholism, gambling, and tobacco use were common vices to get working people through the week. Overall, poverty, sickness, and sudden disaster were familiar to the social environment of the period, and it seems that common people, especially the poor, regarded misfortune (such as losing a spouse or a young child to an early grave) as an inevitability. All of this tragedy, misfortune, and cruelty created the perfect storm for the popularization of rising religious beliefs systems, and the resolve of the medieval Church, which would attempt to "[combat] fatalistic hopelessness" and "explain misfortune and mitigate its rigour" (24).

Therefore, with this portrait of England in mind, it is unquestionable that "the medieval Church thus acted as a repository of supernatural power which could be dispensed to the faithful to help them in their daily problems" (35) and that these daily problems, in and of themselves, were the depths of human sorrows and despair. People went on long, weary pilgrimages to shrines and holy places expecting supernatural cures. Worshipping saints, or images of saints, was considered a cure for the fear associated with misfortune or fear of retribution from the saints themselves (29). The medieval Church, before the Protestant Reformation, claimed to hold supernatural power, and this power

> was an essential element in the Anglo-Saxon Church's fight against paganism, and
> missionaries did not fail to stress the superiority of the Christian prayers to heathen
> charms. The medieval Church thus found itself saddled with the tradition that the

working of miracles was the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of

the truth. (28)

The Church acted as a liaison between Christians and God, stressing the importance of rituals, sacraments, and mass. Therefore, the institution could dictate which words were considered prayers or spells, and whether rituals were considered to be holy sacraments or paganistic:

The ancient worship of wells, trees and stones was not so much abolished as modified, by turning pagan sites into Christian ones and associating them with a saint rather than a heathen divinity. The pagan festivals were similarly incorporated into the Church year. New Year's Day became the feast of the Circumcision; May Day was SS. Philip and James; Midsummer Eve the Nativity of St John the Baptist. Fertility rites were converted into Christian processions and the Yule Log was introduced into celebrations of the birth of Christ. (54)

Some of these Catholic celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter, remain as thus to this day. Despite heavily borrowing and repackaging older pagan rites (such as these assimilated symbols and festivals), the medieval Church controlled the narrative, so if they did not see something as an action of God, it must have been from the Devil: "The Church did not deny that supernatural action was possible, but it stressed that it could emanate from only two possible sources: God or the Devil" (303). This dichotomy is complicated by Protestant beliefs, and the shifting religious sentiments of the early modern period.

It is said that Christopher Marlowe, in particular, showed through his work his excitement at the prospect of living in a transitional period of time where ideologies were shifting. David Wootton writes that

As Europe was caught up in wars between Protestantism and Catholicism, Marlowe must have thought himself trapped in a similar world, in which the old order was being destroyed; but the shape to be taken by any future order was still unknown. His response was not so much one of horror, as of delight. (ix)

Marlowe was constantly being accused by his adversaries for being an atheist, though it is important to consider that Elizabethan and Jacobean writers used "atheist" as an umbrella term for those who were non-conforming or exhibited a kind of immorality rather than being a non-believer. Thomas mentions that "Christopher Marlowe indeed expressed the view that the New Testament was 'filthily written,' that Christ was a bastard and his apostles 'base fellows.' He also anticipated some modern theologians by suggesting that Jesus was a homosexual" (198). However, not every person who lived during this time could be that brazen. "Only in 1677 was the punishment for heresy reduced from death by burning to mere excommunication" (204), demonstrating that many people may have been skeptical or indifferent to religion, but did not voice it for fear of being killed.

The Protestant Reformation further muddled the line between magic and the medieval Church because Protestants asserted that Catholics were participating in rituals that were the devil's craft (58). "[M]ost Catholic rites were regarded as thinly concealed mutations of earlier pagan ceremonies" (74), "no mere ceremony could have any material efficacy, and that divine grace could not be conjured or coerced by any human formula" (65) and "[w]ords and prayers, in other words, had no power in themselves, unless God chose to heed them" (70). Protestants believed that Catholics were using witchcraft and magic when they used instruments or relics to evoke God's power, which they maintained belonged to God alone. Similarly, they did not think that a person needed to go to mass or pray in a church and preferred to build their relationship

with God through quiet reflection and prayer in the home. They were outspoken in their campaign against the holy sacraments, which they regarded as sorcery and devilry, and attempted to deprive the medieval Church of all the supernatural power it claimed to have. In essence, the Protestants believed in stripping human beings of all their ill-conceived divine abilities, and placing all influence back into the hands of the divine itself:

> Protestantism thus presented itself as a deliberate attempt to take magical elements out of religion, to eliminate the idea that the rituals of the Church had about them a mechanical efficacy, and to abandon the effort to endow physical objects with supernatural qualities by special formulae of consecration and exorcism. Above all, it diminished the institutional role of the Church as the dispenser of divine grace. The individual stood in a direct relationship to God and was solely dependent upon his omnipotence. (87)

Before the Reformation, the medieval Church situated itself within a binary of good and evil; the Church was the dispensary of truth, which aimed to absolve its followers of their sins and hardships, and all of the hardships caused by the devil's interference. Anyone who used magic outside of the Church's jurisdiction was working with the devil because the Church acted as God's representative. By 1534-1536, the Church was Protestant, and these lines between magic and religion became blurred. A new religious binary formed out of a false, blasphemous religion opposed to Protestantism. Magic, on the other hand, "was no longer to be seen as a false religion [...] it was a different sort of activity altogether" (88). The difference between magic and religious ritual lay within who controlled the narrative, and who was deemed legitimate and authentic. During the early modern period, religion was defined as modes of behavior and practice rather than strictly belief (88), and the beliefs themselves were muddled.

The difference between churchmen and magicians lay less in the effects they claimed to

achieve than in their social position, and in the authority on which their respective claims

rested. As the Elizabethan Reginald Scot wrote sardonically of the Pope, 'He canonizeth

the rich for saints and banneth the poor for witches.' (56)

A Portrait of Early Modern England: Secularism and Demonology[1]

It is pivotal to first dispel this notion that witchcraft beliefs were primarily held by the poor and

ignorant. Indeed, King James I wrote a substantial tome entitled *Daemonologie*, in which he

outlined his concerns with necromancers, witches, sorcerers, spirits, and specters. In the preface,

he asserts:

The fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaues of the

Deuill, the Witches or enchaunters, hath moved me (beloued reader) to dispatch in post,

this following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serue for a shew of my

learning & ingine, but onely (mooued of conscience) to preasse thereby, so farre as I can,

to resolue the doubting harts of many; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most

certainly practized, & that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severly to be punished.

(xi)

King James's delusions shaped his entire belief system. Howard V. Calhoun writes in his essay

entitled "James I and the Witch Scenes in 'Macbeth'" that

James betrays a singular gullibility with respect to the diabolical powers attributed to

witches, and says definitely that they "ought to be put to death according to the Law of

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[1] Parts of this section were reworked from my previous essay, "Something Wicked This Way Comes: A Historical
Analysis of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," available online at: https://haleiga.wordpress.com/2019/12/17/something-
wicked-this-way-comes-a-historical-analysis-of-shakespeares-macbeth/.

God, the ciuill and imperial law, and municipall law of all Christian nations." This

treatise, coming as it did from the hand of the most powerful figure in the kingdom, was

bound to counteract the effect that the work of a liberal thinker like Reginald Scot had

made upon the popular mind. (185)

Besides viewing witchcraft as a sin that needed to be purged from society, James claimed that

witches tried to take his life on multiple occasions, specifically Agnes Sampson, who was

implicated, tortured, and killed after confessing to using human body parts in a spell in order to

sink his ship during a storm. In a 2015 lecture for Gresham College, James Wright discusses how

that voyage changed James I's perception of witchcraft so much that when he returned to

Scotland from Denmark in 1590, over a hundred people were executed under the presumption

that they were in a coven and they played a role in conspiring his death, noting that James even

acted as an interrogator in many of these cases. It goes without saying that a member of royalty,

especially a king, acting as judge, jury, and executioner does not exactly fare well for the

accused.

   The Gunpowder Plot of 1605, an infamous terrorist plan designed to kill James and his

entire Parliament, was also discovered and defused, but the betrayal that James felt towards his

people shook him to the core and vindicated his paranoia. Stephen Greenblatt writes in his

introduction to *Macbeth* in the *Norton Shakespeare*: "Carrying a watch and devices to light

fuses, Fawkes intended to carry out a desperate plot devised by a small group of conspirators,

embittered by what they perceived as James's unwillingness to extend tolerance to Roman

Catholics" (2555). In *Witches and Jesuits*, Garry Wills states that "The King disseminated his

official version of religious propaganda" (15) after the plot was revealed, using it as an excuse to

push his own ideologies about witchcraft and regicide. Wills affirms that gunpowder was viewed

as being of the devil, so the connection between the two elements of James's fears are clear: "The key to the King's interpretation of the Plot was its subsumption into the apocalyptic reading of history that was the center of religio-political ideology at the time" (16). The Plot exemplified religious intolerance of the period, revealing the King's opposition to those who performed Catholic rituals as well as magical ones, and being a patron of the theater, he undoubtedly influenced the composition and subject matter of *Macbeth*. It is no coincidence that the Bard of Avon wrote *Macbeth* as a bridge between Scottish and English rule, Greenblatt explains that

> Eighteen months before these momentous events, a company of London actors experienced what was for them an important change in their legal status. On May 19, 1603, a scant two months after the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of the English throne of the Scottish King James, Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was formally declared to be the King's Men. The players had every reason to be grateful to their royal master and attentive to his pleasure and interest. It has long been argued that one of the most striking signs of this gratitude was *Macbeth*, based on a story from Scottish history particularly apt for a monarch who traced his line back to Banquo, the noble thane whose murder Macbeth orders after he has killed King Duncan. (2555)

Thus, it becomes evident, at least in the case of *Macbeth*, that the credulous perspectives of the ruling class made their way into the literature during this period, and these anxieties of witchcraft and devilry were not isolated to the lower rungs of society.

On the other side of the spectrum, there were skeptical voices, showing that even Protestant interpretations of witchcraft beliefs were not monolithic. Reginald Scot argued that people who blamed witches had their fear displaced, as humans were unable to harness

supernatural powers. Scot turned a mistrustful eye towards those who believed that witches, as

human beings, could possess a force that rivaled God. He wrote in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft*

that

> The fables of Witchcraft have taken so fast hold and deepe root in the heart of man, that
>
> fewe or none can (nowadaies) with patience indure the hand and correction of God. For if
>
> any adversitie, greefe, sicknesse, losse of children, corne, cattell, or libertie happen vnto
>
> them; by & by they exclaime uppon witches. As though there were no God in Israel that
>
> ordereth all things according to his will; punishing both just and unjust with greefs,
>
> plagues, and afflictions in maner and forme as he thinketh good: but that certeine old
>
> women heere on earth, called witches, must needs be the contrivers of all mens
>
> calamities, and as though they themselves were innocents, and had deserved no such
>
> punishments. Insomuch as they sticke not to ride and go to such, as either are injuriouslie
>
> tearmed witches, or else are willing so to be accounted, seeking at their hands comfort
>
> and remedie in time of their tribulation, contrarie to Gods will and commandement in that
>
> behalfe, who bids us resort to him in all our necessities. (Scot)

Unlike King James, Scot did not believe that witches should be killed or tortured for their

indiscretions, nor did he find them to be a genuine threat within an extraordinary cosmic scope.

Nor did he believe that a person could make a pact with the devil, as the devil is an immaterial

being who does not communicate with humans.

This is all to say that there was no consensus around skepticism and witchcraft beliefs.

While early modern England was not secular, it must be stressed that there was no institutional

conspiracy supervised by the Church or the state to systematically murder witches, but rather

various intersecting beliefs in magic, evil-doing, and devilry that were complicated by the

dynamics between Catholics and Protestants' theological differences, and differences within Protestantism as well. It is worth mentioning, too, that as well as not being a secular culture, England during this time was not a literary culture, either. Before the invention of the printing press, there was less dissemination of public documents or literature. Even after its advent, technology was not as sophisticated as it is today, and there was not systemic resolution to the unreliability of documents and data about witch trials. As Keith Thomas surmises, "[o]ur knowledge of the evidence presented against the witches depends upon the irregular survival of depositions, either at first-hand or in contemporary pamphlet accounts. This means that we know virtually nothing of what was said at most of the trials" (528). This existential issue of authorship also gives us a taste of the debate over *Macbeth* and Middleton. It is an unfortunate reality that information was either lost or never recorded to begin with, and that there is an incalculable amount of data that we do not know or have access to, and much of it we probably will never uncover. This black hole of data includes the exact number of witches that died or what was said during their depositions.

A Portrait of the Witch

The witch of early modern English society was likely to be an impoverished woman who lived an isolated life within a small, tightly-knit village community. Within trial records, there is little evidence or trace of sabbats or covens; instead, accusations within rural communities were derivatives of intersecting beliefs and anxieties rather than organized attempts by the Church and community to oust witch-cults. John Swain details the economic and social ongoings surrounding the trials of the Lancashire witches (one of the most famous trials in England during

this period) in his essay, "Witchcraft, Economy and Society in the Forest of Pendle." He succinctly illustrates this portrait of the witch:

> Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane put forward a hypothesis, derived substantially from Scot, that many accusations of witchcraft originated when a beggar, often an old woman, would be refused charity by a wealthier neighbour, would depart muttering curses and would subsequently get the blame for any immediate misfortune. Thomas claimed: "The overwhelming majority of fully documented witch cases fall into this simple pattern. The witch is sent away empty-handed, perhaps mumbling a malediction; and in due course something goes wrong with the household, for which she is immediately held responsible." (73)

This evidence was substantially derived from Scot's *Discoverie*:

> One sort of such as are said to bee witches, are women which be commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as knowe no religion: in whose drousie minds the divell hath goten a fine seat; so as, what mischeefe, mischance, calamitie, or slaughter is brought to passe, they are easilie persuaded the same is doone by themselves; inprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination hereof. They are leane and deformed, shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them. They are doting, scolds, mad, divelish; and not much differing from them that are thought to be possessed with spirits; so firme and stedfast in their opinions, as whosoever shall onelie have respect to the constancie of their words uttered, would easilie beleeve they were true indeed. These miserable wretches are so odious unto all their neighbors, and so feared, as few dare offend them, or denie them anie thing they aske: whereby they take upon them; yea, and sometimes thinke, that they

can doo such things as are beyond the abilitie of humane nature. These go from house to

house, and from doore to doore for a pot full of milke, yest, drinke, pottage, or some such

releefe; without the which they could hardlie live: neither obtaining for their service and

paines, nor by their art, nor yet at the divels hands (with whome they are said to make a

perfect and visible bargaine) either beautie, monie, promotion, welth, worship, pleasure,

honor, knowledge, learning, or anie other benefit whatsoever. (Scot)

It is important to consider how Scot's portrait places blame on the social atmosphere and

material conditions of the witch imposed onto her by forces outside of her control, such as

poverty and destitution, but also on her own behavior and role within her community. The

relationship between the witch and her accusers was not one-sided, but rather rooted in a mutual

sense of discomfort and agitation. Her neighbors lived in genuine fear of her ire, completely

unbeknownst to them that she could not hurt them at all, and that all of their misfortune was the

cruel byproduct of their living conditions, lack of medical science, and feverish paranoia of the

devil.

Along with the economic aspects of the witch, there were also social stigmas associated

with witches; they were old and often thought of as ugly or hag-like, and these stereotypes based

on their physical appearances could possibly derive from their internal villainy. This perceived

correspondence between outward appearance and inner maledictions is an ancient practice rooted

in physiognomy, or a pseudo-scientific method of assessing a person's personality or character

from their outward appearance. In regards to their personality types, Alan Macfarlane writes in

Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study that

Those who were boastful, illiterate, miserable, lustful and leading a 'lewd and naughty

kind of life,' melancholy—all were likely to be witches. Above all, they were thought to

be the type of person who went round begging and those who had vicious tongues.

Witches were people of 'ill natures, of a wicked disposition, and spitefully malicious';

'malicious people, full of revenge, having hearts swolne with rancour.' They were scolds

and peevish. (158)

The witch's social and economic role was distinct, but along with belief in the devil, she was

often accused of harboring *maleficium* towards her neighbors for denying her charity—that is to

say, magic used to inflict damage, pain, or injury.

In order to understand the influence of curses during the early modern period, we must

consider how speech acts were seen by the medieval Church and within religious beliefs of the

period; the distinction between prayers and spells was hazy, but nonetheless, it is undeniable that

words and their intentions held supernatural power. Thomas notes: "The belief that it was

possible for one person to do physical injury to another by the mere enunciation of hostile words

had a long prehistory" (599). Catholic clergy would also use God's word to curse and

excommunicate thieves, murderers, and enemies of the Church. It was also believed that the

curses of people from the lower classes were stronger than those of the upper classes and greed

was associated with the devil. The power of words and intentions was so strong that instead of

lying, Catholics would often deceive by omission or use ambiguous language—known as

equivocating—to not attract God's fury (like Father Garnet infamously did during the

Gunpowder Plot).

This malicious intent of the witch to curse her neighbor's corn or cattle may have been a

reaction to the economic and social cruelty she endured. Cursing was the only way that she could

seek autonomy and revenge for her lot in life. This belief translates onto the stage, for as Thomas

argues, "in Shakespeare's plays, the curse pronounced by the characters invariably works. This is

not just for dramatic effect; it was moral necessity that the poor and the injured should be believed to have this power of retaliation when all else had failed" (605). Helen Ostovich and Lisa Hopkins write in their introduction to *Magical Transformations on the English Stage* that

> In the early modern period, magic was an alternative for people without other options, whether because of ignorance, poverty, class structures, or gender constraints. Magic also became a way of accusing and isolating those who seemed to challenge the identity or legitimacy of the dominant religious or social group. Sometimes the practices of those "others" seemed to rely on tricksterism, [...] but, in the popular imagination, magic remained the back-up plan that might work in a pinch. (1)

Therefore, we can see magic as a political and retributive act by those who were otherwise powerless, witches seeking to damage those who turned them away or denied them precious resources and commodities. They could trick themselves and their peers into believing that their words held the power to harm communities despite holding little social or economic capital, and their magic amounting to nothing more than a string of malignant obscenities. Their accusers, similarly, formed their accusations to displace their own guilt at having disregarded their sworn duty of giving charity and looking after the poorer members of their community. It is impossible to ascertain whether the guilt or belief in the curses themselves made the victims manifest physical symptoms. To summarize Macfarlane's *Witchcraft*, there was a step-by-step process by which a community would reach conclusive evidence for a witchcraft accusation. First, there was a general fear and uncertainty around witches; people did not want to allow others in their homes or let them borrow their goods because they were afraid that their personal belongings falling into the hands of a witch could be detrimental to their lives. This denial of charity caused *maleficium*. Then, an individual would discuss their fears with a neighbor, and their gossip

would have a rippling effect on the entire community until the village came to a consensus that there was, in fact, an imposter among them. Subsequently, the community would turn their apprehension towards someone who was unanimously disliked (more often than not, someone older who had lived in the community for most of their lives), and a cycle formed where the witch was accused for being disliked and disliked for being accused. This spiral continued until the concerned individual(s) went to a cunning man or woman, who, in their own efforts to avoid suspicion of witchcraft and to maintain their reputation as a "white" magic user, would use their supernatural intuition to confirm the beliefs and fears of the group, thereby initiating the involvement of the courts against the witch in question (110).

The demonic pact, similarly, was a hallmark of witchcraft accusations, as a witch was someone who sought occult forces to bring harm and injury to those around her. Thomas asserts that there was a

> notion that the witch owed her powers to having made a deliberate pact with the Devil. In return for her promise of allegiance, she was thought to have been given the means of wreaking supernatural vengeance upon her enemies. Seen from this new point of view, the essence of witchcraft was not the damage it did to other persons, but its heretical character—devil-worship. Witchcraft had become a Christian heresy, the greatest of all sins, because it involved the renunciation of God and deliberate adherence to his greatest enemy. *Maleficium* was a purely secondary activity, a by-product of this false religion. Whether or not the witch injured other people, she deserved to die for her disloyalty to God. (521)

The witch's power over the demonic was not always agreed upon. While witches were often blamed for more intimate cases of children or animals becoming sick or crops dying, general

pestilence or misfortune that befell an entire community was often attributed to a higher force. It was widely accepted that a witch's power was localized to a couple of miles at most, and their crimes felt personal to their neighbors, who were their close adversaries within small villages. Often curses or spells were viewed within a context of cause and effect: the neighbor would offend the witch in some way, they would find that their child was sick, their crops were dying, or they sustained a mild injury soon after, and they would blame their inconvenience or hardship on the sole person who they had an argument with a couple days before. The witch, it was then implied, consulted the devil or the occult as a means of retribution. As previously established, Scot believed that witches (or humans in general) could not possess the supernatural prowess needed to warrant punishment or execution. Thomas carefully treads the subject of demonic possession as being a reflection of the period's lack of resources in terms of understanding mental illness without diagnosing it as such. Others believed that witches were a pawn of demonic forces that would be discarded after use, or that women in particular were more likely to be seduced by Satan's charms. Macfarlane writes that "Contemporary writers saw the explanation of the predominance of female witches in the temperament of women. They suggested that the female sex was both weak and vicious—weak towards Satan and vicious towards fellow human beings" (161). As previously established, women's "hysteria" was often erroneously attributed to the lunar cycle.

These sexist ideations point towards our modern manifestations of the witch as a reclaimed feminist symbol, or a woman who was wrongfully murdered by male-dominated hegemonic order for falling out of line. Although early modern society was a far cry from a progressive modern representation of witches, these plays have a complicated social and

economic infrastructure. As we will see in analyzing the plays, empowered witches could also use this demonic pact as a revolutionary sense of autonomy over their material conditions.

Representations of Witchcraft in Early Modern English Plays

To understand the representations of witchcraft and the demonic in *Macbeth*, *The Witch*, *The Witch of Edmonton*, and *Doctor Faustus*, we must first assess a brief history of how the supernatural was staged, and how all theater is, essentially, a kind of representation of reality. John D. Cox writes in *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642* that

> [T]he role of stage devils in pre-Reformation drama was to enact whatever opposed individual wellbeing and the sacramental community. Far from being a secular innovation, devils were a way of imagining how and why the sacred needed to function redemptively in the life of the individual and the community. (2)

Although it is tempting for us, as modern readers, to separate the supernatural from the political, Cox urges the reader to avoid binary thinking, or, thinking in terms of the plays being either progressive or religious because they are both simultaneously: "the favored terms were 'secular,' 'progressive,' 'rational,' 'modern,' and the like, in opposition to 'religious,' 'backward,' 'enthusiastic,' 'medieval.' We can see these two incommensurate binary systems in transition and in collision with one another in the eighteenth century" (8). The devil on the stage was not a secular social satire divorced from religion, but rather an amalgamation of different ideas, superstitions, and social issues throughout time. Life imitates art and art imitates life. When reading the plays, we need to consider that their audience was "a people whose religious rituals [were] so woven into the fabric of their life that they could not separate religion from the rest of their activities" rather than "a society in which religion [was] a matter of conscious beliefs,

important primarily for the times of one's most philosophical and poetic solitude" (10). Drama was a social commentary and a means of expressing anxieties and tensions within a community. It also reflected upon how that community should behave. Just as in small communities witchcraft accusations were justified as religious crusades against the devil, they were also a means to "police" people, or to preserve a structure in a society that condemned transgressive behaviors. The beliefs of the time period were too based in religious thinking to be entirely progressive and disconnected from their native roots.

Early modern audiences may have also deemed the theater to be a kind of demonic ritual in itself. Cox espouses the view that the Shakespearean stage "was more likely to be expressive than reductive, repeatedly calling attention to the permeable boundaries between reality and illusion because no one knew precisely where they were" (163). *Macbeth*, especially, breaks down these boundaries between reality and fiction, not only for the characters within it but also for early modern audiences, whose deeply religious society established a foundation for theater-goers to view performance as another form of ritual, or perhaps, demonic expression. Representations of the witch and the demonic in *Macbeth, The Witch, The Witch of Edmonton*, and *Doctor Faustus* illuminate social strife and anxieties of the early modern period in their blending of the supernatural with daily life and political upheaval. In pursuit of these examples, I will first analyze the witches' representations in each of the plays in the scope of what we know of demonology and witchcraft beliefs. Then I will discuss the demonic and the social, showing how their co-existence is necessary to nuanced interpretations of the plays. Finally, I will entertain social, political, and gender commentaries divorced from the supernatural and address the short-comings of secular readings.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (likely written in 1606), the "weyward" or weird sisters, are

described as old, withered hags who do not match the other inhabitants of the play:

What are these

So withered, and so wild in their attire,

That look not like th'inhabitants o' th' earth

And yet are on't? (1.3.38-40)

The witches are haggard, which implies that they are members of the peasantry; in some stagings

of the play, they are depicted as the maiden, the mother, and the crone. Their gender is

ambiguous, as they do not fit into any gender role or convention. They are referred to as

"sisters," yet grow beards on their faces: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid

me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.42-44). In "*Macbeth* and the Bearded Women," James

Schiffer writes that there may have been practical reasons for the inclusion of the sisters' facial

hair, such as roles on the stage being reserved for male actors, or concealing these actors' roles

as other beardless women on the stage (205). He asserts that the importance of the bearded

sisters is the image they evoke rather than the subtle happenings in the Globe Theater:

The Weird Sisters' beards point most directly to Lady Macbeth, especially to her attempt

to unsex herself. The perplexing mixture in the witches of masculine and feminine

physical traits is paralleled in Lady Macbeth's effort to destroy her feminine nature and

thus transform herself into what she thinks is a man. (206)

Lady Macbeth is sometimes referred to as the fourth witch of *Macbeth*. The issue with her and

her husband's views on gender and sex, undoubtedly, is their reliance on essentialism—that

being, the belief that there are fixed, innate, and intrinsic qualities to men and women. Gender

essentialism, for Lady Macbeth, is discarding her ability to feel remorse or compassion, even going as far as threatening to dash a baby's brains out in order to unsex herself:

> Clearly, for Lady Macbeth, and for her astonished husband, to be strong and valorous and quick to act, regardless of the action, is to be manly, while the refusal to act on the grounds of love, compassion, or obedience to law and morality is to be womanly. And to be womanly, by their definition, is to be daunted and fearful, powerless and unfulfilled. (207)

On the other hand, the sisters represent Lady Macbeth's inability to meet her goals—they exist outside of the confines of gender expression. Schiffer asserts that it is easy to read the play as being misogynistic, but also claims that Macduff is Shakespeare's "alternative figure," who "is not only able to act in a just cause, but he is also able to love and feel grief and even accept his own sinfulness" (212), thereby showing their views to be false. Macduff defies the gender essentialism of the Macbeths without inhabiting a strange and incorporeal form. Regardless, the sisters and Macduff counteract the antiquated and misogynistic binary thinking of the Macbeths.

The witches talk in hollow chants rather than conversation even when they are alone on stage, and feel remarkably cold and alien to the audience, as if something or someone is speaking through them. The sisters prophesy Macbeth's becoming the Thane of Cawdor before he gets confirmation of it, and then predict that he will become king, which alludes to their mystery because they seem to have otherworldly knowledge or use divination to see the future. Banquo asks if they are "fantastical," or in other words, if they are imaginary, as they do not seem to be of this world. Shakespeare employs some popular witch beliefs to describe them, such as the witches as causing bad weather or calling to their familiars.

He also repeats the number three throughout the play: "When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" (1.1.1-2). There are three witches who use the number three in their chants and spells, and also, three titles for Macbeth: Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and of course, king:

> The weird sisters hand in hand,
>
> Posters of the sea and land
>
> Thus do go about, about,
>
> Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
>
> And thrice again, to make up nine.
>
> Peace! The charm's wound up. (1.3.30-35)

The rule of three is also a tenet held by some modern day occultists or neopagans, who state that whatever a person puts out into the world, be it positive or negative, they will receive back to them three-fold. This sentiment seems especially pertinent for Macbeth, who stands in a metaphorical ocean of the blood of his enemies, and whose suffering and anguish for those deeds cannot be understated.

Furthermore, the sisters harbor a *maleficium* in their words: "I'll drain him dry as hay / Sleep shall neither night nor day" (1.3.17-18), bringing suffering and restlessness against their target. As the play progresses, the witches become more malicious and intense; the audience sees their spell work and the kind of objects they throw into their cauldrons:

> Eye of newt and toe of frog,
>
> Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
>
> Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,

Lizard's leg and owlet's wing, (4.1.14-18)[2]

These are not holistic herbal remedies that cunning folk might gather to aid a patient's health concerns, but rather dead body parts mutilated and repurposed to injure and cause harm. The ingredients could only be obtained from killing small animals and creatures and putting them all in a pot. And, the objects they pour in the cauldron get more grotesque and human as the scene progresses, advancing to "Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips, / Finger of birth-strangled babe" (4.1.29-30). Their indifference to a murdered baby's severed finger indicates they lack a maternal instinct or basic empathy towards the innocent; their alienation from humanity enables them to objectify the noses, lips, and fingers of the deceased, and recycle them. The three witches congregate around death in the play, creating death in their prophecies and collecting relics or body parts of the dead for their spells. Despite their role being an ambivalent one (as they cannot bear the sole responsibility for these murders), their power and malice lingers over the story, permeating the entire play with a burdening question of what to consider reality. Their dreamlike existence, unlike early modern witches proper, exists outside of the confines of society.

In his "Introduction: The Lancashire Witches in Historical Context," James Sharpe writes that

Historians of English witchcraft have generally been in agreement that the sabbat was largely absent in English witch accusations, and both the court records and demonological writings of the period confirm this impression. Conversely, there are some intriguing clues to the existence of a belief in witches' meetings, which sometimes amounted to folkloric versions of the sabbat. (12)

[2] 4.1 and 3.5 are contested passages that may have been written by Thomas Middleton. The controversy around these added or adapted passages warrants acknowledgment.

Shakespeare's witches form a coven to worship their goddess Hecate without interacting with a community, which seems to be an unusual interpretation of witchcraft based in folklore rather than a historical account. Richard Wilson notes in his essay "The Pilot's Thumb: Macbeth and the Jesuits" that "what is most striking about the riddle that both convokes and disperses 'we three' at the beginning of Macbeth is that this was the first time in an English drama when witches had ever been represented as congregating in a group" (126). Overall, Shakespeare's witches reflect an image of a stereotypical witch formed from classical religious superstition; they are not compelling characters with human emotions, but a means to push the plot forward and a way to create fantastical demonstrations of contempt that promote and facilitate the suffering of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

On the subject of contemptible witches, Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (thought to be written between 1613-1616) showcases the character of Hecate as its titular witch, and it is often speculated that Middleton inserted the Hecate scenes in *Macbeth*. Gary Taylor writes in "Empirical Middleton: Adaptation and Microauthorship" that

> In 1778, *The Witch* was printed for the first time, and by 1790 Malone realized that
>
> Middleton's tragicomedy had clearly influenced the 1623 text of at least two scenes (3.5
>
> and 4.1) of Shakespeare's tragedy. Since 1869, most scholars have agreed with W. G.
>
> Clark and W. A. Wright that Shakespeare's original play was later adapted by Middleton
>
> to incorporate two songs and the character of Hecate from *The Witch*. (239)

Questions of authorship aside, in both plays, Hecate does not feel like a real woman with motivations, feelings, and desires, but rather a whimsical literary exploration of *maleficium*. In *The Witch*, the closest Hecate gets to a motive is briefly commenting on her relationship with the characters that denied her charity:

They denied me often flour, barm and milk,

Goose grease and tar, when I ne'er hurt their charmings,

Their brew-locks, nor their batches, not forespoke

Any of their breedings. Now I'll be meet with 'em." (1.2.52-55)

While this interpretation tracks well with the portrait of the witch as outlined by Scot, Thomas,

and Macfarlane because her neighbors turned her away, it differs in that they grovel back to her

to help them manipulate their peers and navigate their romantic affairs. They know the power she

holds, and yet they allow her to live on the fringes of their town, using her when they see fit.

There are a plethora of characters who enlist the help of Hecate and her spirits in order to achieve

their means. In 1.1, the Duke and Duchess are throwing a banquet for Isabella's wedding. In the

middle of this party, the Duke produces a cup made out of a skull, which he horrifyingly admits

was once the Duchess's father. He then suggests that he keeps the skull as a reminder of the war,

"We'll keep till death in memory of that conquest" (1.1.117). The Duchess does not take kindly

to this gesture, vowing revenge on her own husband. She hires Almachildes to kill him later in

the play. Almachildes, Sebastian, and the Duchess all ask for Hecate's help in their personal

deeds, and Hecate uses her power to manipulate or harm others, or gives them the ability to do so

themselves. Barbara Traister writes in her essay, "Magic and the Decline of Demons: A View

from the Stage" about the many archetypes of stage witches:

> Female characters who interact with spirits are portrayed on stage as witches. Two
>
> different sorts of stage witches engage with spirits. Some are mysterious, enigmatic
>
> figures like the witches in *Macbeth*. These characters may not be fully human and derive
>
> from classical ideas about witchcraft. Similar witch characters appear in Middleton's *The*
>
> *Witch* (1616), a play plundered for material to supplement *Macbeth* soon after its

appearance on the stage. Witches of this sort do not represent real women but are part of

a literary imaginary derived from classical conceptions of witchcraft; they themselves

seem nearly as demonic as the spirits with which they work. They are not captured or

punished and, by their plays' ends, melt back into the literary background from which

they emerged. (21)

In this way, Hecate has bearing on the story, but she does not actually navigate Middleton's

proto-soap-operatic play. When the plot is resolved, she disappears, just like the weird sisters,

and shares no accountability. She is not a woman who elicits the help of supernatural forces—

she is the supernatural force. She melts into the literary background as a comical character who

revels in the spectacle of magic, and her spells create the twists and turns of Middleton's chaotic

plot.

In *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), Mother Sawyer fits more neatly into the portrait of the

witch in early modern England. She is introduced to the audience as she is wondering why the

world is against her for being poor and ignorant: "And why on me? why should the envious /

world / Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?" (21). Downtrodden and trying her best to

survive, those around her call her a witch because of her "bad tongue—by their bad usage made

so" (21). This is true, as she does curse the people in her village: "Diseases, plagues, the curse of

an old woman Follow and / fall upon you!" (61), but it is clear that she blames her bad tongue on

the ones who make her use it. The community ostracized her, which in turn, caused her to seem

more suspicious and susceptible to witchcraft accusations. She was initially disliked, but then out

of desperation rose to the occasion and sought out help from the demonic. Unlike Hecate or the

weird sisters, Sawyer is not unusual, strange, or otherworldly. More akin to *Merchant of Venice*'s

Shylock, Mother Sawyer entreats other people to see her as a human being, and despises their

inability to do so. She uses *maleficium* towards her neighbors, but only curses her adversaries

because they treat her so poorly. When Old Banks enters the scene, his abuse justifies her

cursing. He cries, "Out, out upon thee, witch!" (21) and beats her for gathering rotten sticks to

keep herself warm. She replies

> Strike, do!—and withered may that hand and arm
>
> Whose blows have lamed me drop from the rotten trunk.
>
> Abuse me! beat me! call me hag and witch!
>
> What is the name, where and by the art learned,
>
> What spells, what charms, or invocations,
>
> May the thing called Familiar be purchased? (22)

At this point in the play, she does not have any spells, charms, or invocations of her own; she is

only harboring her maledictions. She blames society for calling her a witch, and figures that she

may as well play the role of one. When questioned by an authority figure and government

representative for her witchcraft, she says:

> I am none.
>
> None but base curs so bark at me; I'm none:
>
> Or would I were! if every poor old woman
>
> Be trod on thus by slaves, reviled, kicked, beaten,
>
> As I am daily, she to be revenged
>
> Had need turn witch. (63)

She envisions her neighbors as people who scorned her and made her a witch, thereby illustrating

witchcraft accusations as a societal issue, and yet her close relation to the devil keeps the play

from being a secular commentary on witch persecutions. The play shows the cyclical nature of

witchcraft accusations, giving Mother Sawyer a level of humanity in her suffering when she calls

for a better world without cruelty. Contrary to the witchcraft representations in *Macbeth* and *The*

Witch, Mother Sawyer is embedded in her community; she is not a folkloric stock character

whose vindictive powers circle the fringes of the plot, but rather her desires and motivations to

be treated better by her neighbors push her further into desperation and solitude. She perfectly

encapsulates a tragic witch. Eric Byville writes a synopsis of witchcraft tragedies as their own

genre in "How to Do Witchcraft with Speech Acts":

> Provisionally, then, I will define European witchcraft tragedy as a genre in which (1) the
>
> hero practises infernal magic through *supernatural* performatives, (2) the hero, bound to
>
> radical and inhuman evil through this magical utterance, is *alienated* from his or her
>
> society, and (3) the plot foregrounds various *other speech acts* in a broader emphasis on
>
> performative utterances, of which the magical charm of witchcraft is only one spectacular
>
> example. (3)

These speech acts are spells or curses where the witch asserts her political power.

> The tragic witch abandons "human" language and resorts to a radically antisocial
>
> utterance, the supernatural performative; this speech act, rather than other characters,
>
> divinities, random chance, or fate, defines her character and determines her
>
> catastrophic end. (2)

The tragic witch is defined by her *maleficium*, but also the ways that she uses language to

transmute reality and seek retribution. Furthermore, "the tragic witch is essentially defined

through her own performative utterance, and it is this ritual speech act (not other powers, events,

or characters) that shapes the tragic plot" (3). By this logic, Mother Sawyer begins the play as an

old, battered victim of her circumstances, but then there is a shift, where she gives up her

humanity in favor of her demonic pact.

In another case of pursuing the demonic for personal needs, *Doctor Faustus*[3] (written

sometime between 1589-1592) sits in an interesting position within the literary tradition of

witchcraft. Faustus begins the play as a respected figure, which differs from the other witches I

have discussed, but nonetheless, he pursues magic and the occult, makes a demonic pact, and

dies a tragic death at the end of the play. By all accounts, he is a witch, but he is also a man, so

he is rarely thought of as one. David Wootton writes that

> Most Elizabethans believed in the possibility of pacts with the devil, and believed that
>
> witches (and, in their view, Faustus would unquestionably have been a witch) were
>
> capable of apparently magical feats: of traveling through air from one country to another,
>
> of making themselves invisible, of turning a bundle of hay into a horse. On stage, Faustus
>
> exercises the powers of a witch. (xix-xx)

This reading of Faustus as a witch is implicit in the text, where he outlines all of his desires to

have dominion over the natural world. Faustus muses on blasphemous ambitions, such as raising

people from the dead, or making "men live eternally" (1.1.55).

In her book, *The Faust Legend: From Marlowe and Goethe to Contemporary Drama and

Film*, Sarah Munson Deats analyzes the pervasiveness of the Faust legend throughout time and

culture. Magic seduces Faust into abandoning his studies: "Systematically, he investigates the

various vocations in which he claims to be an adept, the four great professions of the early

modern period—philosophy, medicine, law, and divinity" (49). Important to consider

tangentially, perhaps, is that certain forms of magical learning were not associated with

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[3] This analysis of *Doctor Faustus* refers solely to the A-Text of the play.

witchcraft and had substantial academic interest, namely divinity and astrology. Men dipping

their toes into how the cosmos dictated human fate was considered a reputable field of study.

Faustus, however, was tired by these academic interests and career opportunities. Instead of

following the conventional, respectable path to power, knowledge, and wealth, he yearns for

greater, higher aspirations to achieve his goals through devilish means. In his soliloquy on why

he is pursuing divine power, he says:

> These metaphysics of magicians
>
> And necromantic books are heavenly.
>
> Lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters—
>
> Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
>
> O, what a world of profit and delight,
>
> Of power, of honor, of omnipotence,
>
> Is promised to the studious artisan!
>
> All things that move between the quiet poles
>
> Shall be at my command. Emperors and kings
>
> Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
>
> Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
>
> But his dominion that exceeds in this
>
> Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.
>
> A sound magician is a mighty god.
>
> Here, Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity. (1.1.78-93)

In this passage, Faustus compares the books of necromancy to heaven; Marlowe plays around

with the idea that witchcraft, magic, and religion are malleable concepts depending on who is

telling the story, who has power and control over the truth, and how these rituals are perceived.

Faustus draws a magic or ritual circle (which is often believed to contain energy or form magical

protection) to summon devils to obey him. He references changes in the weather and dominion

over nature in connection with political power, comparing the magician himself to a "mighty

god" and himself to a "deity." He discusses the cosmic power of the elements again when

Mephistopheles asks Faustus "what wouldst thou have me do?" (1.3.280) and he replies:

> I charge thee wait upon me whilst I live,
>
> To do whatever Faustus shall command,
>
> Be it to make the moon drop from her sphere,
>
> Or the ocean to overwhelm the world. (1.3.281-284)

His interest in magic is an ambitious one; he clearly wants to subvert the natural order of the

world and philosophize about his own dominion. A notable difference between him and the other

witches, besides his social standing (he comes from "parents base of stock," (12) and succeeds in

climbing the social and economic ladder), is that Faustus has a chance at redemption. He is given

the chance by other characters, specifically the Old Man, to repent for his deeds. The weird

sisters and Hecate disappear without a trace, fading into the background without accountability,

while no characters in *The Witch of Edmonton* attempt to redeem Mother Sawyer. As Deats

notes, the play falls within a multitude of ideological interpretations: Is Faustus Calvinist,

believing that he was destined for damnation and therefore it is useless to try and repent for his

sins? Or is Faustus Protestant or Catholic, knowing that it is possible for him to be redeemed, yet

his fear of the devil and lack of faith in himself allows him to sink further and further into

despair instead of appealing to God's will? (69). It seems that Faustus has resolved his fate of

damnation in this scene where he comes to terms with his bitter end:

What art thou, Faustus, but a man condemned to die?

Thy fatal time doth draw to final end.

Despair doth drive distrust unto my thoughts.

Confound these passions with a quiet sleep:

Tush, Christ did call the thief upon the cross;

Then rest thee, Faustus, quiet in conceit. (4.1.1169-1174)

In any case, while there are other characters within the play that find Faustus's nefarious deeds humorous, he is not ostracized from his community based on his wickedness before the pact. All the plays lack a figure of God; humans and the supernatural co-exist without any tangible, solely moral entity to guide them to the truth about themselves or the world around them.

The Demonic, the Supernatural, and Society

There would not be witches without their demonic counterparts, and there would not be demonic counterparts without a social world to create them from their deepest, darkest nightmares. All of the plays feature the demonic or supernatural in some capacity, whether it is a haunting ambiguity that maddens the characters, a devil character acting as a figurehead or representative of the underworld, or Lucifer himself. All of these demonic elements are intertwined with the society and its religious institutions that produce them. Cox asserts in *The Devil and the Sacred*:

Technically, as we shall see, the devil was not supernatural; he was merely superhuman. In pre-Reformation England, however, he was indeed as much a part of the sacred outlook as God was. He was ubiquitous, because his opposition to God accounted for everything that was wrong, not merely in obvious moral or religious terms (committing the seven deadly sins or sacrilege) but in sickness, death, accidents, crop failure, and

social conflict. One of the major purposes of religious activity throughout one's life, from baptism to the last rites, was therefore to reject and defeat the devil, and innumerable liturgical celebrations in the course of every year performed the same purpose for the community. In the traditional society that produced early religious drama, encounters with the devil were deeply involved in the ritual life of the community. Indeed, everyone first encountered the devil without being aware of it and without being able to do anything about it. The doctrine of original sin was construed to mean that newborns literally belonged to the devil, and the baptismal rite therefore involved an exorcism that was designed to expel the devil from the infant to be baptized, whom the rite claimed, instead, for Christ and the Christian community. (11)

While the devil was present at birth, it was also thought that he was present on a person's death bed, trying to seduce them into darkness and heresy. Additionally, the Churching of Women was a prevalent ceremony whereby a blessing was given to mothers after their recovery from childbirth. It is also referenced in *The Witch* after Francisca gives birth, "Here's a sweet churching after a woman's labour" (3.2.112). This ritual practice of purifying women after birth is explained in chapter twelve of *Leviticus*:

> And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say, When a woman hath brought forth seed, and born a manchild, she shall be unclean seven days, like as she is unclean when she is put apart for her disease. (And in the eighth day, the foreskin of the child's flesh shall be circumcised.) And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the Sanctuary, until the time of her purifying be out. But if she bear a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as when she hath her disease; and she shall continue in the

blood of her purifying threescore and six days. Now when the days of her purifying are

out, (whether it be for a son or for a daughter) she shall bring to the Priest a lamb of one

years old for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtle dove for a sin offering, unto

the door of the Tabernacle of the Congregation, Who shall offer it before the LORD, and

make an atonement for her. So she shall be purged of the issue of her blood; this is the

law for her that hath born a male or female. But if she be not able to bring a lamb, she

shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering, and the other

for a sin offering; and the Priest shall make an atonement for her, so she shall be clean.

(*The Geneva Bible*, Leviticus 12:1-8)

The fact that babies were considered to be of the devil after they came from their mother's womb

paints a depressingly misogynistic picture of how the Church viewed women's bodies, but also

provides an example of how it was embedded into the fabric of these people's lives to constantly

deliberate and reject the devil's advances. As we look at the characters within the plays, it is

important to see how the supernatural, superhuman, and demonic function as a seductive force

that permeates their lives, and how this pact, spoken or unspoken, is an appeal to the cosmic

entities to help them, which is brought about by their desperation and powerlessness.

Throughout *Macbeth*, there is an ambiguity to the titular character's visions of the

witches and other supernatural happenings. There is no devil character within *Macbeth* to clear

up this uncertainty. The resounding, unanswered question of this play is: Who is responsible?

The witches are correct in their prophecies, but there is no telling whether these events are

prophetic and the characters are fated to perform these roles, or whether their knowledge of the

prophecies wills them into existence through human folly and overzealousness. "Fair is foul, and

foul is fair" (1.1.10) alludes to the malleability of the demonic and occult in the play; things are

not as they seem and they are difficult to parse. Macbeth is then in psychological turmoil and maintains that "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (1.3. 129-130). Instead of showing us a clear villain, the play avoids an unequivocal moral interpretation— Shakespeare's work sits on a precipice of progressive, secular thought that is more sophisticated than pointing the finger at the witches as the sole proprietors of evil or whose inherently evil exploits elicits negative outcomes for those who cross them. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth constantly deliberate on how to hide their true intentions behind "false faces" to fool their company. As their mental stability dwindles, it becomes less obvious whether they are creating these illusions, such as Lady Macbeth's bloody spot or the ghost of Banquo haunting Macbeth with their own guilt-ridden minds, or whether these hauntings are truly the work of the witches, who merely used Macbeth for their own political ends. While it is possible to argue that the supernatural forces are not to blame for the murderous actions of Macbeth in the story, it is also impossible to completely dismiss their interference.

After Macbeth orders the murder of Banquo, his ghost haunts him, appearing in the middle of an important political dinner party. Macbeth completely loses his composure and Lady Macbeth covers for him to preserve his reputation. She argues that Banquo is "the very painting of [his] fear" (3.4.60). Because ghosts are symbols of guilt and regret for those who see them, it is possible that Macbeth is the only one to see Banquo because he has remorse. According to this reading, Macbeth conceived of the ghost in his own mind. However, ghosts can also be physical representations of a person's psyche and represent a powerful message to the living, meaning that they can project their own image as a way to hold on to the mortal world and convey a lesson or warning before passing on. With this complicated and blurred distinction between

reality and fantasy in mind, it is impossible to disentangle the supernatural from the psychological in this scene.

Furthermore, the weird sisters' presence brings stormy weather. Macbeth postulates in 4.1 about the possible calamities they could create by telling the witches:

Though you untie the winds and let them fight

Against the churches, though the yeasty waves

Confound and swallow navigation up,

Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down,

Though castles topple on their warders' heads,

Though palaces and pyramids do slope

Their heads to their foundations, though the treasure

Of nature's germens tumble all together

Even till destruction sicken, answer me. (4.1.68-76)

Macbeth envisions the witches as evil entities that can uproot order and submerge humanity into chaos. And there is a basis for this claim, as the natural world reacts viscerally to the events of the play, specifically regicide. On the night of Duncan's murder, his horses eat one another while owls and other nightly creatures shriek violently, as if the act of regicide corrupts the natural order so violently that animals are thrown into a sudden madness.

The supernatural is represented as ambiguous, incorporeal, and distant. Macbeth creates an ambiguity on multiple levels, as Greenblatt notes:

[I]f the witches could be definitively dismissed as fantasy or fraud, the audience would at least have a clear-eyed certainty of witnessing human causes in an altogether secular

world. But instead, Shakespeare achieves the remarkable effect of nebulous infection, a

bleeding of the demonic into the secular and the secular into the demonic. (2560)

Much of the play is concerned with permeable dichotomies: reality and illusion, supernatural and

natural, free will and fate, human ambition and demonic interference. Alissa Manninen writes in

the essay, "'The Charm's Wound Up': Supernatural Ritual in *Macbeth*" that

> [I]n *Macbeth* there are two main categories of ritual: social and supernatural. Social
>
> rituals take the form of acts such as gift-giving, banqueting, and public demonstrations of
>
> allegiance; supernatural ones evoke sacred or diabolic forces. In both cases, ritual is here
>
> seen as a collection of actions, an event that presents the participants with something that
>
> they are familiar with. When called upon to respond as individuals or as a group, the
>
> members of the community know what they are expected to say and do in order to affirm
>
> the values that the ritual, or its specific occasion, is designed to make public; I am
>
> preferring the word ritual over ceremony to stress the importance of the symbolic
>
> communications and the possibility of magical effects. A ritual elicits formal responses:
>
> acting in the expected manner demonstrates awareness of and implied consent to the
>
> structure of beliefs and practices that govern the society in question. (61)

Tying the falsity and ambiguity of the play together, Manninen looks at Macbeth and Lady

Macbeth's actions as a form of social obligation; for example, Lady Macbeth acts like a cordial

housewife to Duncan, which is a ritual based in the norms of hospitality, and yet, she performs

rituals of betrayal behind the scenes. Essentially, this interpretation of the play links the

supernatural with the social: "Macbeth's breakdown at the banquet costs him the authority of

kingship in the eyes of the nobles and thereafter his rule becomes only the performance of an

actor without the legitimacy that would inspire obedience to his commands: a series of misfires,

it might be said" (62). The witches and the ghost disrupt this social cohesion, or keep him from

performing social rituals:

> [F]ailure of a supernatural ritual does not lie in its execution by its true participants, the
>
> Scottish witches; rather, failure is found only in a ritual's misinterpretation by observers
>
> from the world of social ritual who are unfamiliar with its signs and lack a genuine
>
> connection with the supernatural. (62)

The consequences of the supernatural forces within the play, although obscure, spawn an

environment for Macbeth's bloody and corrupt rule of Scotland, where his inability to discern

between the rituals of the supernatural and his own political ambitions brings about his own end.

 The Witch's Hecate is full of spells, pacts, and familiars, yet there is no discernible devil

character. Instead, Hecate and her fellow witches, like the weird sisters of *Macbeth*, use and

recycle the bodies of their victims and the dead for their spells. Much like the Duke, who drinks

from the skull of his wife's dead father, the witches utilize human bodies and body parts for their

own pleasure and revenge. In "Middleton's Tragicomedies" Samuel Schoenbaum writes that

"Middleton's witches are less interested in shaping men's destinies than in satisfying their own

lusts by sleeping with visitors or succubi or their own offspring; their escapades reflect the

persistent concern with sexuality" (Schoenbaum). Hecate's copulation connects to Sebastian's

wishes for her to make Antonio, the husband of the woman who he loves, impotent, for Hecate

cannot "disjoin wedlock / 'tis heaven's fastening" (1.2.170-171), but she can create "jealousies,

strife and heart-burning disagreements" (1.2.172), which is to say, she cannot undo a marriage,

but she can exacerbate the ways a marriage can fail. Middleton explores sexuality and the world

of marriage by using supernatural and the demonic as a vehicle for exemplifying the taboo of

extramarital affairs and intercourse.

In "Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England" Julia M. Garrett writes that witchcraft studies have drawn attention to the topic of sexuality within the discourse of witch trials in early modern Europe. The sexual element of witches was not overlooked, but rather reproduced by the literature of the time:

> [W]hile trials did not generally produce evidence about the most fantastical witch practices— including orgiastic sabbaths, copulation with the devil, transvection (nocturnal flight), violation of the dead, cannibalism, and ritual infanticide—such material was hardly absent from English culture altogether. (Garrett)

Francisca is sent away for having a baby out of wedlock, but Hecate flaunts her sins out in the open, even sleeping with one of her familiars. Hecate asks "who shall lie with me then?" and Firestone replies, "The great cat for one night mother. 'Tis but a night — / Make shift with him for once" (1.2.95-96). Not only does Middleton invoke bestiality, he also introduces incest:

> You're a kind son!
>
> But 'tis the nature of you all, I see that.
>
> You had rather hunt after strange women still
>
> Than lie with your own mothers. Get thee gone. (1.2.97-100)

Even if the other plot threads in the play focus on revenge or anxieties associated with marriage and sex, Hecate represents a far cry from the normal range of human emotions, such as envy or anger. Straying from what would be considered understandable human behavior, she goes far beyond taboo into a territory generally thought of as inhumane and disgusting. Firestone insists that the devil is within her, which implies that she was seduced by the devil and coerced into horrifying exploits and experiences because of that connection.

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, the character of the Dog is a devil. Summoned by Mother

Sawyer's cursing, the Dog enables the witch to enact her revenge on the town, even subliminally

having his own hijinks outside of her purview. Interestingly, Mother Sawyer's first request of the

Dog is to kill Old Banks, to which he replies:

> Fool, because I cannot.
>
> Though we have power, know it is circumscribed
>
> And tied in limits: though he be curst to thee,
>
> Yet of himself he's loving to the world,
>
> And charitable to the poor: now men that,
>
> As he, love goodness, though in smallest measure,
>
> Live without compass of our reach. His cattle
>
> And corn I'll kill and mildew; but his life—
>
> Until I take him, as I late found thee,
>
> Cursing and swearing—I've no power to touch. (27-28)

Since Old Banks is a man of God, he is not vulnerable to the devil; this sentiment likely

comforted early modern audiences, knowing that it was within their control to defend against

such evil intruding upon their lives. Mother Sawyer, on the other hand, is able to call the Dog

because she is not someone who loves goodness; she is within the limits of the devil's influence

and therefore succumbs to it. Cox writes:

> Morally repugnant as it is, the identification of an alienated minority with the devil is
>
> culturally comprehensible, but that identification is also compelling evidence that the
>
> majority of baptized Christians—namely, the peasants—could not have been able to
>
> identify with the devil as their champion against social oppression. [...] The social

function of the devil in the mystery plays is to be the oppositional Enemy; in that

capacity, it is incomprehensible that he could ever be on the side of the poor and the

oppressed, for the plays insist time and again that without the devil, poverty and social

oppression would not exist in the first place. (38)

Likewise, the Dog is not really there to help Mother Sawyer as much as he is there to capitalize

on the moral chaos that facilitates his presence. Her call is an opportunity to wreak havoc in his

own way. While Mother Sawyer originally wishes for the death of Old Banks, she immediately

accepts that she can only hurt his cattle and crops. However, the Dog is responsible for multiple

deaths in the play, including a murder and a suicide. In "Interrogating the Devil: Social and

Demonic Pressure in *The Witch of Edmonton*" David Nicol argues for the importance of the

demonic pact within Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's play, saying that to ignore the importance of

the devil is to ignore the play's nuanced vision of how society functions:

Reading the play as a demonological study—that is, as a text that attempts to define the

boundary between social and demonic causation—reveals an intellectual sophistication of

The Witch of Edmonton while acknowledging its roots in the belief systems of early

modern England. (425)

Equally, to merely ascertain that the play is spiritual or religious without any sense of the social

commentary would be a mistake. Nicol explains the demonic and social as a symbiotic

relationship because "Of these forces, it is the social that is the most important: without it, it is

implied that the Devil would have no work. If it were not for the pressures that drive Sawyer and

Frank to their small sins, the Devil would not have been attracted to them" (441). The other plot

thread in the play follows Frank Thorney, a man who has married two women; Susan, because

his father set them up so that he could inherit and control her dowry, and Winifred, whom he

impregnated and does not want to disgrace by leaving her. In 3.3, the Dog comes along Frank

and Susan in a field, "Now for an early mischief and a sudden! / The mind's about it now; one

touch from me / Soon sets the body forward" (51). The Dog rubs against Frank's leg, and he

ends up stabbing Susan to death, which allows him to claim his endowment and continue his

marriage with Winifred. He tells Susan:

<blockquote>

You are my whore.

No wife of mine; the word admits no second.

I was before wedded to another; have her still.

I do not lay the sin unto your charge,

'Tis all mine own: your marriage was my theft,

For I espoused your dowry, and I have it.

I did not purpose to have added murder;

This devil did not prompt me till this minute:

You might have safe returned; now you cannot.

You have dogged your own death. (52)

</blockquote>

Frank may have felt this way about Susan beforehand, being trapped in an impossible scenario,

pressured by his family to marry a woman with money to save him from poverty and to leave

behind the mother of his child in disgrace. When the Dog rubs against his leg, Frank is prompted

to act on these feelings; he even admits that it was not a premeditated decision and that the devil

came to him that minute, and the playwrights coyly acknowledge that she "dogged" her own

death. Before Frank is charged with the murder, he is joined by the ghost of Susan (like in the

case of Banquo, this symbolizes his guilt and/or her inability to leave behind the mortal world),

and he says: "To please a father I have Heaven displeased" (76), indicating that he knows that

regardless of what people believe, his soul is lost. Mother Sawyer is hanged for bewitching, but Frank is forgiven by the town, repents, and accepts his death. Consequently, the Dog has power only because the people in the town were vulnerable and because they were already under the stress of adhering to a strict social order.

In arguably the most famous, important, and influential case of the devil pact in English drama, Doctor Faustus seeks out the devil to serve him, only to find that he is out of his depth, succumbing to unfathomable cosmic entities out of his control. It is imperative to look at how magic is used in the play. Despite having lofty ambitions, Faustus does not use the demons to harm others; he teases the Pope by using his invisibility to steal things from his dinner table, beats up some friars, travels the world, and performs requests for people. Essentially, when given infinite possibilities, Faustus no longer wants to do anything at all, including saving himself. He uses his powers for nothing more than pranks. In 4.1, Faustus promises to help an Emperor who is enlisting him to do some necromancy in order to bring rulers back from the dead. Here, the demonic is linked to the social, as it is blasphemous to oppose death, but magic is utilized for political gain. The Emperor, who is revealed in the prologue to be Charles V, requests,

> Then, Doctor Faustus, mark what I shall say. As I was sometime solitary set within my closet, sundry thoughts arose about the honor of mine ancestors—how they had won by prowess such exploits, got such riches, subdued so many kingdoms, as we that do succeed, or they that shall hereafter possess our throne, shall—I fear me—never attain to that degree of high renown and great authority; amongst which kings is Alexander the Great, chief spectacle of the world's pre-eminence,[4]
>
> The bright shining of whose glorious acts

---

[4] This edition of *Doctor Faustus* contains the footnote "in A; as here, this is printed in prose, but arguably it is blank verse" (47 n. 14).

Lightens the world with his reflecting beams,

As when I hear but motion made of him

It grieves my soul I never saw the man.

If, therefore, thou, by cunning of thine art,

Canst raise this man from hollow vaults below,

Where lies entombed this famous conqueror,

And bring with him his beauteous paramour,

Both in their right shapes, gesture, and attire

They used to wear during their time of life,

Thou shalt both satisfy my just desire

And give me cause to praise thee whilst I live. (4.1.1056-1076)

Devils were often associated with the ruling class or people who held wealth and refused to share it with others. He wishes to bring back his hereditary monarchy through heretical means, asking Faustus to revive famous colonizers and violent warlord conquerors so his family can command with a newly-invigorated iron fist. Charles V has no concern with using magic to help his people and their daily struggles, and Faustus agrees to help him, but instead brings back a churlish, disrespectful, dead knight as the Emperor's ancestor, implying that his deep pride is a mere masquerade.

Many interpretations of the play have touched on Faustus's inability to listen to Mephistopheles, as well as his confusion about their power dynamic. He thinks himself a master of demons, but he is a slave to their whims, unwittingly participating in his own destruction:

I see there's virtue in my heavenly words!

Who would not be proficient in this art?

How pliant is this Mephastophilis,

Full of obedience and humility!

Such is the force of magic and my spells.

Now, Faustus, thou art conjurer laureate,

That canst command great Mephastophilis! (1.3.271-277)

Faustus draws a false equivalency between "heavenly words" and demonic ritual, which also supports Marlowe's critics who viewed his work as holding contempt for orthodox religion. Furthermore, Faustus is arrogant and boastful about his ability to summon devils; he snidely remarks that anyone could be proficient in doing so, and Mephistopheles will be obedient to him. Cox suggests that "in Marlowe's rendering of the story, Lucifer and Faustus are not willful rejecters of creative and loving goodness; they are merely losers in a struggle for power" (112). He continues by stating that

> The devils of *Dr. Faustus* are also subversively ambiguous as they interact with Faustus
> in his struggle for power. For if Faustus is "overthrown" on one hand by an absent,
> punitive, malignant, and merely powerful God, he is destroyed on the other by the lying
> promises and empty threats of demons. The result is less an opposition of good and evil
> than of one overwhelming cosmic power and another. (113)

Faustus's witchcraft is tragic because he appeals to the demonic to gain agency in order to further his ambitions, but becomes torn between two polar opposite forces who will not spare him. In a play where the struggle for power is the chief concern of the protagonist, he is coincidentally not aware of the stakes until his life is spent and he knows that he cannot redeem himself.

Marlowe's play can be explained through Protestant theology such as Reginald Scot's *Discoverie*, as Faustus attempts to gain control over supernatural, superhuman, and demonic forces, but it becomes evident that he has no authority over them. The devils worship Lucifer and Lucifer alone, and no human character can use the book to command demons. In 2.2, two fools named Robin and Rafe discover Faustus's spell book and in 3.2, Rafe and the Vintner manage to "summon" Mephistopheles, who enters the scene and sardonically exclaims that "Upon whose alters thousand souls do lie, / How I am vexèd with these villains' charms!" (3.2.1025-1026). Mephistopheles serves Lucifer and toys with humans. These two scenes undermine Faustus's intellect and authority because Robin, Rafe, and the Vintner do not need to be ambitious doctors or respected scholars to read spells and get deluded into thinking they have control over the devil.

Secular Readings

Although I have so far argued against reading the plays from a secular perspective, it is important to consider how the emotions, avarice, and pride of the characters impact the reading of these works. It is also imperative to discuss the social atmosphere of the plays, namely, their relationship with marriage, gender roles, and the shackles of oppressive systems, all outside of a solely religious framework. This is to say, to read something through a secular lens is to imply that the religious and social readings of these plays can be disentangled from one another. Although this argument seems antithetical to my assertion that we must look at these plays as being theocratic and existing within the minds of the credulous early modern public, the secular readings that propose these playwrights as progressive in their social commentaries outside of religious beliefs are not without their merit.

Macbeth and Faustus are often considered to be overreachers, or characters who attempt to attain a higher social standing and achieve greatness, but end up falling from those heights to their tragic, preventable deaths. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have long been read through a secular lens, and although I do not endorse a secular reading of either play, there is a comfort in seeing their aspirations and guilt as the cause of their mental spiral and ultimate downfall. Without the interference of magic or witches, the Macbeths are murderers whose remorse for their choices induces their destruction. It is not only that Faustus (or Macbeth for that matter) climb to new heights from their own desires, but they challenge the hegemony of their worlds, embracing the supernatural in order to do so. Harry Levin writes in *The Overreacher*

> Which, then, was true virtue: to suffer the slings and arrows of an outrageous fortune or to take arms against them, defying the stars and entrusting one's own fortune to one's own hands? It was to this dilemma that Marlowe's tragedies delivered their challenging response. Tragedy is grounded upon mortality; and in obscuring the prospect of hereafter, it enhances the perception of here and now. Moreover, in exalting the individual to heroic stature, it frees him to act, but measures his act by a scale of values; and the stature of Marlowe's heroes is so exalted that we shall be wondering whether it does not jeopardize the scale. By conquering kingdoms or amassing fortunes or scrutinizing the cosmos, they challenge the more settled ways of living. (26)

They challenge the cosmos and thereby elicit their own fates in that grand cosmos. In the Prologue of *Doctor Faustus*, the Chorus compares him to Icarus, proclaiming

> That shortly he was graced with doctor's name,
>
> Excelling all whose sweet delight's disputes
>
> In heavenly matters of theology;

Till, swoll'n with cunning and self-conceit,

His waxen wings did mount above his reach,

And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow.

For, falling to a devilish exercise, (18-24)

In Greek mythology, Icarus flies too close to the Sun with wax and feather wings, causing him to plummet towards Earth to his death. Faustus is akin to Icarus because of his ambition to fly closer to the sun but also because he attempts to conquer a theological goal. He wants to have power over the heavens through magic and demonology. The myth is also notable because both Icarus and Faustus mirror Lucifer, who descends from heaven with other fallen angels who rebelled against God, forming Hell. In both *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* the titular characters seize power improperly and tragically fall to their deaths. In this reading, it is Faustus who is to blame for his own demise; there are demons and devils who contribute to his end, but he is the one who embarks on the soul crushing, disappointing journey of human folly. The personal responsibility and accountability to his deeds—in other words, his overreaching to grasp what was never rightfully his—causes his eventual fall.

Another secular interpretation to entertain is that of a feminist critical lens. *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Witch* discuss marriage, and namely, the freedoms and powers (or lack thereof) that women have in marriage, the gender roles in romantic relationships, and how witchcraft is a woman's weapon against oppressive forces. Modern readers might question the validity of viewing something written during early modern England through a contemporary feminist lens. The answer is not to promote historical revisionism, to pretend as if there was any feminist scholarship during that time, or to act as if witchcraft accusations were solely caused by gender discrimination. Adrienne Rich writes that

The act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new

critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know

ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for

identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A

radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a

clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine

ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to

see—and therefore live—afresh. (xix)

There is a value in viewing literature in a way that might not be considered canonical and there is

merit in analyzing the ways women in these plays navigated patriarchal conventions such as

marriage and childrearing. Judith Fetterley writes in "On the Politics of Literature" that

Power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To

be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a

peculiar form of powerlessness—not simply the powerlessness which derives from not

seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more

significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against

self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to

be male—to be universal—is to be *not female*. Not only does powerlessness characterize

woman's experience of reading, it also describes the content of what is read. (xiii)

Although Fetterley discusses American literature in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach*

to American Fiction, the same rings true for early modern society. There was no prolific feminist

scholarship (or any at all for that matter). Early modern audiences may not have been aware of

any of these intersecting concepts of gender identity and they may have thought of both gender and sexuality as entirely different than we do now, but regardless there is validity in looking back.

The Witch of Edmonton's other plot thread, the one that revolves around the townspeople instead of Mother Sawyer, pertains to marriage and children out of wedlock. Frank Thorney must marry Susan in order to combine their estates, showing their marriage to be a logical economic transaction; however, he impregnated Winifred, and does not want her to be disgraced. Thorney is caught between intersecting social forces: does he marry this woman to repent for his sins in a religious sense or forgo his dowry and keep true to his decisions and his wife's respectability? It seems, upon first glance, that Winifred's shame is a shadow of Mother Sawyer's squalor. Mother Sawyer represents a woman that society has turned their back on; she is ostracized, belittled, and ruined in the eyes of the townspeople. Winifred's only choice is to turn her husband in at the end of the play for Susan's murder. Cleaning her conscience of his sins, she says, "My fault was lust, my punishment was shame. / Yet I am happy that my soul is free" (89). Therefore, the women in the play step into distinct roles: Susan, who is innocent yet representative of how dowry necessitates the need for marriage; Winifred, who compares herself to the devil for seducing Frank, but is able to redeem herself by the end of the play by absolving herself of his sins and maintaining the social order; and Mother Sawyer, whose inability to conform or die quietly makes her a witch.

The Witch's Isabella and Francisca have different ideations of romance, revenge, and marriage. Isabella has traditional views on marriage and childrearing, chiding Francisca for not marrying:

You are no good companion for a wife;

> Get you a husband, prithee, sister, do,
>
> That I may ask your counsel now and then.
>
> 'Twill mend your discourse much; you maids know nothing. (2.1.100-104)

According to Isabella, unmarried women lack life experience and their advice is not worth listening to. However, as Francisca notes, "You have happened well, no doubt, on a kind husband, / And that's not every woman's fortune, sister" (2.1.70-71). Not all women are lucky enough to find a husband, and Isabella's path is not a universal one. Their ideological differences come to a climax when Isabella finds out that Francisca was pregnant, and she finds her "imprudent in sinning" (3.2.108). Francisca then attempts to expose Isabella before she can tell anyone else that she gave birth outside of marriage by fooling Antonio into believing that Isabella is cheating on him with Sebastian. The chaotic web of Middleton's play is steeped in comedic drama, but at the center is a conflict about the social roles and expectations of married women. Isabella is harsher on Francisca than she is on any of the men in the play, and she is harsher on her than any of the men are towards the women in general. Her tenacity in ensuring that Francisca conforms to marriage and childrearing is rooted in her religious values, but it also shows how policing women's bodies and choices has, and always will be, an ingrained cultural behavior perpetuated by people of all genders.

The ways in which the characters in these plays interact illuminate cultural signifiers such as how gender roles functioned within early modern English society. These plays also explore timeless lessons about the human condition, such as the folly of hubris. The women in these plays must adhere to a different set of expectations than the men, who can detach themselves from the responsibilities and associations of marriage and motherhood, and who are free to climb these social ladders and fail miserably, comfortably outside of the bounds of gender

discrimination. The witches are powerful women who do not conform to this controlling patriarchal structure and do not need to learn how to navigate their gender in order to survive it. They are either outside of the community entirely (Hecate and the weird sisters) or they have no hope of changing their neighbors' hearts and minds (in the case of Mother Sawyer). In their defiance as outsiders, it is clear to see how modern readers may find their toying spell craft to be a recognizable pushback or even a heroic rejection of an oppressive heteronormative society.

Conclusion

Witches, magic, and the demonic on stage constituted a transgression from the hegemonic status quo. Whether witches were spinning *maleficium* in their words, or it was the delusion of the local citizens that the devil was infiltrating their community, the supernatural was viewed as a tangible threat to society. This uncertainty in regards to the causes of their misfortunes led common people, as well as those in the ruling class, to search for explanations or scapegoats for the tragedies of daily life. Perhaps these fears were rooted in a hostile relationship with a neighbor who was impoverished or old, who cursed those under her breath, or who otherwise conformed to the contemporary portrait of the witch. Or, perhaps their hostility towards magic itself fed their belief that someone was attempting to harm them. Regardless, this vicious cycle of the community's attempt to purify itself from the devil's influence killed thousands of women—that we know of. Even after witchcraft was decriminalized in England, vigilante justice ran rampant, with townsfolk killing witches on their own accord, showing that governmental or religious manipulation was never solely to blame. Rather, these systems gave people an outlet and a means to voice their anxieties towards the cruelty of the world, just as magic enabled the poor and neglected to have autonomy in political or personal retribution, or at least the illusion of it.

The plays I have considered here, as forms of popular entertainment that spoke to the concerns of the age, all encapsulate different representations of the multi-faceted realm of witchcraft beliefs, displaying how varied and complex representations of the supernatural were, and how both social and supernatural forces shaped the popular media and beliefs of early modern audiences. Magic and witchcraft are not just catch-all terms for evil-doers, and are not only utilized by those who are waging a war against patriarchal forces. Rather, the portrait of the witch is a complex one, and as I hope to have shown, is derived from historical accounts of economic, social, and religious forces, but it is also tainted, misconstrued, and warped by fictional narratives. By viewing *Macbeth*, *The Witch*, *The Witch of Edmonton*, and *Doctor Faustus* through a theological lens as well as a social one, it is possible to see a nuanced and complicated reading of their appropriation of the supernatural, the demonic, and witchcraft as and for entertainment. Despite the distinction between magic and religion being an imperceptibly fine one during early modern England, these plays attempt to construct a moral framework in which the characters who utilize magic fail or are otherwise unredeemed and the ones who succeed against demonic forces are heralded or propelled into positions of power by having resisted the supernatural.

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