

Chapter Two

The Witch

This chapter explores Thomas Middleton's representation of the witch figure in his play The Witch. My discussion not only looks at the witch-like¹ qualities found in some of his female characters, but also Middleton's understanding of what constitutes the "ideal woman". This argument deconstructs Middleton's representation of witches and witch-like women and attempts to demonstrate how their predicaments and witch status essentially reflect patriarchy's inner demon brought on by irreconcilable internal conflicts. This chapter will also look at the theme of sexual "sins" and its disruptive influence on Christian morality as well as the ways in which feminine sexuality is synonymously linked with witchcraft. It is imperative, however, to first delve into Middleton's other plays and determine his preoccupations as well as the influences that shape the themes and characters in his writing.

Thomas Middleton's prolific writing often probes into subjects close to the heart of the Jacobean era especially those of morality and spiritual chaos. As Ribner Irving states: "Generally, the Jacobean dramatists are firmly Christian in their orientation, although their Christianity may take different forms"². Alike his contemporaries, he presents plays from a Christian point of view, but "Middleton's is neither the optimistic religion of Heywood nor the heaven-oriented Christianity of Tourneur"³. Ribner further states that a certain gloom shrouds Middleton's plays for his vision is steadily fixed on "hell and damnation he offers little hope for human triumph"⁴. Such bleakness clearly presents itself in plays like The Changeling⁵ and Women, Beware Women. Both feature

tragic characters deep in sin (lust and murder) who ultimately suffer death as retribution. Interestingly, women play a significant role in Middleton's conception of sin. He employs them to explore the subject of Jacobean morality. This was an era in which women were expected to slavishly adhere to religious dictates, much more than their male counterparts. Middleton's plays demonstrate how the "depravity" in feminine behaviour subverts Christian morality, and deserves nothing but damnation and even death.

The Changeling is about a noble lady, Beatrice, who employs a coarse and unsightly servant, De Flores, to kill her betrothed so as to enable her to marry the man she loves, Alsemero. Compromising her position with such a terrible deed and secret, she becomes vulnerable to the amorous advances of her manservant. His persistent and relentless attention finally wears her down (particularly when accompanied by veiled threats to expose her), and she yields especially when she finds an affinity with his evil side. Upon realisation that her heart is just as coarse and unsightly as his looks, her hatred turns to admiration. Meanwhile, she marries her love and arranges for her servant, Diaphanta, to bed her husband on their wedding night to disguise the fact that she has lost her virginity to De Flores. Afterwards, the servant is murdered to conceal her plot. The play culminates in a tense scene where Alsemero confronts Beatrice with her sinful ways and in a heated moment she confesses to all her past deeds, inevitably implicating her manservant. De Flores avenges her betrayal by confirming their amorous affair and spitefully kills her and then himself. This play exposes the dark side of human nature and Middleton concludes that the wages of sin could only be death.

Women Beware Women trails along a similar path of sinister plots. The Duke of Florence falls for the beauty of Bianca, who is married to Leantio, a poor clerk. Livia, a great lady of the society arranges for the girl's seduction (thus betraying her) to gain the Duke's favour. Livia also satisfies her perverse desire for intrigue and simultaneously gains the favour of her brother, Hippolito, when she helps him consummate his incestuous love for Isabella (their niece) by declaring her an illegitimate child, thus giving them "permission" to pursue a relationship. Isabella then marries a foolish man, known as the Ward, to shield the illicit affair with her kinsman. Livia, on the other hand, takes a carnal interest in Leantio and "hires" him for a sexual tryst by flaunting material wealth as part of her ruthless seduction. All the deceit comes undone during a masque held in honour of the Duke. A series of betrayals and acts of revenge finally culminate in the deaths of the main characters. In this play, Middleton cynically portrays love as lust which, along with fidelity, can be purchased for a price. Those who fail to defend Christian virtue can only expect condemnation and loss of dignity, regardless of their material wealth and social standing.

Acting as a spokesperson for patriarchy, Middleton criticises women's "degenerate" traits that include coveting material wealth (Bianca in Women, Beware Women), seeking carnal pleasure (Livia in Women, Beware Women), and deceitful hiding of sexual experience (Beatrice in The Changeling). Ultimately, all those who display this kind of morally criminal behaviour end in despair and death. In these plays, Middleton seems to subscribe to the "theory of the spiritual chaos of Jacobean drama [that] implicitly connected female disobedience with a degenerate social order"⁶. In doing so, his works reflect issues that seemed to dominate the social psyche of the time.

In The Witch, Middleton uses the witchcraft theme to explore female disobedience. Although his opinions on witchcraft remain hazy, Frances Howard's massive scandal intrigued and inspired The Witch in 1613⁷. It is often thought that Middleton's treatment of witchcraft "is perhaps often that of the connoisseur rather than the believer"⁸. On top of that, Middleton's witch lore material has the appearance of having come directly from Reginald Scot's Discoverie of Witchcraft "whom he [Middleton] often paraphrases almost word for word"⁹. Katherine Briggs adds that "it is at any rate rather decorative than realistic"¹⁰. I largely agree with this statement as Middleton habitually punishes transgressive characters, especially women. Hecate, however, who could be considered the "ultimate sinner", remains untouched and unpunished. The different treatment of Hecate is especially interesting as Middleton imbues this witch figure with the depraved qualities that other female characters possess and are punished for. Perhaps for Middleton — who was intrigued with the theme of sexuality — witchcraft provided another avenue for him to explore what he considered transgressive sexual behaviour. After all, it ties closely with questions of morality and Middleton's religious convictions. However, I tend to agree with David Lindley that Middleton's The Witch does reveal an underlying anxiety about witchcraft and its purported power over sexuality¹¹.

Sexuality and Witchcraft

In early modern Europe, "erotic pleasure" was not supposed to be either "erotic" or, for that matter, "pleasurable"! Unless for procreation, sexual intercourse was seen as intrinsically sinful and greatly frowned upon by patriarchal authority and its flock, and no

punishment was too terrible as long as it compelled the masses into abstaining from it. In fact sexuality, when discussed outside the bounds of marriage in the seventeenth century setting, was viewed as threatening and unfairly associated with witches – in “the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sexual overtones became the leading theme of demonological imagery”¹². Carol Karlsen notes that women who sexually disregarded social restriction or failed to curb sexual impulses “were open to the charge of witchcraft”¹³. As it happens, Christian theologians proposed¹⁴ that a “good” woman was one who apparently had no sexual desire and a “bad” woman was one who found sexual intercourse a source of pleasure (even though she was not necessarily promiscuous). This standpoint ran in accordance with the binary opposition of chastity versus sexuality (that had been naturalised into social structure). Basically, patriarchal power frowned on feminine sexuality and its expression. Both threatened patriarchal systems and structures and were often associated with witchcraft. A sexual woman, supposedly, came that much closer in contact with the devil (imagined in masculine terms because of the persistent use of the pronoun “he”) who could easily seduce susceptible weaklings. Again, this particular fantasy refuses to acknowledge that the Devil also existed as succubus and was just as capable of “operating” as a homosexual.

Middleton seems to simplistically conclude that morality ties in very tightly with chastity. Outside the bounds of marriage, sexuality becomes the root of all evil. In The Witch, Middleton explores what he sees as the sexual deviance of witches who symbolise all that is evil and corrupt in society, such as incest, pre-marital intercourse, adultery and the use of sex as a commodity. He expands this theme by demonstrating how women with power perform sinister deeds connected to sexuality, namely infanticide (to hide

their transgression) and impotence in men (I will elaborate on this in subsequent paragraphs). The far-reaching consequences of this moral anarchy, apparently, is its power to divert women's attention from their vocation in life — fulfilling maternal and domestic obligations which define their worth and value. However, this brand of morality, or rather imposition, instead of protecting women, only served to expose them to a level of danger that made them vulnerable towards the very sex that claimed it their duty to protect them — men.

Double standards between the genders existed when social conditioning was sadistically imposed on one gender only (women), while the other revelled in the very behaviour considered taboo. For instance, absence of chastity before marriage was a mild offence for a man, but an unpardonable sin for the other sex. Praises were sung and poetry composed in celebration of women's chastity, but such exaltation rarely existed for men. In fact, the opposite was expected, judging by the common maxims about male sexuality/debauchery: "a reformed rake makes the best husband", "men sowing their wild oats" and many more. Keith Thomas reiterates: "When men took liberties, women had to be educated to tolerate them ... women should recognize that double standard was in nature of things ... model wives should turn a blind eye to their husbands' liaisons"¹⁵. Such hypocrisy and unfair standards dominate The Witch. In this play Middleton inadvertently exposes matters already rife in the social scene of early modern Europe, a profound double standard and sexual persecution that affected the psychological well being of women.

The male characters in the play (such as Aberzanes and Almachildes) devote time to "wenching" (if caught, they escape with a mild censure), whereas the female

characters remain entrenched in conflicts and dilemmas over whether to yield (and risk pregnancy and loss of virginity) or reject men's seduction and risk repeated advances/harassments in future. Women's sexuality afforded neither freedom nor self-will. For them, the forsaking of chastity meant transgression of moral and religious codes (punishable by death), whereas denial of sexuality meant masochistic suppression of her own needs. Both alternatives backed her to a corner.

Sexual crime (a consequence of yielding to sexual temptations) usually preludes accusations of witchcraft. Many of the accused have been known to have had abortions or performed infanticide¹⁶, considered most unnatural, sinful and often an exclusive practice of single women¹⁷. Anne Barstow observes that witchcraft was sex-related and "charges for all these crimes rose and fell together; the seventeenth century saw a peak of prosecution for abortion, infanticide and witchcraft"¹⁸. Middleton concurs with this foolish, pervasive perception and in The Witch fashions a character, Francesca, who exactly observes the crime mentioned, as if proving the weight of that truth on stage by acting out the way in which a woman's initiation into demonology begins with witch-like characteristics. It does not matter that she does not have any inkling of witchery and its craft.

Middleton takes this sentiment further to evince a deep-rooted suspicion for women living independent of male custodianship. In the character of Hecate, he expounds on the ways in which witch-like behaviour matures to its fullest potential when left unchecked. Using her, Middleton proposes that feminine lust will grow and mutate into more bestial desires including incest and promiscuity that extend to copulating with incubus. The nymphomaniac embodies the classic statement from the Malleus

Maleficarum that “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable”¹⁹. Only the devil could match her sexual perversion. On top of that, once a woman acquires power through demonic relationship, there is no end to the mayhem and calamity she could wreak, including the ability to interfere with men’s sexuality and cause impotence. Such vividness of independent women’s sexuality and ability unveil the voyeuristic imagination that runs amok when control of women’s bodies cannot be asserted as desired. Add to that a sense of masculine fear and insecurity that also help tremendously in affirming the denied vulnerability that is patriarchy and its illusion of power.

Suspicion too fell on female healers and midwives. They commanded awe, respect and even fear, precisely for wielding a great deal of power. Their knowledge of herbs and elements aided childbirth, cured impotence and infertility. However patriarchal imagination, predictably, fantasized how those very skills could affect just the opposite, i.e. abortions, disappearing penises and even contraceptives. Healers or wise women, highly regarded and most sought after by neighbours, constantly battled with jealous male physicians who cast aspersion on their reputations. Obviously, by slandering them, the physicians hoped to change public view and increase the esteem of their profession. In light of this view, fantastic tales (supplied by intellectuals and glamorised by commoners) about Hecate and those like her ran abound. The tales slandered her role as a healer and undermined her by painting her as sexually perverse and voracious to the point of subverting maternal instincts. She gave “birth to and suckled demons instead of children and ... dispensed poisons rather than cures”²⁰ and feasted on “unbaptized infants”²¹. Capitalizing on contemporary perceptions of witches and their craft,

Middleton recreates repulsion, if not fear, in readers as Hecate represents “the most repugnant expression of female aggression and depravity”²².

To recapitulate, Middleton treats the “sin” of sexuality as being synonymous to the “sin” of witchcraft. Its association is dramatised with ugly images of lust that start as a simple, but no less reprehensible, deviation of morality, only to manifest to a mature form of depravity involving copulation with the devil, and flourishing to a relationship that gives women the power to commit harmful and sinister deeds involving, most importantly, men’s sexuality. Incidentally, Middleton’s The Witch struck a nerve in society because the theme of sexuality correlated with the sexual crimes afflicting early modern Europe. His depiction of the witch personality was realistic in the eyes of society. However, these depictions, I believe, reflect, on close analysis, the deformed reasoning of patriarchy.

The Witch

The Witch opens with Sebastian returning from war only to discover that he has been reported dead and his contracted wife married to the man who spread the rumour about his death. To prevent the consummation of this marriage, Sebastian solicits Hecate’s skills to prepare a charm that would render Antonio impotent. The charm succeeds. Jealousy and a desire for revenge propel him to go into disguise to reveal Antonio’s deceit. In another plot, the Duchess attempts to kill her husband for a terrible humiliation and disrespect he displayed during a banquet. She entices men with promises of sexual favours and seeks supernatural assistance to be rid of her husband and secure another powerful man into her arms. The subsidiary plot concerns Francesca and her

predicament in dealing with an unwanted pregnancy and an irresponsible lover. It could be said that in this play Middleton divides his female characters into several categories: the ideal woman, the witch-like women and the bona fide witch.

The Epitome of an Ideal Woman: Chaste and Pure

Isabella defines the category of the ideal woman. She is subjected to efforts by various quarters to seduce, manipulate and dishonour her, but she triumphs over the evil that is placed in her way. Firstly, Antonio fabricates a vicious lie that her betrothed, Sebastian, has died in battle. Proposing marriage, he convinces Isabella to become his bride. However, to Antonio's chagrin, he fails to consummate the marriage due to Sebastian's interference using a witch's charm. Rumours of Antonio's infidelity motivate Isabella to ascertain the truth with the help of Celio (Sebastian in disguise) who, in turn, tries to seduce her but fails. Despite that, the damage is done when they are seen together and Isabella's reputation is virtually ruined. The last scheme involves Francesca who orchestrates a dramatic event to discredit her sister-in-law's sterling reputation to save her own. She executes a bedroom scene as ocular proof (for Antonio's benefit) that Isabel is an adulteress.

Throughout the play, Isabella's uncompromising virtue lends her the strength to endure each harrowing test of character. Antonio's inability to perform conjugal duty/ "selective impotence"²³ on their wedding night does not bother her. In fact she extols patriarchal statutes concerning women's roles in their men's/masters' lives:

If you had a husband, you might exercise,
To the good o' the commonwealth, and do much profit:
Besides, it is a comfort to a woman
T' have children, sister; a great blessing certainly. (II.i)

Her great devotion to Antonio blinds her to his infidelity, and she even denounces Celio's allegations:

Thou dost belie him basely: I dare swear
He's a gentleman as free from that folly
As ever took religious life upon him. (III.ii)

Her initial reaction to Francesca's "base lust" is triggered by concern for family pride and honour. She insists that Francesca leaves "the pleasurable dump"²⁴ that is her brother's home, and warns her against misbehaving and sinning again. Isabella's reaction is a reflex to protect the good name of her husband. She does not once question the identity of the father of the child, or insist that he shoulder his share of the responsibility.

Middleton glorifies Isabella for remaining chaste and free of corruption despite the perfidy of others. She perfectly defines traditional feminine values (she is a chaste, dutiful wife aspiring to become a dutiful mother) and upholds patriarchal expectations in the face of adversity. Paradoxically, her heroic stature, most elevated in morality and virtue, amounts to nothing and she becomes the perfect instrument to internalise patriarchal ideologies. She submissively surrenders to the most restrictive male-dominated social structures. At best, she is a "pallid" one-dimensional character who does not confront her obstacles. Antonio dies a sudden death, Sebastian loses his will for revenge and ends up singing praises of her virtue, and Francesca has no choice but to reveal her fraud to save her own life. On discovery that Isabella has not strayed, the Governor (or Middleton rather) grandly professes that the chaste are insulated against evil and those morally corrupt, "for where Heaven's bounty holy ground-work finds, 'tis like a sea, encompassing chaste minds" (V.iii).

When Isabella defends an already tainted reputation of a lecherous husband at the expense of sisterhood, she backlashes against the only bond that exists to hold women together against the machination of patriarchal ideologies, making Francesca truly alone and vulnerable in her own predicament. Isabella's superficial principles are grounded in "the complex nature of women's subordination produced by the ideological configuration of woman herself"²⁵ through the assimilation of the "phallic" morality. In light of this view, Isabella not only masochistically alienates her identity, but also frigidly denies her sexuality and spirituality. On top of that, she wills much determination and wasted eloquence to fight with all her might (the wrong battle) to defend that wretched position of submission. Be that as it may, Isabella's virginal perfection rests in a precarious place in patriarchy's esteem. The latter perpetually assumes that she could lapse in her resolution, just like the Biblical Eve. The possibility that she may have deviated does not come as a surprise to Antonio. Enraged by the possibility of cuckoldry, he cries:

Oh, perjurous woman
 Sh'ad took the innocence of sleep upon her
 At my approach and would not see me come;
 As if sh'ad lain there like a harmless soul,
 And never dreamed of mischief. (IV.iii)

and vows to make his "revenge dreadfuller than a tempest" (V.i) without even taking into consideration his own continued infidelity with the whore²⁶/mistress Florida that started five years ago. Even the Governor accedes to Isabella's (his niece) murder, "I'll not speak, to have her spared if she be base and guilty" (V.i). And not a moment before that, he challenged Antonio for daring to disparage "her virtuous meekness" (V.i). Responding to the Governor's sentiments, the devoted servant Hermio also changes his opinion: "Tis

strange to me that her sweet-seeming virtues should be so meanly overtook with Celio” (V.i).

In retrospect, this paragon of virtue ultimately loses a husband and is left defenceless against attempts to slander her reputation. Not only that, for a while she becomes the object of hatred of her uncle for yielding to evil temptations. Such is the ambivalence of patriarchy, its self-destructive canons protect not even the fragmented existence of those women who conform to it.

Witch-like Women

In The Witch, Isabella, the ideal woman is put on a pedestal, while her opposites, Francesca and the Duchess are punished for not conforming to the requisite of femininity that adheres to patriarchal standards. The machination of patriarchy reacts much more violently to women whose reasoning and action threaten patriarchal establishment, by means of persecution and punishment. Lisa Jardine asserts that “the decline in women’s actual status was accompanied by the punishment of assertive femininity on the stage which served as a warning against transgressive women”²⁷. Middleton uses both Francesca and the Duchess to contextualise witch-like behaviour within the domains of the home, portraying it as a sinister and dangerous force to contend with in the preservation of morality. However, by focusing and magnifying these supposed transgressions, Middleton downplays the male depravity that elicits such responses, and lets them off for moral crimes that women, ultimately, are persecuted for. In the first scene, Francesca bitterly laments her fate for getting pregnant:

But ‘twas my luck, at the first hour, forsooth,
To prove too fruitful. (II. i)

after yielding to Aberzanes' seduction. Truly terror-stricken by the thought of her secret leaking out — "My brother sure would kill me if he knew't" (II.i) — she contemplates infanticide,

A yard of lawn will serve for a christening-cloth,
I've use for everything, as my case stands (II. i)

which pushes her further into the abyss of sin (as Middleton views it).

While Francesca contemplates a matter of grave concern, Aberzanes plots to save himself from the mess. He agrees to assist his illicit lover to conceal their transgression. His uncharacteristic act of abetting Francesca is really self-serving. In the past, his much too cavalier ways at womanising, "'tis a good ease to a man; you can swell a maid up and rid her for ten pound" (II.iii), speaks volumes of the hypocrisy of patriarchal morality that tacitly tolerates such behaviour. However, as a family friend, he not only deceives but also betrays his friendship with Antonio. To avoid confrontation or possibly a duel for compromising the sister of an influential man, Aberzanes fabricates a letter requesting for Francesca's presence at her mother's home. Francesca leaves the watchful eyes of Antonio and Isabella to wait the time to get rid of her child. Unfortunately, she returns home to an unpleasant surprise as Isabella discovers her secret. The latter then passionately rants and reprimands Francesca:

And speaks her impudence: sh'as undone herself—
I could not hold from weeping when I read it—
Abused her brother's house and his good confidence.
(III. ii)

and demands that she leaves the house without burdening her brother with the disgrace of her actions. Feeling doubtful of Isabella or any woman's ability to keep her confidence:

She can keep it secret?
That's very likely, and a woman too!
I'm sure I could not do't; and I am made
As well as she can be for any purposes. (III. ii)

Francesca slanders her sister-in-law so that the latter's possible revelation of the pregnancy would lack credibility. She quickly drops hints to Antonio about his wife's alleged infidelity and goes to the length of orchestrating a scenario that enables him to catch his wife in a scandalous position with another man. However, fate plays against her and Antonio, in a haze of rage, assaults the wrong couple and unpredictably turns against his sister to vent his still unassuaged wrath. In desperation Francesca blurts out the truth, if only to plead to Antonio to spare her life.

Being related to a well-known social figure binds Francesca even more to social mores — each action and behaviour is closely scrutinized. Francesca's vicissitude seems to merit no attention from the other characters in the play and, when it does, she is quickly married off to the very man she abhors just so the others (Antonio and Isabella) could cling to the illusion of having saved the family's "good name". Obviously the aspiration to become the "ideal" woman comes at a high price. Negating individual development, the "good" woman must follow the dictates of society or she risks denigrating her reputation and family's good name.

Compared to Isabella, Francesca seems cold-hearted and maliciously selfish. While the former preaches the glory of matrimony and childbirth: "Were I conceived with child ... I should be so proud on't" (II.i), the latter repudiates maternal obligation. In the eyes of patriarchy then, she is devalued as a woman, her significance nullified. By highlighting her deeds, Middleton alludes to the grotesque images of witches' "boiling of

unbaptized infants”²⁸, clearly an image that subverts motherhood and an unpardonable disgrace to womanhood, a chain reaction originating from the sin of sexuality.

Close analysis shows that desperation and profound fear motivates Francesca’s extreme behaviour of crossing one of the biggest social boundaries. Jilted by a lover/rake who refuses to save her honour and abandoned by the only person (Isabella) who could provide any sense of comfort, Francesca obviously feels alone and lonely in facing her plight. Having no one to trust and confide in, she seeks her own solution, which Middleton qualifies as a transgression that goes against every grain of morality and portrays her as a repulsive deviant. But more terrible is Middleton’s refusal to empathise (this is portrayed through Isabella) and he allows a worse criminal like Aberzanes to freely roam the streets with his compulsive sexuality. It must be admitted that Francesca does not act in the most commendable way, but feeling trapped and caged like an animal, she behaves like a human being (in strength and weakness), not an evil woman possessing Eve’s genetic disposition for deviation. Her subterfuge is a self-defence mechanism against the “mindless man-driven theory”²⁹ of morality that is capable of murder to uphold and assert itself. In comparison, Francesca behaves similarly to Sebastian or the Duke when in conflict, but she is forced to bear the responsibility and punishment for the misconduct of the two (Aberzanes and herself).

The Duchess (who demonstrates a witchlike lasciviousness mainly to manipulate and control others) is another character that personifies Malleus Maleficarum definition of women’s inherent vices: infidelity, lust, being impressionable and possessing a “slippery tongue”³⁰. Acting on her intense abhorrence for the Duke, the Duchess plots to kill him using Almachildes. He is lured to sleep with the woman he has been

pursuing/harassing, Amoretta. However, to his horror, the Duchess discloses that it was she he “slept” with (when in fact she hired a prostitute), and uses that to blackmail him into murdering her husband or risks having his transgression discovered by the powerful Duke. Next, like a cunning villain, she consults witches to destroy her accomplice and plans to secure another powerful man into her affection:

I'm weary of his sight, he must die quickly ...
My great aim's
At the lord governor's love. (IV. ii)

Away from the Duchess, Almachildes confides the plot to the Duke who then, with the help of the Governor, feigns death. In this, the men come together in complicity to uphold the masculine code and dupe the foolish woman at her own game. The Duchess' scheme falls apart when confronted by the “dead” Duke. However, in a most interestingly twisted scene, she is bestowed forgiveness by the Duke and restored to his arms again.

From these events, it is apparent that the Duke is a detestable figure for his sadistic treatment of the Duchess. In a marriage, Christianity tirelessly drills women:

Submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.
Eph. 5:22

Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.
Eph. 5:23

Middleton paints the Duchess as a cunning seductress who violates sacred wedding vows. However he fails to expose the men, such as the Duke, who demand complete submission from his wife. Her feelings and thoughts are of no consequence to him. He respects her as much as he would a slave. This scant regard is obvious when he gloats and boasts of victory in a battle by making her drink a toast of triumph from the skull of her slain father:

Our duchess, I know, will pledge us, though
The cup was once her father's head, which,
As a trophy, we'll keep till death in memory of that conquest.
(I. ii.)

His contemptuous and tasteless act, almost barbarous, arouses deep resentment and vindictiveness in his wife. Instead of respecting and caring for her, the Duke seems to have forgotten that the Bible also states:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church,
and gave himself for it. Eph. 5:25

Christ sacrificed his life for his people and for the redemption of man. The Duchess however, saw no sight of her husband sacrificing himself for her for anything. Instead of treasuring her, his achievements, power and victory take precedence over her feelings and affection. Adding fuel to fire, he ridicules the memory of her father and subsequently humiliates her and what she holds dear in public, which only hints at the hateful nature and violence in him.

Yet again, Middleton draws our focus away from the duke's inability to assume the role of a husband and concentrates on the Duchess' flawed behaviour by illustrating her supposed negative qualities. A good submissive wife should stand by her husband (and absorb his failures) and pray away his cruelty, instead of aggressively taking action against it:

Did ever cruel barbarous art match this?
Twice hath his surfeits brought my father's memory
Thus spitefully and scornfully to mine eyes
And I'll endure 't no more; 'tis in my heart since:
I'll be revenged as far as death can lead me. (I. ii)

Middleton illustrates the consequences faced by a wife who fails to observe obedience in marriage, whereas the contemptuous ways of the Duke merits no attention at all. Any

attempt to escape victimization from a cruel husband is seen as a self-defeating effort to subvert patriarchal authority, when all she desires is to escape from an abusive relationship. A woman asking for a divorce is incomprehensible. No longer able to deny herself, the Duchess courageously breaks patriarchal laws, risking everything in an attempt to control the course of her own life. That she offers sex as a commodity has only to do with the fact that her body is the only thing of value she has to offer. There can be little doubt that her conviction in transgressing man-made rules is absolutely necessary because her own sanity seems at stake. However, Middleton finds that unacceptable and demonises her intentions and behaviour. He ministrates the restoration of "phallocentrism" (centering on the phallus)³¹, of power and control by highlighting their (the Duke, Lord Governor and Almachildes) triumph in the face of the Duchess' failure:

Bestow me upon death, sir; I am guilty,
And of a cruelty above my cause:
His injury was *too low* (italics mine) for my revenge.
(IV. iii)

At the end, we witness a pitiful turnabout in spirit — a woman magnificent in her pursuit to change her life, is transformed into a minion again, her private clamouring for freedom successfully suppressed. Women like the Duchess and Francesca who try to fight patriarchy are perceived as witch-like women, that is women who defy the norm and display behaviour that go against the qualities society associates with the ideal woman.

Hecate's Witch

Middleton's Hecate becomes the yardstick of depravity against which other women are measured. Using Hecate, Middleton presents witch-like behaviour that culminates into full-blown depravity, where total moral anarchy in the form of excessive

sexuality freely reigns. Hecate fits the stereotypical portrait of a witch of early modern Europe, a misfit that rebels against the traditional role of a submissive woman, wife and mother. She flouts male authority and refuses to serve neither man nor his expectations of her by living in a space independent of male influence. As a consequence many elaborate fantasies about her were generated. These tales slander her roles as a woman (and her sexuality), mother and neighbour, and portray her as the most despicable and frightening member of the community. But it is also in her role that we discover much about the male psyche, of internal demons unresolved and projected onto the witch character, of masculine vulnerability (an oxymoron by patriarchal standards) manifesting into various forms of ugliness that is perversely resolved/unresolved through the suppression of women.

Our first encounter with Hecate and her cronies — boiling and consuming an unbaptised child — is rather grotesque. This is done deliberately to shock and assault the senses, and incite fear and repulsion through the stage visual. On top of that, Hecate demonstrates neither remorse nor guilt for her unbecoming sexual tendencies. Her lasciviousness extends to bedding her own flesh and blood, the ungrateful Firestone, who half the time wishes her dead. She unabashedly asks her son to satisfy her distorted sexual appetite. In an incident, when Firestone expresses interest to pursue another woman, she scoffs at him:

I see that
You had rather hunt after strange women still
Than lie with your own mothers. (I. ii)

Hecate's brittle relationship with her son is an unnatural, parasitic one which disembodies motherhood and its nurturing function. Having derailed the sacred concept of maternal

instinct, she teaches her children ways of concocting evil potions and such. It is interesting that Hecate and the Duchess share a bond that resembles a twisted mother/daughter relationship³², for both resort to dark forces of evil to meet their ends:

Hecate : Worse and worse; doubts and incredulities!
Can you doubt me then, daughter...
Duchess : I did not doubt you, mother. (V. ii)

This suggested relationship of mother-daughter ties in with my earlier point that women like the Duchess and Francesca possess witch-like qualities.

Hecate also revels in an overdose of unrestrained sexuality, and for those she lusts but cannot have she decides:

What young man can we wish to pleasure us,
But we enjoy him in an incubus? (I. ii)

Another despicable trait of Hecate involves concocting unguents for various potions, and using her skills as a witch to interfere in the cycle of reproduction, i.e. causing barrenness in women and impotence in men, for whoever hires her services:

Knit with these charms and retentive knots,
Neither the man begets nor woman breeds,
No, nor perform the least desires of wedlock. (I. ii)

Living independent of male authority also affords her the luxury of freely expressing her opinions — or curses rather. Any person who dares vex or slight her has to contend with Hecate's wrath:

Hecate: And is the farmer's picture and his wife's
Laid down to the fire yet?
Stadlin: They're a-roasting both too.
Hecate: Then their marrows are
a-melting subtly,
And three months' sickness sucks up life in 'em.
They denied me often flour, barm, and milk.
(I. ii)

Her powerful spells also result in dwindling or failing of livestock or even sexual incapacitation of her victims.

Ironically, for all her depravity, Hecate remains the most powerful figure in the play, unharmed and untouched by Middleton's retribution. Ania Loomba's observation that "the patriarchal notion of woman as witch acknowledges female power even as it seeks to demonise it"³³ helps highlight Hecate's role in the play. In The Witch, Hecate emerges as a female character who succeeds in living life according to her own terms. Her skill as a witch/medicine woman is most sought after even by those who find her repulsive, but reluctantly regard her with awe. Her clientele consists of men of different ranks, both weak and powerful (although by consulting her, their power is much reduced). Almachildes is much beholden to her for a love potion he sought to "persuade" Amoretta to fall for him. Even Sebastian (who professes to be a man of deep religion detests Hecate for her notorious lifestyle) owes much to her skills for making Antonio impotent on his wedding night:

Heaven knows with what unwillingness and hate
I enter this damned place: but such extremes
Of wrongs in love fight 'gainst religion's knowledge.
(I.ii)

With the interference of "the witch", Antonio's impotence elevates Sebastian's own sexual prowess, and his masculine potency complements Isabella's almost sterile femininity.

Although in The Witch Middleton tries to present Hecate as a symbol of deviance and transgression, she materialises as an ambivalent character who projects strength that transcends patriarchal limitations. Even the dramatist neglected to punish her as he did the Duchess and Francesca. Hecate blatantly challenges the status quo to create a

personal space away from the web of patriarchal constraints. This necessary transgression essentially emancipates and affirms her identity as a woman and automatically negates the significance and need for male order. Inevitably, Hecate's journey reclaims a strong sense of strength and wisdom that undermine the supposedly stable and divinely sanctioned rules of patriarchy:

Sebastian : I depart happy
 In what I have then, being constrained to this.—
 And grant, you greater powers that dispose men,
 That I may never need this hag agen!
 Hecate : I know he loves me not, nor there's no hope
 on't;
 'Tis for the love of mischief I do this.

(I.ii)

Hecate's statement asserts that she holds no illusion about patriarchal intentions and motivations, unlike other female characters such as Isabella. Therefore, the derogatory male-designed labels such as "outcast", "criminal" and "violate" cease to contain any significant meaning for Hecate:

Almachildes : Is your name Good Hag?
 Hecate : 'Tis anything:
 Call me the horrid'st and unhallowed things
 That life and nature trembles at, for thee
 I'll be the same.

(I.ii)

In crossing limits, Hecate taps into a new site for self-expression in matters concerning sexuality, knowledge and skill (to mention a few); all of which appeal to Hecate's (or for that matter most people's) sensibilities:

Now I go, now I fly,
 Malkin my sweet spirit and I
 O what a dainty pleasure 'tis
 To ride in the air
 When the moon shines fair
 And sing and dance, and toy and kiss
 Over woods, high rocks, and mountains
 Over seas, our mistress' fountains.

(III.iii)

In such a pursuit, she achieves a sense of power: "My power's so firm, it is not to be questioned" (V.ii) that surpasses that of the "dominators".

Hecate becomes the reflecting mirror that strips man to his most naked form and exposes his hypocrisy, frailties and inability to appropriate his own rules. In other words, as Lacan contextualises "without the constant availability of woman as a foil, representing a place where he can unconsciously project everything of himself that he doesn't want to acknowledge, his vulnerability, his powerlessness, his sense of uncertainty, chaos and emptiness, man would never have enough room to construct and believe in his own viability and goodness"³⁴.

Conclusion

I find Middleton's portrayal of the female characters intriguing. Isabella, the ideal woman, fails to find herself due to values (which are borrowed from patriarchal structures) that allow only a fragmented existence. Conversely, Middleton portrays Francesca and the Duchess as witch-like women whose supposed transgressive deeds lead to a sinful existence. However, it is quite clear that these brave souls courageously face great adversity in venturing out of a constricting and repressed life. Contrary to Middleton's denigration, these women manage to challenge the current social arrangement. However, patriarchal authorities perpetually curtail such attempts by breaking these women's spirit (like wild horses) to "restore" them back to the bosom of society.

Hecate, however, plays an ambivalent role. Although Middleton casts her in a derogatory manner, she is also a figure that stands alone and apart from social restrictions

and, in that separateness, Hecate acquires a strength that is lacking in the other characters of the play. The witch figure, totally liberated, decidedly stands as the symbol of men's fear and possibly women's aspiration of self-empowerment and fulfillment of identity. Hecate expands and defines new spheres for women to explore and offers possibilities of newness by denouncing patriarchy and its machinations. Hecate, therefore, could boast of success not only in breaking into the facade of masculinity, but also in "finding" herself in the chaos of patriarchy.

- ¹ James Keller, "Middleton's *The Witch*: Witchcraft and the Domestic Female Hero," J. Fantastic In The Arts 4 (1991) 44. A borrowed term from Keller's article.
- ² Irving Ribner, Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest For Moral Order (London: Methuen, 1979) 9.
- ³ Irving 9.
- ⁴ Irving 9.
- ⁵ A collaborative effort with William Rowley.
- ⁶ Ania Loomba, Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 39.
- ⁷ David Lindley, introduction, The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James (London: Routledge, 1993) 1. Frances Howard, Countess of Somerset and her husband Robert Carr were prosecuted in 1616 for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, Carr's friend and political advisor. He was murdered to prevent his opposition to Howard's divorce from her first husband, the third Earl of Essex, on the grounds of his impotence. The scandal became a sensation also due to the witchcraft allegations.
- ⁸ Katherine Briggs, Pale Hecate's Team: An Examination of the Beliefs on Witchcraft and Magic Among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and His Immediate Successors (London: Routledge, 1962) 77.
- ⁹ Briggs 81.
- ¹⁰ Briggs 77.
- ¹¹ Lindley 98.
- ¹² Keller 39.
- ¹³ Keller 39.
- ¹⁴ Henry Wells, Elizabethan and Jacobean Playwrights (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939) 33.
- ¹⁵ Keith Thomas, "The Double Standard," Race, Gender and Rank: Early Modern Ideas of Humanity, Maryanne Cline Horowitz, ed., (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1992) 196.
- ¹⁶ In patriarchal society, premarital sex was taboo. For the illicit union of unmarried men and women to result in children out of wedlock is considered a crime. If a man refuses to take responsibility towards his partner and their child, more often than not, the woman would resort to abortion or infanticide to escape punishment and being stigmatised by neighbours.
- ¹⁷ Anne Barstow, Witchcraze: A History of the European Witch Hunts (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994) 7.
- ¹⁸ Barstow 133.

¹⁹ Barstow 135.

²⁰ Keller 40.

²¹ Keller 40.

²² Keller 42.

²³ Lindley 97.

²⁴ "Pleasurable dump" here refers to Francesca's social strata that allows her to indulge in material pleasure that is denied most her poverty-stricken sisters. However, that very place of pleasure hinders her development and chokes her with strict rules and regulation and she has to bow to the authority and will of her guardian brother, whether she wants to or not.

²⁵ Dymphna Callaghan, Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 172.

²⁶ Lindley 63. In Renaissance drama, the term "whore" is most often applied not to women who sleep with many men, but to women who do not — to wives, for the most part, who sleep or are thought to sleep with other men. Florida qualifies to be called a wife, although not legally, for she has been with Antonio for 5 years.

²⁷ Loomba 67.

²⁸ Keller 40.

²⁹ Part of the title of James Sosnoski, "A Mindless Man-Driven Theory Machine," Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism Robyn Warhol, Diane Price Herndl; eds., (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 40.

³⁰ Jonathan Clark, "Inside/Out: Body Politics Against Large Bodies," Daphnis 20 (1991) 121.

³¹ Warhol 399.

³² Keller 44.

³³ Loomba 6.

³⁴ Rosalind Minsky, Psychoanalysis and Gender: An Introductory Reader (London, Routledge, 1996) 161.