

## Chapter Three

### The Witch Of Edmonton

The Witch of Edmonton, written in 1621, was a collaborative effort by the playwrights Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley. The play questions the social forces surrounding witchcraft, namely economic pressures, perceptions of salvation and the inherent need in society to find a scapegoat for its ills. By highlighting these issues, I will explore the contradictions within patriarchal culture, and prove that in the play, accusations of witchcraft are in fact a manifestation of patriarchy's unresolved inner conflict. This conflict essentially lies in the failure to protect the "weaker sex" and to uphold the patriarchal code of conduct for the masculine self. Before delving into the text, I will first briefly discuss the dramatists who wrote this play.

The Londoner Thomas Dekker, made a living writing pamphlets and plays. His optimistic and empathising attitude towards ordinary people and their misfortunes often created dramatic characters who have "more of that mixture of good and evil which we find in real human beings"<sup>1</sup>. Dekker largely exhibited life as he saw it in his plays, without the apparent intent to reform or preach<sup>2</sup>. His works are often described as "good-natured farce"<sup>3</sup> and their inspiration is drawn directly from life. John Ford, an Oxford man, fashioned characters based on Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. Stuart Sherman calls Ford a "decadent" dramatist, a "romantic apostle of illicit love who could glorify even incest for the delight of an effete upper class audience, sated with the ordinary fare of a drama whose novelty had long been exhausted"<sup>4</sup>. However, Ribner Irving suggests that the quality of Ford's moral position is much more subtle than is given credit for by

his critics<sup>5</sup>. Usually, the tragedy of his heroic characters lies in their enslavement to their own human instincts and the need to conform to social order that runs counter to their desires. These conflicting demands usually destroy the characters who find “no escape other than in the courage of his[her] death”<sup>6</sup>. Ford concludes that only death could resolve moral uncertainty in life and this inevitably made him one of the most “pessimistic tragedians of his age”<sup>7</sup>. William Rowley, on the other hand, delved mostly in comedies especially with the King’s Men from 1623<sup>8</sup>. He often collaborated with other famous writers including Middleton, with whom he produced The Changeling.

The Witch of Edmonton is a domestic tragedy containing three significant scenes. Dekker is believed to have inspired the scene involving Mother Sawyer (the witch), Ford is the creator of Frank Thorney (the bigamist) and Rowley seems to have composed Cuddy Banks (the clown)<sup>9</sup>. These playwrights began to show interest in the subject of witchcraft as stage-play when Henry Goodcole (a minister in charge of Elizabeth Sawyer in Newgate Gaol) provided details of her accusation, trial, witch practices and punishment in a pamphlet entitled The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch, Late of Edmonton. It has been said that after being condemned to death, Elizabeth Sawyer confessed to Goodcole of “long and close-carried witchery” and said that the devil “always came in the shape of a dog”<sup>10</sup>. It is safe to assume that the dramatists exploited the sensationalism of this scandal to collaborate in The Witch of Edmonton, although they did succeed in shaping a play of moral complexity. The idea of Elizabeth Sawyer led to the creation of a play described as “a comprehensive study of Elizabethan ideas of witchcraft”<sup>11</sup> and “the soberest and most factual of all witch plays”<sup>12</sup>. It can be safely inferred that all three dramatists thought that there was more to witchcraft than

malignant intents and magic spells. Even though the play is moralistic in tone, the multi-layered work also reveals the playwrights' possible scepticism towards accusations concerning familiars, levitation and such.

In the play, an elderly woman, Mother Sawyer, is scrutinized under a microscope. Her social condition, personality, behaviour and sexuality<sup>13</sup> become public concern. It is most unusual and significant that the dramatists give Mother Sawyer a voice in the play unlike, for example, Mrs. Generous in The Late Lancashire Witches. Critics like Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge discuss this freedom for self-expression as a means for Mother Sawyer to provide "an explanation of the social causes which have led to her ostracism and demonisation, and also a sharp refusal to allow society to purify itself by scapegoating her"<sup>14</sup>. Therefore readers could *hear* the witch's woeful laments and angry cries due to her plight. Her pleas represent the voice of a woman crying out for fairness and compassion. Readers are also privy to her reasons for allegedly yielding to the devil. Mother Sawyer assumes a role that argues that witchcraft is a social phenomenon derived from tensions and prejudices within the community. Through Mother Sawyer, questions about the double standard existing between the sexes and people of different social strata are raised. To understand the dynamics that victimized women such as Sawyer, I will first explore several factors in the patriarchal design, specifically the economic and cultural setbacks. Both factors rendered women helpless in running their own lives and ultimately left them vulnerable to witch accusations.

The emergence of capitalism transformed the dynamics of the family nucleus and the perception of sharing and charity in community. Domestic work was no longer viewed as productive. Household tasks were considered wifely duties and not work that

warranted wage; a social obligation rather than an occupation. Inevitably women's status declined. Household duties awarded no monetary value, and working outside the home yielded only a minimal wage. One way or another, most women had little choice but to depend on men financially. Inevitably, hard living and new work ethics weakened the bond of the extended family and neighbourly ties. Focusing only on the immediate family's survival, the man of the house gave less and thought less of extended family members and neighbours. The individualistic trait seeped down to the root of society and created a generation who co-existed with the needy and the poor (mostly single or lone female) and led to a whole new social problem that weighed down the economy.

Capitalism displaced the weakest group in society — elderly women living in abject poverty. When time ravaged youth and strength, they ceased to contribute significantly to the economy, thus making them a liability to society, an unwanted social burden. Neighbours looked at them with mixed feelings — sympathy, guilt and resentment — and this created much tension and discontent. Reconciling the newly acquired trait of individualism with Christian values gnawed at the social conscience. Whenever an impoverished fellow Christian's needs were denied or insufficiently aided, it constituted "a transgression of traditional codes of communal sharing"<sup>15</sup>. The clash between "neighbourliness"<sup>16</sup> and "individualism"<sup>17</sup> manifested into anger and hostility; invectives and bad treatment often interplayed between the two parties. Perhaps witch accusations served as the last resort taken by neighbours to end the incessant aggravation and profound ill feeling they felt.

The construction of femininity and social behaviour of the "ideal woman" within the framework of patriarchy stoically demanded, among others, a "nurturing behaviour

and well-governed speech”<sup>18</sup>. Reginald Scott describes the type of women singled out for witch accusation as exhibiting the opposite to these ideals, “doting, *scolds* [italics mine], mad, divelish ... so firme and steadfast in their opinion”<sup>19</sup>. Commonly, sharp-tongued and quarrelsome women often engaged in disputes with neighbours (especially hostile ones) who did not take well to being reminded of their moral obligation. The harsh words and imprecations of old women (which earned them a notorious reputation) were interpreted as witchery and cause for misfortune, giving rise to suspicion and fear. In order to compensate economic disability, old women were believed capable of pacting with Lucifer and causing harm on those who provoked her wrath. Such bizarre reasoning motivated witch accusations. In a way, the accusations allowed society to find a scapegoat for its various misfortunes. Certainly, prosecutions were a manageable feat because old women, as Keith Thomas points out, “were the most dependent members of the community, and thus the most vulnerable to accusation”<sup>20</sup>.

John Calvin professed that people “are not all created with similar destiny; but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others”<sup>21</sup>. Ironically, the yardstick of one’s spirituality depended on material success. In other words, if one did not succeed economically, this failure would prove that one was damned. This arbitrary pronouncement did not bode well for most women (especially older ones) as patriarchy denied equal opportunities for women to amass wealth. Self-righteous zealots persecuted old women as witches (as they fit the description of the “damned”) on the assumption that they would naturally turn to the devil for material enrichment. Witch-hunts (possibly one of many methods) reinforced a zealot’s quest for moral perfection, to exalt his own

status and to confirm his place among the elects. By acting on behalf of God in defending Christianity, he believed he secured salvation for himself.

Patriarchal culture approached procreation and female physiological functions in the same misogynistic manner that further persecuted old women as witches. It manipulated religion to substantiate countless outlandish notions about the female body and its procreative powers, to attach some value that could be detracted at will. Martin Luther decided that women's salvation lay in her womb, "it is a very great comfort that a woman can be saved by bearing children"<sup>22</sup>. Giving birth apparently enabled women to atone for Biblical Eve's sin in causing man's fall. In light of this view, post-menopausal women could no longer "perform" this "honourable and salutary"<sup>23</sup> duty. To make matters worse, old women were seen as oversexed. This provided the basis for legends about demon lovers, for only they could satisfy the sexually insatiable but physically unappealing crones. Early modern times equated outward beauty with inward virtue; therefore an ugly old woman must be a witch. Antonia Fraser comments that suspicion of witchcraft weighed heavily on "every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue ... a Dog or Cat by her side"<sup>24</sup>. Hence, a barren yet sexually voracious woman was someone to be feared and repulsed – a witch.

### **Mother Sawyer – The Witch of Edmonton**

The Witch of Edmonton links the witchcraft theme to economic factors, bigamy and betrayal. It revolves around two protagonists – Mother Sawyer and Frank Thorney – whose experiences are vastly different, but a commonality (their transgressive behaviour)

brings them together at the gallows. A juxtaposition of these characters will significantly reveal how gender, social status and economic position determine the relationship between community members, especially in times of trouble or tragedy.

The first glimpse of Mother Sawyer immediately establishes her social standing. She is "poor, deform'd and ignorant" (II.i.4), with only "one eye, old and isolated from the community"<sup>25</sup>. Impaired by destitution, she constantly battles the scorn of uncharitable, wealthy males. When she gathers "a few rotten sticks to warm [her]" (II.i.20), Banks (the owner of the land) spews condemning words at her. In a fit of anger, he evicts Mother Sawyer from the land and accuses her of being a witch:

Mother Sawyer: Dost call me witch?

Old Banks : I do, Witch, I do: and worse I would, knew I a name more  
hateful. (II.i.18-20)

One wonders at Banks' unnecessary hostility. No doubt her harsh words aggravate the conflict, but his hatred runs deep enough for him to physically hurt her. The reason becomes clear when readers discover that Banks shares his community's sentiments about the supposed witch, who is believed to harbour a familiar:

You have a Spirit, they say, comes to you  
in the likeness of a Dog (IV.i.215-6)

after making a pact with the devil:

Abjure all goodness: be at hate with prayer  
And study Curses, Imprecations,  
Blasphemous speeches .... so I might work  
Revenge upon this Miser (II.i.107-11)

whom she is said to treat like a lover:

Oh, my best love!  
I am on fire, (even in the midst of Ice)  
Raking my blood up, till my shrunk knees feel  
Thy curl'd head leaning on them.

Come then, my Darling!  
If in the Aire thou hover'st, fall upon me. (V.i.9-13)

Her other sins include tricking, among others, Cuddy Banks for amusement and revenge. An apparition of Kate Carter (Cuddy's beloved) appears to him and this nearly leads to his drowning:

A ball well banded: now the set's half won  
The Father's wrong I'll wreak upon the Son. (II.i.260)

Old Thorney even accuses her of bewitching Frank Thorney into murdering his own wife, Susan, a crime which lands him in the gallows (this incident will be further elaborated in the section on Frank Thorney):

Did you not bewitch Frank to kill his wife?  
He could never have don't without the Devil. (V.iii.37)

All these characters imagine Mother Sawyer's speech, laden with complaints and curses, as powerful prayers to the devil that bring about economic misfortunes and sexual misconduct:

Countryman 2 : Rid the Town of her, else all  
our Wives will do nothing else  
but dance about other Country May-poles  
Countryman 3 : Our Cattel fall, our Wives fall  
our Daughters fall, and Maid-servants fall.  
(IV.i.10-14)

Perhaps Mother Sawyer's most terrible deed comes in the madness and death of Anne Ratcliffe, a woman who dared cross Mother Sawyer in a neighbourly dispute:

Mother Sawyer : That Jade, that foul-tongu'd whore, Nan Ratcliff  
Who for a little Soap lick'd by my Sow  
Struck, and almost had lam'd it; Did not I charge thee  
To pinch ... to th'heart? (IV.i.173-6)

Old Ratcliffe : Nothing: she's become nothing  
But the miserable trunk  
Of a wretched woman ... she beat out  
Her own brains, and so died. (IV.i.203-207)



Mother Sawyer's blatant rebellion in speech, behaviour and actions (a trait viewed most unbecoming and which does not condone to acceptable feminine stereotypes) forges her notorious reputation as a witch, an outcast. As Allison Coudert points out: "Rebellion was routinely equated with witchcraft"<sup>26</sup>.

Terrible assumptions easily shadow Mother Sawyer because of her solitary existence and "an angry glare would be interpreted as the evil eye, an irate epithet as a curse, muttering as invocation, and loitering as working a spell"<sup>27</sup>. Women who live without any male guardianship arouse the suspicion and incur the abuse of small-minded neighbours. They are assumed to be more likely to resort to unethical methods in their dealings with life and people. Witchcraft is viewed as a crime clandestinely perpetrated by a weak person. On a sub-conscious level, witch charges could be an alternative means of being rid of indigent old women. Barbara Walker encapsulates Mother Sawyer's life well: she could be called a witch and so "destroyed, like domestic animals past their usefulness.... The old woman was an ideal scapegoat: too expendable to be missed, too weak to fight back, too poor to matter"<sup>28</sup>.

Without understanding the circumstances that force Mother Sawyer to behave in a certain way, the likes of Banks look down on her; the beating of Mother Sawyer clearly illustrates that:

Mother Sawyer : Dost strike me, slaye?  
Old Banks : Cursing, thou hag! take that, and that.  
(II.i.28-30)

Others, such as Cuddy Banks, mock and make fun of her:

The old Witch of *Edmonton*. If our mirth be not cross'd —  
Bless us ... let her curse her tother eye out. (II.i.83-4)

Whilst the people of Edmonton self-righteously accuse Mother Sawyer of witchcraft, hidden in the community are “men-witches” (IV.i.148) like Sir Arthur Clarington:

Men in gay clothes, whose  
Backs are laden with Titles and Honours  
are within far more crooked then I am. (IV.i.86-8)

An influential man in society (one of the leaders in Edmonton), he exploits his power to hide his sanctimonious ways. Although Sir Arthur persecutes Mother Sawyer, *he* possesses a dark side. For example, he helps Winnifride and Frank to marry, only so that he might continue an affair with her without worrying about the risk of pregnancy:

Sir Arthur : Good, good, to con the lesson of our loves,  
Our secret game  
Winnifride : Oh, blush to speak it further!  
As y'are a noble gentleman, forget  
A sin so monstrous. (I.i.173-7)

When discovered at the end, he escapes unscathed (despite the Justice acknowledging his hand in the chaos) merely paying a small fine out of a fat coffer:

Sir Arthur, though the Bench hath mildly censur'd your  
Errours, yet you have indeed been the Instrument that wrought all  
their mis-fortunes: I would wish you pay'd down your Fine  
speedily and willingly (V.ii.1-4)

To deflect public censure, he insists on wearing a false rectitude to denigrate a poor old woman whom clearly exists at the margin of society. He vindictively endorses Banks accusation that Mother Sawyer consorts with the devil, more so when she divulges Sir Arthur Clarington's ploys.

Mother Sawyer's awareness of being victimized can be inferred from her inner dialogue which also acquaints readers to her thoughts, feelings and motivations. She knows that the social stigma attached to her gender, age, unappealing appearance and

poverty brand her a witch, although she remains thoroughly confused by such social dynamics:

And why on me ... should the envious world  
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?  
'Cause I am poor, deform'd and ignorant. (II.i.1-3)

How can one help but feel inadequate and helpless living in a society that perceives material lack as damnation on earth. The impossibility for Mother Sawyer to succeed economically never occurs to neighbours who somehow fail to notice that capitalism in the patriarchal kingdom has largely marginalized women in its quest for material riches. Social conditions disabled Mother Sawyer from contributing economically. To her detriment, society condemns the very "product" created by its economic system. To add insult to injury, Mother Sawyer no longer possesses childbearing capabilities and a desirable physicality that can sexually entice men. In short, she has nothing of value to offer society. When a woman is tacitly declared worthless, she becomes an albatross to the Christian community she depends on for survival.

Despite the opposition to her presence, Mother Sawyer will not be suppressed. Her most powerful weapon lies in her voice, as intended by the dramatists<sup>29</sup>, and she verbalises not only personal predicaments but also manages to provide great insights into the flaws of the people of Edmonton. The play introduces Mother Sawyer letting out anger, frustration and sadness in her lamentation:

Must I for that be made a common sink,  
For all the filth and rubbish of Men's tongues. (II.i.6-7)

Although she cannot be described as virtuous for hurling abuse at the cruel treatment of neighbours such as Banks, her response seems reasonable as her "voice" is the only weapon she possesses:

Curmudgeon, now thy bones aches  
Thy jyonts cramps, and convulsions stretch  
and crack thy sinews. (II.i.28-9)

Ignorant neighbours, on the other hand, interpret her vituperations as ill words which could damage prized livestock and crops and lead to economic breakdown. However, in a soliloquy, Mother Sawyer reveals complete ignorance of witchcraft practices, an important piece of information revealed during a private moment:

Call me Hag and Witch!  
What is the name? where and by what Art learn'd?  
What spells, what charms or invocations  
May the thing call'd Familiar be purchas'd? (II.i.33-6)

Wizened and angered by the moral bankruptcy that afflicts Edmonton, Mother Sawyer also speaks of society's hidden witch-like tendencies that contradict the moral high ground it preaches from:

A Witch? who is not?  
Hold not that universal Name in scorne then  
What are your painted things in Princes Courts?  
Upon whose Eye-lids Lust sits blowing fires  
To burn Mens Souls in sensual hot desires:  
Upon whose naked Paps, a Leachers thought  
Acts Sin in fouler shapes then can be wrought. (IV.i.101-8)

Finally, she articulates, although in vain, a defence of her position in society against neighbours who have thus far behaved brutishly:

Why then on me  
Or any lean old Beldame? Reverence once  
Had wont to wait on age. Now an old woman  
Ill favour'd grown with years, if she be poor  
Must be call'd Bawd or Witch. (IV.i.118-22)

Long before Mother Sawyer even contemplates consorting with the devil, she was falsely accused of "forespeak[ing] their [her community's] Cattle" (II.i.12) and of "bewitch[ing] their Corn" and "their Babes at nurse" (II.i.13). Internalising the

community's ill treatment of her, Mother Sawyer declares, "some call me Witch, and being ignorant of my self, they go about to teach me how to be one" (II.i.8-10). Mother Sawyer's personal tragedy begins when she feels shunned, reviled and, most of all, alone and defenceless in her plight. Pushed beyond endurance, she resolves to challenge the cruelty and violence and becomes what she was initially accused of:

Abjure all goodness: be at hate with prayer;  
And study Curses, Imprecations  
Blasphemous speeches .... Or any thing ...  
so I might work Revenge upon this Miser,  
this black Cur ... That barks ... sucks the very blood  
Of me .... Vengeance, shame, ruine,  
light upon that Canker. (II.i.107-15)

At that vulnerable moment, responding to her bitterness and despondency, the Devil appears. He empathises and seduces with temptations of power, "come out of my love to give thee just revenge against thy foes" (II.i.123-4). At the sight of slight hesitation, he proceeds to threaten to kill her, "if thou deniest, I'll tear thy body in a thousand pieces" (II.i.129-30) and this pushes Mother Sawyer to accept his offer. Mother Sawyer may not be fully aware of the repercussions of her action, but she discovers a newfound power — control over her life, reclamation of pride and self-worth and ultimately the opportunity to exact revenge against her adversaries:

Ill morrow to thee, and all the world, that flout a poor old  
woman. *To death pursue 'em* . (II.i.183-4)

The demonic alliance with the Dog (her familiar) also provides a sense of security and lessens the loneliness felt by a woman isolated by neighbours:

My dear Tom-boy welcome  
I am torn to pieces by a pack of Curs  
Clap'd all upon me, and for want of thee  
Comfort me: thou shalt have the Teat anon. (IV.i.148-51)

Mother Sawyer fully appreciates the intoxicating feeling of being sought after for her supernatural abilities. When, for instance, Cuddy Banks pleads for help to make Katherine Carter fall madly in love with him, Mother Sawyer is incredulous:

Clown : My request is, to send one of thy what d'ye call  
          'ems, either to pluck that out, or stick another as fast in hers.  
          Do, and here's my hand, I am thine for three lives  
Sawyer: But thou dost think that I can do't, and I alone?  
(II.i.215-23)

Although the Devil is exploiting her vulnerability and plans to eventually abandon her, the newfound respect and attention gained in her reputation as witch somehow justifies (in her mind) her witch status, and she feels emancipated from oppression and humiliation. For a moment, Mother Sawyer genuinely feels acceptance and fulfilment and is able to overcome feelings of rejection by her Christian neighbours. She becomes the *master* of her own happiness and fate by creating a personal space within the constraints of tradition. A somewhat revitalized Mother Sawyer recognises newfound freedom to express sexuality, if she so desires, despite popular opinion that sex becomes a grotesque indulgence when a woman reaches a certain age. Mother Sawyer may not have made a radical climb on the social or economic ladder, but what little power, dignity and compassion that she finds in the winter of her life seems to make a world of difference, as she never had much to begin with.

However, Mother Sawyer's journey into witchcraft eventually leads to her tragic downfall. There is no escape for a woman once she is labelled a witch. Having withdrawn from Edmonton's social scene even further evokes the suspicion of neighbours (who now suspect her seeming independence and self-possession). The numerous misfortunes that have befallen families and their livelihood necessitate the need to lay blame on someone

or something. The people of Edmonton burn the thatch of the witch's roof believing that "when 'tis burning, if she be a Witch, she'll come running in" as evidence of guilt (IV.i.18). Predictably, the owner who rushes to save her only earthly possession is condemned for following her instinct: "this Thatch is as good as a Jury to prove she is a Witch" (IV.i.26). Determined to exact justice, the incensed townsmen turn into a lynch mob bent on "hang[ing] her, beat[ing] her, kill[ing] her" (IV.i.29). The Justice puts a stop to the violent proceedings with a pointed reminder that "arrant fools" (IV.i.44) "must not threaten her: 'tis against Law" (IV.i.51). In this heated and tense scene, Mother Sawyer spiritedly cast abuses at her accusers, exposing the hypocrisy and moral laxity among the higher class:

Men-witches can without the Fangs of Law  
Drawing once one drop of blood, put counterfeit pieces  
Away for true Gold. (IV.i.142-4)

To her peril, Mother Sawyer's exposé earns her a death sentence. In a confusing turn of events, the Justice seems more concerned about her caustic self-defence, which he terms as "sawci[ness]" and "bitter[ness]" (IV.i.81). Ironically, it is her insubordination (of engaging in a public war of words with the Justice and neighbours) rather than alleged crimes that secures her imprisonment.

### **Overcoming Patriarchy's Demon**

Frank Thorney is an important example of the way in which society could fight the patriarchal demon. Though he is very much like the other male characters in the play, he does undergo a transformation towards the end, which suggests that society could overcome the ills of patriarchy. He also provides an interesting contrast to Mother

Sawyer in the way in which community members view their executions. The play begins with Frank committing bigamy. He goes on to make an honest woman out of the pregnant Winnifride in a discreet ceremony. However, during that time, Frank is constantly pressured by Old Thorney to marry Susan Carter (a wealthy yeoman's daughter) in the hope of gaining a lifestyle and financial standing befitting minor gentry:

If you marry  
With wealthy *Carter's* Daughter, there's a Portion  
Will free my land (I.ii.131-2)

Frank justifies committing bigamy as "known and approv'd in Palmestry" (II.ii.116). In order to hide the clandestine union and maintain Old Thorney and the community's approval, Frank weaves a web of deceit. Unfortunately, the emotional strain (of keeping up with his own lies and double-life) takes its toll — Frank is wrecked with guilt, partly because Susan epitomises the ideal wife, obedient and self-sacrificing:

Here is the fen in which this Hydra  
Of discontent grows rank  
In my own bosom ... (II.ii.110-3)

Consequently, Frank contemplates fleeing Edmonton with Winnifride. In a drunken state of intense rage and desperation, Frank kills Susan (for refusing to part with him) and frames Warbeck (an unsuccessful suitor) and Somerton for the crime. It is whilst convalescing in Old Carter's home (due to a self-inflicted wound) that Katherine (Susan's sister) discovers the murder weapon, thus effectively ending any deception, and forcing Frank to face the magnitude of his crimes. The law that must be upheld punishes such blatant transgressions — Frank dies in a public execution.

Frank's weak will and complacent nature prompt him to seek material gratification at another's expense. For instance, he solicits the help of Sir Arthur



Clarrington to certify, or lie rather, about his marital status, to secure an inheritance from his father:

I'll use  
Such dutiful and ready means, that ere  
He can have notice of what's past, th'inheritance,  
To which I am born Heir, shall be assur'd. (I.i.26-30)

On top of that, Frank's passive acceptance of the current situation further pushes him onto a self-delusional path and he blames others, fate even, for a difficult and sinful life:

One every side I am distracted  
Am waded deeper into mischief  
Then virtue can avoid. But on I must:  
Fate leads me, I will follow. (I.ii.192-5)

Be that as it may, as pathetic and weak a figure as he makes, contrition and self-introspection finally overcome this disturbed soul. Frank's journey transforms him into, arguably, the strongest male character in this play (or, in my opinion, any Jacobean witch play for that matter). Locating an inner voice, Frank finally admits failure to reconcile personal and social obligations, which was the main cause of Susan's murder:

To please a Father, I have Heaven displeas'd. (IV.ii.102)

Instead of incriminating women to take the blame, he assumes responsibility in confronting the consequences of all mistakes and failings. This radical breakaway/subversion from patriarchal tradition sets him apart from other male characters, such as Antonio (The Witch) and Mr. Generous (The Late Lancashire Witches). Frank's retrospection excavates a sinful past that creates the present moral tension within, due to excessive indulgence of "many years in lusts, in surfeits, murders of Reputation, gallant sins commended or approv'd" (V.iii.76-7). The confession that his "faults are monstrous to be nam'd; yet they are monstrous" (V.iii.89-90) transcends

patriarchal ideology that behind every sinful man stands an even more sinful woman. It also confers a legitimacy and validity to the frailty that inherently exists within the male psyche (surely an oxymoronic concept in patriarchal rubric). Just a step away from death (at the gallows), a new dimension of masculine knowledge emerges out of this most unusual experience (public self-blame among men is considered a rare jewel) that Frank insists for the community of Edmonton to know including: "A curse hangs on their heads, who rather chuse to marry a goodly Portion, then a Dowr of Vertues!" (V.iii. 109-10). Emancipated from the governance of man-made laws, he creates a personal space for himself. At this point, past behaviour evokes an overwhelming sense of shame and grief that propel Frank to beg forgiveness for mistreating and betraying Winnifride's affection, "when of thee I took leave, I went abroad onely for Pillage" (IV.ii.99-100), "thou much wrong'd woman, I must sigh for thee" (V.iii.66). Most of all, Frank cannot help but condemn himself for grossly disrespecting and cruelly taking the "good woman" Susan's life. Again, Frank's high regard for female persons (albeit too late but significant nevertheless) and remorse for reprehensible behaviour towards them seem abnormal and out of place in a society that holds women as second-class citizens. In fact, the range of emotions Frank experiences (remorse, humility etc) seem curiously out of place in the body of masculinity. Thus, it elevates him as a man enlightened, of having attained new knowledge, whose wisdom, unfortunately, the rest do not share. The legacy of wisdom he wishes to leave behind dies along with him.

Frank's execution is a significant event in the play because it could be counterposed to Mother Sawyer's execution. As discussed earlier, Frank undergoes a radical

change and the public view him sympathetically at the point of his death. Mother Sawyer too experiences a change just before her execution:

I was well resolv'd to die in my repentance, I repent all former evil.  
(V.iii.41-50)

However, the deeply prejudiced onlookers dismiss it and offer no forgiveness — she is damned to the very end. The diverse response to Frank and Mother Sawyer could be linked to the notion of gender: a man may find forgiveness and salvation but a woman may not. Indeed, Old Carter accuses Mother Sawyer of bewitching his son-in-law for the murder of Susan, a pathetic attempt to exonerate Frank. The community needed this leverage to cling desperately to the illusion that Frank is not capable of such treachery while justifying the public murder of the alleged witch. Despite the bitterness, a certain ray of hope emerges when the play ends in reconciliation and reprieve, but certainly not for Mother Sawyer. The gallows scene clearly demonstrates the dynamics of hypocrisy and double standard (grounded in religious and social beliefs) that become a perverted norm in victimizing women.

At this point, it would be useful to briefly look at the role of Susan Carter. In contrast to Mother Sawyer, Susan plays the role idealized by society — the submissive and compliant woman. Being treated as a commodity does not trouble her in the least. Old Carter marries her to Frank for the title that Old Thorney possesses. The trade ends with fatal consequences. As a woman, Susan personifies wifely patience and humility, ironically traits that bring much of Frank's inner turmoil, "thou art all perfection, Diana her self" (II.ii.95). At the slightest show of unhappiness in Frank, she masochistically takes it as her fault that originates from failed wifely duties:

From some distaste

In me or my behaviour ... 'Las, Sir, I am young,  
Silly, and plain .... Say but in what I fail,  
I'll study satisfaction. (II.ii.78-82)

Susan's numbing persistence to please ultimately causes her life. She dies at Frank's own hands and even then (after being betrayed by her husband and "guardian"), Susan still holds to patriarchal definitions of feminine virtue:

Now heaven reward you ne'er the worse for me  
I did not think that death had been so sweet  
Nor I so apt to love him. I could ne'er die better. (III.iii.57-9)

Ironically, Susan (unlike Mother Sawyer) who obeyed all patriarchal rules shares the same fate of death as the woman who transgresses those rules. The experiences of both women underline the general vulnerability and lack of security in women's lives, even when one conforms to patriarchal dictates. Men (such as Frank and Sir Arthur Clarington) failing to assimilate or carry out their duties place women in a more precarious position, as the latter end up on the receiving end of those failures. Susan and Mother Sawyer clearly illustrate this (as does Isabella in The Witch).

## **Conclusion**

Although patriarchal systems of economy and social beliefs often interlinked with masculine morality, they usually resulted in a split self that struggles for reconciliation. Kant maintains that the Christian divide consists of the "earthly" – the animal, desires/wants/feelings and emotions of self; and the "spiritual" that involves duty, reason and morality. Kant further asserts: "Morality means acting against our inclinations, against our emotions and feelings"<sup>30</sup>. Mere mortals like Frank illustrate that inner conflict of reconciling "earthly" and "spiritual" aspects within himself. However, coupled with

introspection and self-realisation, Frank ultimately blames himself for personal shortcomings and failures. When these elements go missing in the masculine body, the next best alternative seems to be to scapegoat. Witchcraft accusations act as the absorbing sponge of patriarchal sins. It is the ballast that keeps afloat the illusion of supremacy of patriarchal institutions supposedly founded on divinely-sanctioned principles, whilst hiding masculine ego, inadequacies, and guilt even, in the heart of its body.

As power lies in the hands that rule, Sir Arthur Clarington represents the influencing force that obtains the subordination of women using economic and social machinations. Mother Sawyer was helpless in determining her own financial standing. Reduced to a dispensable commodity, Mother Sawyer is demonised as an individual, woman and neighbour, thus necessitating the removal of a presence considered “indigestible”<sup>31</sup> and a disruptive social element. Witchcraft accusations merely legitimised those efforts and expunged patriarchy’s contribution in the creation of witches.

However, nothing can impede feminine power from rising and asserting itself, even at the risk of death. Mother Sawyer learns that her dependency and feeling of inadequacy is a condition socially and economically created. Thus, she decidedly assumes the identity forced on by community — the Witch of Edmonton — and searches for her own fulfilment. Mother Sawyer’s journey for self-power may have forced transgression of social boundaries, but her breakthrough (in embracing her individuality and attaining self-empowerment) spells her success as a human being. Her instincts and courage lead to a gamble against the odds to reach for a slice of freedom — surely most important a step in becoming a complete being.

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- <sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, Eleventh Edition, Volume VII (Cambridge: University Press, 1910) 939.
- <sup>2</sup> Martha Fletcher Bellinger, A Short History of Drama (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1927) 240.  
Bellinger describes Dekker as a bohemian. At one time, he was incarcerated for about three years for unpaid debts; he seems to have had at least some knowledge of the hardships of life.
- <sup>3</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica 940.
- <sup>4</sup> Irving Ribner, Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest For Moral Order (London: Methuen, 1979) 153.
- <sup>5</sup> Irving 154.
- <sup>6</sup> Irving 163.
- <sup>7</sup> Irving 155.
- <sup>8</sup> "Jacobean and Caroline Drama," < [www.sogang.ac.kr/~anthony/books/Ren011](http://www.sogang.ac.kr/~anthony/books/Ren011)>.
- <sup>9</sup> The 1911 Edition Encyclopedia <10.1911encyclopedia.org/F/FO/FORD\_JOHN.htm>.
- <sup>10</sup> Lena Cowen Orlin, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1999  
<[www.shakespearedc.org/pastprod/witnotes.html](http://www.shakespearedc.org/pastprod/witnotes.html)>. Goodcole intimated that his report served as a moral warning to his readers, "stand on your guard and watch with sobriety to resist him, and the Devil your adversary, who waiteth on you continually, to subvert you".
- <sup>11</sup> Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, eds., introduction, The Witch of Edmonton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) 4.
- <sup>12</sup> 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) 94.
- <sup>13</sup> Sexuality of old women is often interlinked with their physiological and biological functions. This aspect will be elaborated in page 6 under the paragraph on sexuality of old women.
- <sup>14</sup> Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Deborah Willis, Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995) 41.
- <sup>16</sup> Willis 41.
- <sup>17</sup> Willis 41.
- <sup>18</sup> Willis 43.
- <sup>19</sup> Anne L Barstow, Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts (San Francisco: Pandora,

1994) 27.

<sup>20</sup> Anne L Barstow, "On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History," Feminist Studies in Religion, 4 (1988) 12.

<sup>21</sup> Mordechai Rotenberg, The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Failure (New York: The Free Press, 1978) 9. The influence of Calvinism spread throughout Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, where new social theories compatible with predestination became increasingly popular.

<sup>22</sup> Allison Coudert, "The Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women: The Case of the Witchcraze." Witchcraft and Demonology in Art and Literature Brian Levack (New York: Garland Publication, 1992) 80.

<sup>23</sup> Coudert 80.

<sup>24</sup> Antonia Fraser, The Weaker Vessel (London: Arrow Books, 1999) 124.

<sup>25</sup> Corbin and Sedge 4.

<sup>26</sup> Coudert 78.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Russell, A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 113.

<sup>28</sup> Barstow 29.

<sup>29</sup> Viviana Comensoli, "Witchcraft and Domestic Tragedy in The Witch of Edmonton," Witchcraft and Demonology in Art and Literature, Brian Levack (New York: Garland Publication, 1992) 152. According to Comensoli, the dramatist "elevate and dignify the character [Mother Sawyer], enhancing the audience's sympathy for her" when a poor, uneducated woman describes her status as a social outcast "with a considerable rhetorical acumen".

<sup>30</sup> Victor J. Seidler, Recreating Sexual Politics: Men, Feminism & Politics (London: Routledge, 1991) 69.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Daly, "European Witchburnings: Purifying the Body of Christ" in Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) 184.