



Università  
Ca'Foscari  
Venezia

Master's Degree  
in Scienze del  
Linguaggio

Final Thesis

**Witchcraft  
beliefs and early  
modern society  
in three  
witchcraft plays**

**Supervisor**

Ch. Prof. Laura Tosi

**Assistant supervisor**

Ch. Prof. Loretta Innocenti

**Graduand**

Damiano Pecorari  
Matriculation number  
855417

**Academic Year**

2019 / 2020

## TABLE OF CONTENTS.

### Witchcraft beliefs and early modern society in three witchcraft plays

*The witches of Lancashire*, by Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood

*The witch of Edmonton* by Thomas Dekker, John Ford, William Rowley

*The witch*, by Thomas Middleton

<b>Introduction. The historical reality of witchcraft</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Witchcraft and the Law .....	5
The chronology of persecutions .....	7
The early modern magical universe .....	8
Psychophysiology of witchcraft .....	10
<b>1. The witch in her body. Gender and household</b> .....	<b>14</b>
1.1. Women in early modern society .....	14
1.1.1. Gender stereotypes in witchcraft accusations .....	16
1.1.2. Non-gendered motives for witchcraft trials .....	17
1.2. Marriage and sexual transgression .....	19
1.2.1. Ligature .....	20
1.2.2. Purity and female sexual desire .....	22
1.2.3. Spirits and <i>incubi</i> .....	26
1.3. The female body .....	28
1.3.1. Ugliness and deformity .....	29
1.3.2. Old age .....	30
1.4. Familiars and motherhood .....	32
1.4.1. Breastfeeding and the witch mark .....	34
1.4.2. Children and affection .....	38

1.5. Household magic.....	42
1.5.1. Fire and cooking.....	43
1.5.2. Food and banquets.....	47
<b>2. The witch in her community. Poverty and social dynamics.....</b>	<b>52</b>
2.1. Poverty.....	52
2.1.1. Charity refusal.....	54
2.1.2. Class issues in <i>The Witch of Edmonton</i> .....	55
2.1.3. Revenge.....	58
2.2. Suspicion and reputation .....	63
2.2.1. Divination.....	64
2.2.2. Gossip and rumours .....	67
2.2.3. Reputation .....	69
2.3. Tension and catharsis .....	72
2.3.1. The context of the early modern village .....	72
2.3.2. Scolding.....	74
2.3.3. The cathartic effect of witchcraft beliefs .....	77
2.4. Misfortune and scapegoating .....	81
2.4.1. Death and disease.....	81
2.4.2. Scapegoating, prevention, and counter magic .....	84
2.4.3. Violence and repression .....	88

<b>3. The witch in society. Deviancy and diabolism.....</b>	<b>91</b>
3.1. Deviancy .....	92
3.1.1. Arcane language.....	93
3.1.2. Day-witch and night-witch .....	96
3.1.3. Shapeshifting.....	97
3.2. The cumulative concept of witchcraft.....	100
3.2.1. The Devil.....	101
3.2.2. Diabolical compacts.....	107
3.2.3. Nocturnal flight.....	110
3.2.4. The sabbath .....	113
3.3. Witches' anti-society.....	116
3.3.1. Misrule and disorder .....	117
3.3.2. Maintaining order.....	121
<b>Conclusion. The witch-cult.....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>125</b>

## INTRODUCTION. THE HISTORICAL REALITY OF WITCHCRAFT.

During the XV, XVI, and XVII century in Europe, between 90,000 and 200,000 people were tried for the crime of witchcraft <sup>1</sup>, and approximately half of them were executed <sup>2</sup>. The worst of these persecutions took place on the continent, where witch-hunts tended to be prolonged and hysterical; France, Swiss, and the Holy Roman Empire were particularly dangerous, with the latter being single-handedly responsible for half of the trials <sup>3</sup>. England had a more lenient take on the crime: “only” 5,000 alleged witches were tried there, for an estimated total of 1,500-2,500 executions <sup>4</sup>.

This disparity is the result of two different traditions of witchcraft beliefs. On the continent, the stereotypical image of the witch essentially corresponded to that of which we still think today: a woman gifted with supernatural powers by a compact with the Devil, flying in the night to meet her peers in the satanical feast of the sabbath <sup>5</sup>. In England, on the other hand, the witch was imagined as a more mundane figure: an old, poor village woman who got her powers thanks to a lesser diabolical spirit in the shape of an animal – a familiar.

However, an interplay existed between the scholarly continental tradition, and the popular English tradition: documents such as King James I’s *Daemonologie* introduced bits of continental lore into the learned English élites’

---

<sup>1</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 112-156.

<sup>2</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 30-33.

<sup>3</sup> LEVACK B. P., *ibid.*, pp. 30-33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-59.

framework, blurring the distinction between the two sets of beliefs <sup>6</sup> and influencing witch-finders such as the infamous Matthew Hopkins <sup>7</sup>.

### **Witchcraft and the Law.**

Another difference between England and the continent lays in the legal customs and procedures of the two areas.

England had a series of laws regulating the use of magic <sup>8</sup>:

- The first law against witchcraft was instituted in 1542 by Henry VIII. It punished, with penance or exposure on the pillory, people who used magic to treasure-hunt or to commit *maleficium* (the use of magic to hurt persons, animals, or goods). *Maleficium* was particularly feared because it was believed to happen in secret, implying “sinister intent, undetermined means, and the unfairness of a surprise attack” <sup>9</sup>;
- Elizabeth I added to the list of crimes the use of magic to provoke love (1563) and to determine the length of a monarch’s reign or the identity of their successor (1580-1581);
- James I included the possession of a familiar and the collection of parts of dead bodies to be utilized in necromantic rituals; he also expanded the list of crimes which lead to a death sentence (1604). With time, however, this intransigent persecutor of witches became more lenient: in the first period of his English reign, between 1603 and 1615, there were 35 executions, whereas between 1616 and 1625 there were only five.

---

<sup>6</sup> BEVER E., “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 58-59.

<sup>7</sup> MAIR L., *Witchcraft*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, pp. 226-232.

<sup>8</sup> HARRIS A. J., *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century Drama*, Manchester, Manchester, pp. 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> KIECKHEFER R., “Magic and its Hazards in the Late Medieval West”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 21.

- This moderate tendency continued also under Charles I: under his reign only 11 witchcraft trials were held, five of which in Essex; no hanging happened between 1628 and 1637, before a brief increase in numbers due to Hopkins's persecution <sup>10</sup>.

In England, the main crime associated with witchcraft was *maleficium*: it was prosecuted by civil courts and it was considered a *crimen exceptum* (particularly difficult to prove). The prosecution was thus allowed a somewhat relaxed standard in the search for evidence, which relied more on testimony and reputation, than on concrete, tangible proof <sup>11</sup>.

On the continent, instead, the simple fact of being a witch was considered a crime by itself. In addition, continental trials followed the more punishing inquisitorial procedure <sup>12</sup>: in this system, the onus of investigating the alleged crime lied not with the prosecution, but with the court, which had all interest in achieving a conviction <sup>13</sup>.

Another important difference between the two areas was the use of torture: in England it was rarely – if ever properly – employed, while on the continent it was frequently used; there, it often brought the suspects to accuse other people, who in turn were subjected to it and accused even more people. In addition, each round of accusations involved not only to those who were named by the tortured, but also to those who were simply close to them, such as their relatives <sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> GASKILL M., “Witchcraft Trials in England”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 293-294.

<sup>11</sup> LEVACK B. P., “Witchcraft and the Law”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> THOMAS K., “The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *La stregoneria. Confessioni e accuse, nell'analisi di storici e antropologi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 278-302.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278-302.

This procedure frequently resulted in mass chain-hunts fuelled by collective hysteria and involving suspects of every social class. England's typical case, on the contrary, was an accusation against one or a few persons, usually poor, which ended once the alleged witches were condemned or acquitted. Continental mass persecutions widened much more and much faster than the English ones, and often become so broad that they ultimately lost credibility <sup>15</sup>.

### **The chronology of persecutions.**

Finally, continental cultures possessed a substratum of beliefs which England lacked, and which predisposed them to interpret witchcraft as a threat to the whole Christianity. The roots of this substratum dated back to the high Middle Ages. Between the VII and the XI century, legal and ecclesiastical councils discussed the nature of magic: they were trying to determine not only in which circumstances magic should have been deemed illegal, but also if it existed in the first place. Some credibility for its existence came from the fact that witches were named in the biblical exhortation: "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22; 18 - which actually referred to poisoners and instigators <sup>16</sup>); however, many people believed that magic was nothing more than a satanical illusion, and the common understanding was that witches did not exist and that believing they did was close to paganism <sup>17</sup>.

The situation began to change around the XII century, with the emergence of the first medieval heretical sects. The Church reacted accusing their members of worshipping the Devil: this allegation appeared for the first time on an official trial in 1307, when the Templar Knights were accused of worshipping a diabolical idol named Baphomet (probably a corruption of the name Mahomet) <sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 30-33.

<sup>16</sup> CENTINI M., *La stregoneria*, Milano, Xenia, 1995, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-8.

<sup>18</sup> COHN N., "The Myth of Satan and his Human Servants", in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 3-16.

Inquisitors, tasked with eradicating the heretical sects, started to take interest in Devil worship, and built a narrative about men and women serving Satan in exchange for powers <sup>19</sup>; these people were believed to partake in cannibalistic feasts and nocturnal orgies, and to reach them flying or on flying mounts <sup>20</sup>.

During the XIV and XV century, with publications such as Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (1436-1438), Kramer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), and Ulrich Molitor's *De Lamiis et Phytonicis Mulieribus* (1489), these images were shifted from heretics to witches, causing the emergence of the belief in the existence of a unified anti-Christian hidden cult of the Devil <sup>21</sup>.

The inquisition and the State authorities were then charged with combating this new "sect", in a one-sense a war which continued until the belief's eventual decline – begun with an increase in scepticism between 1520s and the 1560s, and concluded approximately between the 1630s and the 1770s <sup>22</sup>.

### **The early modern magical universe.**

For the modern western mind, the strength, longevity, and the very existence of a similar belief in magic feels absurd; however, the average early modern person was far from a superstitious simpleton incapable of inferring causes from effects: they simply lived in a mental world which was extremely different from that of today

In early modern English, "witchcraft" was an umbrella term which, could be applied to some forms of "science": even sceptical writers such as medic Johann Weyer and Parliament member Reginald Scot, men with a high level of

---

<sup>19</sup> BROWN P., "Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages", in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 17-46.

<sup>20</sup> CENTINI M., *ibid.*, pp. 12-17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>22</sup> LEVACK B. P., *ibid.*, pp. 217-223.

education and social responsibility who publicly doubted the existence of witches, nonetheless believed in magic <sup>23</sup>.

Magic was not considered supernatural (something ignoring the laws of nature, a miracle which only God could make happen) but simply preternatural, which means highly unusual <sup>24</sup>; remedies which would look magical today, such as anointing a blade to heal the wounds it caused, were perceived to be natural by the contemporaries <sup>25</sup>.

People lived within a “magical universe”, that is to say in the belief that an occult dimension based on official religion, Christianized traditions, and unofficial practices touched every aspect of human life <sup>26</sup>: a series of confessions collected between 1566 and 1579 in the Essex village of Hatfield Peverell, shows how every single townsfolk and magistrate believed in a world inhabited by supernatural evil beings <sup>27</sup>.

Belief in magic was wider than belief in witchcraft; the latter was part of contemporary experience, but not pivotal to it, as shown by the sporadic nature of witch-hunts. People also believed in a good form of magical power, the divine miracle; the priest and the Mass certainly had magical connotations in the eyes of the populace <sup>28</sup>. Alongside these, several other mystical practices and traditions existed, surrounded by a debate regarding the possibility that they, too, were of diabolical inspiration <sup>29</sup>. This – as it is customary for magical powers – usually

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-79.

<sup>24</sup> STEPHNESS W., “The Sceptical Tradition”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 190-191.

<sup>26</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., “Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>28</sup> MAIR L., *Witchcraft*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 151-203.

resolved in their favour whenever they played an institutional or ritualized role, or when they could be encompassed within the positive framework of Christian paradigm; otherwise, the verdict was usually that they were diabolical and evil <sup>30</sup>.

Among these were the magic of alchemists, astrologers, diviners, and theurges, who tried to understand nature and God's will through spells and quasi-scientific or ascetic practices. All these people could be viewed by contemporaries as either positive or negative characters: in the first case, they were often believed to summon angelic spirits or souls from Heaven and to consult with them to increase their knowledge or predict the future; in the latter, they were believed to be deceived by – or in league with – the Devil and his demons <sup>31</sup>.

### **Psychophysiology of witchcraft.**

One more reason for which magic was believed to work was because in many cases it (or something closely resembling it) did in fact work. For example, many cases of *maleficium* can be explained as poisoning: common poisons such as nightshade are frequently cited ingredients in witchcraft formulas, and for early modern medicine it was not trivial to distinguish between the two occurrences <sup>32</sup>.

The symptoms of *maleficium* often included inexplicable pains, vomit, motor disfunctions, illness, accidents, and sudden death, all of which are also possible results of stress. Stress, in fact, can cause psychosomatic symptoms, weaken the immune system, increase the probability of having accidents, and it can even kill through cardiac arrhythmia; this latter phenomenon is known as “voodoo death”, a symptom observed in people who, believing to be accursed, actually die due to a severe disruption of their autonomic nervous system <sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>30</sup> MAIR L., *ibid.*, pp. 18-24.

<sup>31</sup> HARRIS A. J., *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century Drama*, Manchester, Manchester, pp. 110-112.

<sup>32</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

A possible cause of stress is the knowledge of being the object of someone's hostility, which can happen for example because of:

- Overt manifestations of animosity, including verbal attack (“cursing”), and manifest spellcasting directed against its target <sup>34</sup>;
- Nonverbal manifestations of enmity, such as an aggressive use of prosody, proxemic, or gesticulation (as in many incantations), or a facial and ocular expression communicating intense rage (“evil eye”) <sup>35</sup>;
- The knowledge transmitted by a third party that someone enacted a covert ritual to curse the target of their hatred <sup>36</sup>.

This acceptance of *maleficium* was partially recognized already in early modern times, when hostile magic was associated with anger and envy, and its power was related to the ability of harming someone by projecting one's ill will against them <sup>37</sup>.

Two ways in which magical practice could have favoured this transmission of stress are the use of symbols and the manipulation of the enchanter's nervous system through self-hypnosis: symbols could solicit a neurophysiological response in both the sorcerer and their victim, while self-hypnosis (achieved by chanting an incantation) could prompt the user to assume a more aggressive look or posture; this might increase their self-confidence, or influence their enemies', causing stress <sup>38</sup>.

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>37</sup> BEVER E., “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 159-168.

Poisoning and stress could also explain some cases of animals which were believed to be hit by *maleficium*; another explanation for these is physical aggression happening without knowledge of the animal's owner <sup>39</sup>.

Another form of self-suggestion which may explain many apparently mystical occurrences are hallucinations. Hallucinations are influenced by cultural expectations: for example, a person living in a society where people are expected to be tempted by the Devil is more likely to actually hear hallucinatory voices tempting them. They also tend to manifest the fears and expectations of the moment, so that people who believed themselves to be the victim of a magical attack was predisposed to hallucinate a familiar persecuting them or to experience "old hag". This latter phenomenon, similar to hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucinations, is a form of paralysis combined with a sensation of pressure on the chest, which was commonly reported in *maleficium* accounts <sup>40</sup>. Hallucinations can in addition be aggravated by the frequent consumption of ergot, a cereal common during the early modern period which, when spoiled, acquires hallucinogenic properties <sup>41</sup>.

Similar considerations could be made about illusions: imperfections of perceptions which are, as hallucinations, influenced by culture and contingent preoccupations <sup>42</sup>.

Other explanations for the apparent working of magical practices are:

- Confirmation bias: if one believed themselves to be the object of magic, they tended to reinterpret events to make them fit that expectation;
- Supernatural explanation for the apparent failure of magic, such as a *maleficium* which seemed not to work because the target was carrying a blessed charm;

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-63.

- Simple fraud;
- Mere coincidence.

Finally, another factor which corroborated the belief in the existence of magical practices were the spontaneous confessions of people who were actually convinced to be witches. Possible explanations for these include:

- Sincere conviction of being a witch;
- An altered mental status, such as delirium;
- A self-destructive sense of guilt, lack of self-worth, or desire for attention;
- Straight-up fraud either by the confessant or the person who reported their words.

# 1. THE WITCH IN HER BODY. GENDER AND HOUSEHOLD.

*The Witch of Edmonton* has two main female characters: one, the titular character Elizabeth Sawyer, is of course a witch; the other, the innocent Susan, is so oblivious to the nature of her husband Frank and to the polygamous character of their union that some critics have defined her crazy <sup>43</sup>.

These two qualifiers – crazy and a witch – must have resonated with many members of the contemporary audience. The image of the early modern woman, was mostly negative, deriving primarily from the Old and New Testament, and from the writings of St. Paul, Aristotle, and St. Augustin, and the medieval mystique of chastity <sup>44</sup>.

Women were the object of panegyrics and of protective attentions, but also and predominantly the target of cruel satire and the source of several deeply rooted anxieties.

## 1.1. WOMEN IN EARLY MODERN SOCIETY.

The ambiguous role of women in the early modern imaginary reflected on their position within England's Common Law.

They had some advantages: for example, England's torture laws treated them as minors, allowing for them to be whipped, but sparing them from more severe torments <sup>45</sup>. However, for the most part women were in a position of legal inferiority: despite some exceptions, English Common Law generally treated husband and wife as a single entity subject to the husband's decisions, with fathers, brothers and masters detaining a similar authority over unmarried women.

---

<sup>43</sup> MUCCI C., *Il teatro delle streghe. Il femminile come costruzione culturale al tempo di Shakespeare*, Napoli, Liguori, 2001, pp. 108-115.

<sup>44</sup> DUSINBERRE J., *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, pp. 1-62.

<sup>45</sup> PURKISS D., *The Witch in History*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 59-90.

Men, in addition, had the right of recurring to physical force against women if this was considered necessary, as for example in the case of adultery <sup>46</sup>.

Women were likewise at a disadvantage from an educational standpoint. They were more illiterate than men; they were as well precluded from achieving the higher levels of learning and from pursuing humanities, theology and natural science, in favour of an education focused on the qualities expected from a good wife: chastity, obedience and housekeeping skills <sup>47</sup>.

This educational path was founded on the presupposition that females were of weak mind; humanists such as Thomas More retorted that the opposite was true and that it was this kind of education to produce the impression of weak mindedness. Therefore, holding women to be spiritual equals to men, they imparted the same teaching to both sexes; their experiences, despite being successful, were however not sufficient to shift the collective mentality of their contemporaries, who continued to educate women in the traditional manner <sup>48</sup>.

When working, women mostly limited themselves to the less physically demanding jobs, particularly to domestic production and commerce, where they nonetheless met disadvantages such as being paid less than men and restrictions such as being excluded from the guilds' administration and not being able to lend or invest money over a certain sum. Exceptions existed in these cases as well, but they were few and far apart <sup>49</sup>.

One reason for this strict control was that contemporaries thought women to be more prone than men to surrender to momentaneous impulses, including revenge, aggression, and arousal <sup>50</sup>. The weak will of women is a sub-theme in *The Witch of Edmonton*: Susan regrets that women "have weak thoughts within

---

<sup>46</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 303-306.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-194.

<sup>48</sup> DUSINBERRE J., *ibid.* pp. 77-103.

<sup>49</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 112-156.

<sup>50</sup> MUCCI C., *ibid.*, pp. 110-118.

[them]” (III. ii. 93) and Old Thorney – a serious character, not a comedic figure – states that “most wives are [...] stark mad” (IV. i. 197).

This lack of self-control meant that, on the biblical exemplum of Eve, women were more vulnerable than men to the promises of the adversary of humanity – the Devil.

One of these temptations was the power represented by witchcraft.

### **1.1.1. Gender stereotypes in witchcraft accusations.**

The misogynistic belief regarding the weak will of women wanted witches to be mostly female.

This reflected on the works of the contemporaries: of the three plays analysed here, none features a male witch. It likewise influenced the reality of witch trials: of those tried for witchcraft in Europe between the XV and the XVII century, 80% were women<sup>51, 52</sup>.

This disparity had many reasons, many of which directly originated from the negative imagery surrounding the early modern woman:

- Women were believed to have a propensity for projecting ill will in such a manner to hurt or kill in the act of *maleficium*;
- The stereotype wanted witches to be female so that, when someone suspected to be the victims of witchcraft, they looked for a female culprit;
- Most of the women accused of the crime of *maleficium* were unmarried or widows, underlining the fact that witchcraft-related justice served as an alternative control tool for women who were felt lacking parental or conjugal forms of male authority<sup>53</sup>;

---

<sup>51</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 40-63.

<sup>52</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 278-280.

<sup>53</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 154-171.

- Witches were believed to be servants to a male devil. This position of subordination made it common for contemporaries to imagine them as females, whereas sorcerers, who got their knowledge and powers conjuring spirits instead of subjecting themselves to a diabolical compact, were most often thought to be male;
- It was less common to accuse men of witchcraft. In many cases in which a woman would have underwent a trial for *maleficium*, a man instead faced an accusation for poisoning or heresy <sup>54</sup>.

Male witches nevertheless existed, but in order to make the accusation believable they needed to undergo a process that attributed to them feminine qualities or otherwise linked the source of their witchcraft to a feminine influence, for example displaying the feminine trait of a weak will or being relatives of or married to a female witch.

English courts also tended to assign more severe punishment to female witches than to male ones, even in the case in which the latter committed more serious crimes, denoting the fact that witch trials were sometimes used as an instrument to evaluate and punish undesirable womanly behaviours, creating in the meantime negative examples for the education of what were considered good women <sup>55</sup>.

### **1.1.2. Non-gendered motives for witchcraft trials.**

In spite of this evidence, it would be inaccurate to define witchcraft persecution as a gender conflict. The negative stereotypes surrounding women influenced it and the perceived necessity of repressing female restlessness was among its motives, but most demonologists were not particularly misogynistic

---

<sup>54</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 40-63.

<sup>55</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

compared to the general population and the phenomenon did not develop as a strife between a male patriarchy and a female resistance <sup>56</sup>.

This is not to say that a patriarchal system did not exist – it did – but that misogyny was a widespread mentality which involved women as well as men. The majority of witnesses in witchcraft trials were women, often the same midwives that the modern imaginary of the witch would want to be the victims of the persecution, but who actually appeared more often on the side of the prosecution than as defendants <sup>57</sup>.

Alongside misogynistic stereotypes more objective reasons existed for the gender disparity among the accused:

- Modern anthropology holds women to be cross-culturally as prone to aggression as men but, being at a disadvantage in terms of physical strength, they tend to eschew overt violence and recur to covert powers and instruments. These include, in the societies that recognize it as a reality, the use of *maleficium*;
- Women were closer to the sources of witchcraft belief: popular culture, and superstition; and to its instruments: for example, herbs and cooking implements;
- The events witchcraft sought to explain, such as sudden disease, the death of children or animals, and the spoiling of food, sometimes happened in what was perceived as “the women’s area of control”.

Witchcraft trials involved females both as accusers and as accused; hence, they acted as a means for women to resolve tensions linked to the domestic sphere.

---

<sup>56</sup> BEVER E., “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 62-63.

<sup>57</sup> ROWLANDS A., “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 449-467.

## 1.2. MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL TRANSGRESSION

Another milieu of the early modern world that, as Law, was heavily influenced by misogynistic beliefs and a patriarchal obsession for controlling women was that of family.

Early modern society in England was founded on hierarchy: as God was believed to have power over Creation, so the King governed the State, and the husband was believed to be the head of the family.

Family and marriage were the founding institutions of society: marriage included considerations regarding the intellectual, spiritual, and sexual compatibility of the spouses, but it remained primarily based on pragmatical assessments of an economic and social nature. Puritans opposed this view, bearing that it equated the wife to the whore and that it brought to adultery, but it nonetheless remained the commonly accepted position <sup>58</sup>.

In some measure, hence, contemporaries perceived the attacks to marriage and family as if they were addressed to the entire system.

Early modern society believed women to be particularly prone to these attacks. They were accused of not being able to control themselves and of having a stronger sexual appetite compared to men; in addition, they were in a position of social inferiority and legal subordination that made it difficult for them to rebut such accusations.

Early modern witchcraft beliefs were, among other functions, means of projecting onto a concrete target these widespread anxieties regarding women, and attacks against family and the sexual morality of the time.

---

<sup>58</sup> DUSINBERRE J., *ibid.*, pp. 110-113.

### 1.2.1. Ligature.

The most common witchcraft-related fear regarding marriage was that of magical castration, usually represented by the causation of impotence in the husband: this was particularly serious since a failure in consummating the marriage could even bring to its dissolution. In early modern Europe, marriage was “an alliance between two lineages, arranged by the male leaders, and involving an exchange of a woman and property”<sup>59</sup>. Especially in the higher ranks of society, two families which were not allied were considered to be potential enemies: a marriage thus acted as a peace treaty between the two groups and breaking it could imply the surging of hostilities between them<sup>60</sup>.

The most common form of erotic magic used to provoke impotence was believed to require the ligature of a string, similarly to the method used in the castration of animals.

In *The Witches of Lancashire*, the house servant Lawrence suffers from such an hex when, on the day of his wedding, the witch Moll gives him a bewitched “point” (a lace for tying together parts of clothes, in a similar fashion to modern buttons) which makes him impotent (III. iii. 122-140)

The effects of this “ligatory point” (IV. iii. 76) angers Lawrence’s wife, the fellow servant Parnell, who, in a comical episode, beats him while lamenting her frustrations in the almost indecipherable northern dialect the two speak (IV. iii. 84-132). The old gentleman Doughty and the young Sir Arthur, who are watching the scene, are quick to recognize the influence of witchcraft in both the sudden loss of virility in man that used to be “a lusty name among the bachelors” (IV. iii. 108), and in the violent reaction of his spouse:

DOUGHTY. Alas, it is too plain: the poor fellow is bewitched.

Here's a plain *maleficium versus hanc* now.

---

<sup>59</sup> MUIR E., *Ritual in Early Modern Europe. Second edition*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 21-61.

ARTHUR. And so is she bewitched too into this immodesty.

(IV. III. 154-158)

Castration magic is likewise a crucial device in Middleton's *The Witch*.

The play's main plot follows the love triangle between the noblemen Sebastian and Antonio, and the noblewoman Isabella: Sebastian and Isabella had exchanged marriage promises, an act that in the eyes of Sebastian, and in the customs of the time <sup>61</sup>, made them rightfully wedded before the Lord. However, as she believed him dead in war, she later married Antonio. Maddened by jealousy, Sebastian appeals to the titular Witch herself, Hecate, asking her to cast a spell that would make Antonio impotent.

She confirms her ability to cause both impotence in the man and barrenness in the woman with a plethora of methods:

- The use of snake skins to be knotted in a ligature and left inside the household Sebastian wants to be bewitched (I. ii. 155-160);
- A variety of herbs which list Middleton found in the work of the sceptic Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, despite the fact that the treatise was actually a rebuttal of witchcraft beliefs (I. ii. 161-165);
- The insertion, in the pillows of the couple, of needles used to sew a dead person into their shroud; once again, an experiment Middleton found in Scot (I. ii. 165-169) <sup>62</sup>.

She, however, is unable to "disjoin wedlock" itself, because it is a godly sacrament over which the Devil, from who the witch acquires her powers, has no authority (I. ii. 172-177). This same belief was behind the real-world notion that a wedding ring blessed by a priest was a tool of protection against ligature.

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-61.

<sup>62</sup> CORBIN P., SEDGE D. (edited by), *Three Jacobean witchcraft plays. Sophonisba. The Witch. The Witch of Edmonton*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986, p. 224.

Other counter-magical remedies for impotence and barrenness, relying on the principle of sympathetic magic, included putting coins or a ring inside the spouses' shoes, symbolically hiding the testicles (coins) and the vagina (ring) from the enchanter's power, or having liquid, usually wine or the husband's urine, flow through the wife's wedding a ring or through the keyhole of the church in which they got married <sup>63</sup>.

In *The Witch*, Antonio tries a more mundane remedy: believing himself to have caught a venereal disease from his mistress, the prostitute Florida, he orders a broth to be made with "Two cocks boiled to jelly", "half an ounce of pearl" and gold powder, a rich dish thought to have beneficial proprieties against gonorrhoea (II. i. 13-19) <sup>64</sup>.

### **1.2.2. Purity and female sexual desire.**

Alongside the risk of impotence, another alleged menace to marriage was that of sexual misconduct, as in the case of adultery or, more in general, of what were perceived as unacceptable sexual behaviours.

This preoccupation had existed since the Middle Ages and it gave rise to a moral code revolving around the capital value of respectableness <sup>65</sup>. This mystique of chastity, a parallel to the honour code that governed men's lives, arose in response to the perceived necessity of containing female lustfulness, which was imagined to be stronger than male <sup>66</sup>.

The code was put under scrutiny during the Renaissance and it was at least partially rejected by Puritans and by humanist scholars such as More and Erasmus, for example in the elevation of the state of the wife over that of the physically virgin nun, which did not longer exist in Reformed England, thus preventing

---

<sup>63</sup> MUIR E., *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> CORBIN P., SEDGE D. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>65</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 22-60.

<sup>66</sup> DUSINBERRE J., *ibid.*, pp. 1-39.

women from pursuing a religious vocation. However, the changes required time to embed into the collective mentality, so that a double standard against women, based upon the perceived value of chastity, still existed in the XVI century. This was especially true during the reactionary reign of Charles I and his Catholic wife Henrietta Maria <sup>67</sup>: her faith held this value as supremely important, especially because of its relevance within the cult of the Virgin Mary.

Transgressions against the chastity code were considered particularly serious if committed by a woman, especially among the higher social classes, as an adulterous or excessively prodigal noblewoman could generate bastards who were more difficult to deal with than those created by a man, and who could produce inconveniences or dilutions in the division of inheritance <sup>68</sup>.

Loss of respectability – in this case involving the dyscrasia between the requirement for virginity and the obligation to bear children – is a key trigger of the action in *The witch of Edmonton* and in Middleton's *The Witch*. In both plays, a female character loses her purity by breaking a sexual taboo and getting illicitly pregnant: *Edmonton*'s Winnifride lays with two different men, while *The Witch*'s Francisca has sex at an age considered inappropriately young.

Women were required to refrain from any excessive showing of sexual desire or initiative, a behaviour that was perceived as doubly dangerous because of the biblical example of Eve, who tempted Adam with lust, and of the conviction that brain matter, bone marrow, and semen constituted a single material, so that excessively frequent intercourse could cause damage to the man <sup>69</sup>.

Since witches were depicted as an example of negative femininity, they often displayed these traits in the beliefs of the time. On stage, the witch could act as an analogous of the whore in the role of perturbator of the commonly accepted erotic morality.

---

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-49.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-62.

<sup>69</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 278-302.

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Elizabeth Sawyer is too old to display these attributes (even if it was not uncommon for older women, especially widows, to be accused of sexual voraciousness) but the townfolks nevertheless consider her as a source of sexual disorder and accuse her for the infidelity of their wives (IV. i. 4-7). It is interesting to notice that in the context of the play this accusation is completely unfounded, showing the intention of the authors to portray the titular witch as an at least partially innocent scapegoat, despite the fact that she is involved in an actual devil compact.

Middleton attributes similar inclinations to his witches: the first time a character, the vain noble Almachildes, speaks of them, it is to state that they “have charms and tricks to make a wench fall backward” (I. i. 90-94) and later Hecate confirms this belief with an array of love charms made with animals or animal parts (I. ii. 202-210) listed in Scot’s *Discoverie*. Hecate likewise displays a high level of initiative in her sexual conduct: she is explicit about her erotic interest in Almachildes (II. ii. 196-198) and actively seduces him (II. ii. 223-231).

In a subsequent scene, she and her sisters fly together with their companion spirits and “kiss” in the air while singing and dancing (III. iii. 62-75). This kind of orgiastic fantasy was decidedly more frequent and more perverse in the continental imagery of the witch, than it was in the English imaginary. Notably, it was almost exclusively limited to female witches, with some occurrences of presumed sodomy between males – an act that nevertheless feminized them <sup>70</sup>.

The authors of *The Witches of Lancashire* had a certainly lighter inclination: they eschewed the classical references of Middleton and used the witchcraft theme not to criticize society and express scepticism, as Dekker, Ford and Rowley did in *Edmonton*, but simply as a pretext to display (in the words of the contemporary spectator Nathaniel Tomkyns) “ribaldry” and “fopperies” for the entertainment of their audience <sup>71</sup>. In spite of this lack of seriousness, however,

---

<sup>70</sup> MUIR E., *ibid.*, 93-124.

<sup>71</sup> EGAN G. (edited by), *The Witches of Lancashire*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2002, p. xi.

the play features many scenes and characters that portray – and therefore betray – anxieties about female sexuality.

The chief example of this is the witch Moll Spencer. Despite the fact that she is not married, Moll openly has sexual relationships with multiple partners in the persons of her current lover, Robert, and her former, Lawrence. This privilege was traditionally reserved, albeit not explicitly, to men, under the belief that "an 'experienced man' [made] a better husband than an inexperienced, but an inexperienced woman [did] not make a better wife" <sup>72</sup>.

Arthur is afraid that Moll will “charm [Doughty’s] love from [him]” (III. iii. 28-30) and appropriate of his heritage, which Doughty would have already promised to Arthur. In spite of the keyword “charm”, which implies the recourse to magic, at this point of the play Arthur is not aware that Moll is a witch; therefore, he is probably thinking more about an act of seduction than an actual spell, once again denoting the recognition of a level of erotic expertise on her part.

In the second act of *The Witches of Lancashire*, the dim-witted Whetstone introduces the theme of the witch as a sexually ambiguous being:

'Tis said hares are like hermaphrodites - one while male and another female -  
and that which begets this year brings young ones the next, which some think to  
be the reason that witches take their shapes so oft.

(II. ii. 54-58)

The witch shows traits of both sexes: she is female but displays a masculine awareness and assertiveness regarding her sexual desires.

Another example in *Lancashire*, alongside that of Moll, of a woman and a witch that reverses gender roles, is found in the comical episode of the bridle, in which Mrs Generous transforms the servant Robert into a horse (III. ii. 96-104) and rides him to a night feast (IV. i. 1-32). The erotic implications are never

---

<sup>72</sup> DUSINBERRE J., *ibid.*, p. 56.

openly mentioned and nevertheless completely transparent, constituting a large part of the comedic aspect of the episode.

### **1.2.3. Spirits and *incubi*.**

In *Lancashire*, the crucial episode dealing with the sexuality of the witch is the interrogation to which the makeshift witch-hunter Doughty subjects the old witch Meg, concerning her sexual relationship with the diabolical spirit her servant: Mamilion (V. v. 202-230).

While the rest of the play is for the major part a work of invention, this dialogue follows closely the interrogation and confession of the real-life Margaret Johnson, who spontaneously came forward and confessed that she a witch in the 1633-1634 trial.

In both texts, a Devil came to the old lady under the shape of a gentleman dressed in an elegant suit of black silk and made her a witch through a diabolical compact. He and the witch had sex regularly (the real-life Johnson insists that every witch did the same with her familiar spirit), even if this was pleasurable only in the play, where Mamilion is “like a proper man” (V. v. 224), while the actual confession defined the act “wicked uncleanness” and specified that Johnson did not enjoy it much <sup>73</sup>.

Rather than the demonological allusions regarding the coldness of the spirit’s body, the most interesting part of the interrogation is the uneasy insistence that Doughty shows when hammering Meg with increasingly punctual questions regarding her relationship with Mamilion, and especially its sexual component: a poignant reminder of the psychosexual nature that witch-hunting assumed for some of its pursuers.

---

<sup>73</sup> TEMPERA M., *The Lancashire Witches: lo stereotipo della strega fra scrittura giuridica e scrittura letteraria*, Imola, Galeati, 1981, pp. 63-65.

This interest is particularly motivated by the fact that Johnson breaks multiple sexual taboos:

- She openly manifests her sexual desire;
- She has sex with a devil;
- She does it at an old age, when she is ugly and undesirable;
- She does it for her own pleasure, not with a reproductive purpose (she was infertile because of her old age and, in addition, demonologists believed devils to be sterile).

Meg is not the only character to indulge in such a forbidden pleasure. In *The Witch*, Hecate and her sisters joyously admit multiple times to having sex with *incubi*, male or hermaphrodite devils capable of assuming human shape in order to have intercourse with their summoner (their female counterparts were called *succubi*).

Hecate mentions both her and her sisters' relationship with *incubi* and the spirits' shapeshifting abilities (I. i. 30-31) and later she specifies that the devils are able to assume the appearance of specific individuals, in this case Almachides (I. ii. 196-198). The latter trait is likewise present in *Edmonton*, when a spirit assumes the shape of Katherine in order to comically mislead her improbable suitor, the clown Cuddy Banks (III. i. 75-96).

The aberrant sexuality of Hecate is noticeable as well when she accuses her degenerate son Firestone of preferring the "hunt after strange women" to lying with her, in what is probably a hint to an incestuous relationship between the two (I. ii. 93-101).

The image of a witch that emerges from these pages is that of an individual – a woman – whose main trait is the inability to control the impulses that society would need to control, especially the sexual ones, a trait that sometimes extends beyond the person of the witch, overflowing in the surrounding milieu.

### 1.3. THE FEMALE BODY

This anxiety about overflowing was in line with contemporary medical knowledge, and it was especially tied to the female body which, according to the humours' theory which constituted the foundation of early modern medicine, was believed to be colder and moister than the male. In fact, since humours' theory related hotness to solidity, contemporaries saw the female body as a somewhat formless entity, an impression enhanced by phenomena such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding, that made it difficult to discern where the body of the mother ended and that of the child begun. The belief in the prevalence of cold humour in the female body was, in fact, one of the reasons why fire was commonly employed in unwitching rituals <sup>74</sup>, while its moistness implied a liquid nature, threatening to spill out in a corrupting flood <sup>75</sup>.

The shifting nature of the body is exemplified in *The Witch of Edmonton* by the change of colour that the Dog, the diabolical companion of Mother Sawyer, undergoes in the fifth Act, when he is about to abandon his former master (V. i. 28-56). Also present in the main source of the play – the pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch* by the chaplain Henry Goodcole – the change in the Dog's fur's colour emphasizes not only the treacherous character of the Dog himself, but also the liquid and unreliable nature of the body. This concept of non-fixed corporality also related to the shapeshifting powers that demonologists oftentimes attributed to witches.

This lack of solidity blurred the boundaries of the female body, making it more permeable to magic and therefore more vulnerable to it. This liminal nature was likewise an important precondition for many types of magic, as contact between bodies often appeared as a requirement for the spell's functioning. It was for example in the forms of counter magic that involved breath, such as that of the un-witcher Margaret Stothard: she is reported to have healed a sick child by

---

<sup>74</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119-144.

putting her mouth on his and “sucking” out the witchcraft which afflicted him. Similar forms of countermagic involved applying an un-weaned child’s mouth or even a duck’s bill to the mouth of a person who was believed to be hexed, in order to – allegedly – suck the malevolent spirits out of the accursed body together with the breath <sup>76</sup>.

### **1.3.1. Ugliness and deformity.**

Another trait that emphasized the negative depiction of the witch’s body and made it harder to decipher, especially for the male gaze was ugliness or, in many cases, deformity. This “hardness” was sometimes translated into a literal sense, as shown by the accounts of witches who repelled fire or revealed themselves to be impervious to bullets <sup>77</sup>.

This theme is present in the plays as well: in the first scene of *The Witches of Lancashire*, Whetstone defines witches as “ugly creature[s]” (I. i. 91-92) and “ugly old bedlams” (I. i. 101) – even if he immediately specifies that good looks can bewitch as well (I. i. 101-103). It is, however, especially capital in *The Witch of Edmonton*.

In *Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer does not begin her story already a witch but becomes one as a response to the abuses the townspeople inflict on her daily. Ugliness is one of the reasons of these abuses, as she makes clear on her very first entrance on stage at the beginning of the second Act:

And why on me? why should the envious world  
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?  
'Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,  
And like a bow buckled and bent together  
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself,  
Must I for that be made a common sink  
For all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues

---

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

To fall and run into? Some call me witch,  
And being ignorant of myself, they go  
About to teach me how to be one

(II. i. 1-10)

Later (II. i. 89-90) one of the dancers who accompany Cuddy Banks mentions that she is one-eyed, a deformity which echoed both a common belief about witches and Goodcole's *Wonderrull Discouerie*, in which the real-life Elizabeth Sawyer is described suffering from the same defect <sup>78</sup>.

This is in accord with Reginald Scot's portrait of the stereotypical witches:

Women which be commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale. Fowle, and full of wrinkles... They are leane and deformed shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them <sup>79</sup>.

Ugliness was likewise a factor in real-life Sawyer's trial, where it acted as an aggravating factor for the prosecution, instead of being a reason for empathy, as in the play.

### 1.3.2. Old age.

Another element that, alongside ugliness, could contribute to a woman's reputation as a witch was old age, not only because it aggravated ugliness itself, but also because it carried along additional negative prejudices: contemporary beliefs crystallized around elder women the anxieties concerning aging, sterility, depression, and bad motherhood; post-menopausal women were supposed to be at the apex of their magical powers, and some contemporaries thought that they effused vapors capable of drying maternal milk and making children sick <sup>80</sup>.

---

<sup>78</sup> CORBIN P., SEDGE D. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 235-236.

<sup>79</sup> GOODCOLE H., "The Wonderfull Discouerie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch", in HARRIS A. J., *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century Drama*, Manchester, Manchester, p. 106.

<sup>80</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, p. 84.

Mother Sawyer, in her self-introduction, describes herself as “like a bow buckled and bent together” (II. i. 4) referring to her hunching posture; later in the same scene, one of the Morris dancers calls her “the old Witch of Edmonton” (II. i. 87).

In the first scene of the fourth Act, Mother Sawyer is called to defend herself against the accusations of the Justice and of the townsfolks. She seizes the opportunity to reproach the injustices of the witch-hunting prejudices and of society in a more general sense.

During her plead, Sawyer argues that “every poor old woman” (IV. i. 77) is a potential witchcraft suspect, a complaint that is echoed in subsequent lines, with the adjective “old” appearing twice in two lines (IV. i. 121-122).

Mother Sawyer’s *j’accuse* is not unfounded, as many witchcraft suspects were in fact old for the standards of the time, being at least forty<sup>81</sup> or fifty<sup>82</sup> years old. More precisely, most witchcraft accusations happened between two people of different generations: the most common occurrence involved a middle-aged person of either sex accusing an elderly woman<sup>83</sup>; generational conflicts had a role in some accusations, especially in those fueled by incidents related to bad parenting<sup>84</sup>, by the envy of members of the younger generation for their richer elders or, on the contrary, by the necessity of many impoverished elderlies – who were too old to work and were oftentimes abandoned by their sons and daughters, remaining without a source of income<sup>85</sup> – to resort to their younger’s charity, which was a capital source of witchcraft-related tensions and accusations<sup>86</sup>.

---

<sup>81</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 40-63.

<sup>82</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 167-168.

<sup>83</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 40-63.

<sup>84</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 278-302.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-111.

<sup>86</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970, pp. 147-157.

The early modern imaginary surrounding elderly women was mostly negative, depicting them as even more sinister than the young: the fact that elder women do not have menstruations and are incapable of producing milk engendered the belief that they had lost the wet humor; this, in turn, deprived them of a trait that, despite its associated negativity, defined them as women, so that they became even more difficult to outline.

They were also considered to be more sexually predatory than the young. This was believed especially of widows, oftentimes of advanced age, who were thought to be driven by the necessity of finding a new husband to protect and provide for them.

Finally, in the early modern period, an increased aggressiveness could also be the result of the disadvantageous conditions in which many elderly women, especially widows, were living, due to their poverty and lack of social standing.

#### **1.4. FAMILIARS AND MOTHERHOOD.**

Another element that contributed to the imaginary of the female body as a menacing entity was the general ignorance surrounding it. Female genitalia were seen as a mirrored version of the male, instead that as a completely distinct and independent system, and this vision made it difficult to understand their actual functioning, increasing the mystery surrounding them. The role of the woman and the ovule in reproduction was unknown, a condition of ignorance which persisted until the XIX century; likewise, menstruations were considered impure blood that the body expelled, and menstruating women were thought at risk of tainting their surroundings<sup>87</sup>.

The various phases of the reproductive process defined women's lives in the same way work-related events defined men's; thus, as stereotypes of a negative femininity, witches were victims to all these prejudices:

---

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-95.

- They were likewise thought to interfere with pregnancy: it was assumed that feelings of rage could cause miscarriages, so that witches were accused of projecting their own negative feelings on expectant mothers to cause abortions <sup>88</sup>;
- The moment of birth was supposed to be susceptible to magical attacks, prompting midwives to use counter magical remedies such as the girdles so-called “of Saint Margaret”, wore by the birth-giver for the duration of the labour, and the mother’s caudle, a drink consisting of ale, sugar and spices, warmed up and drunk in order to maintain the mother’s strength both during the labour and in the following days <sup>89</sup>;
- The period following childbirth was considered impure and dangerous, to the point that new mothers were forbade from going to church and attending the communal life of the village <sup>90</sup>.

Closely tied to maternity was the peculiarly English belief in the existence of familiars. According to the belief, familiars were lesser demonic spirits that were summoned by weaker conjurers, such as the typical village witch. They were supposed to take the shape of small animals such as cats, newts, crows, or toads; an allusion to the latter is the “toad in marchipane” that Almachildes gives Hecate in *The Witch* (I. ii. 216).

These devils wanted to bind their conjurer to a compact with the Devil, which damned the witch’s soul in exchange for the familiar’s help and magical powers.

---

<sup>88</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, pp. 91-118.

<sup>89</sup> FILDES V. (edited by), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England. Essays in memory of Dorothy McLaren*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 73-82.

<sup>90</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 63-111.

### 1.4.1. Breastfeeding and the witch mark.

The religious connotations of this belief and the presence of a diabolical pact tied it to the learned continental tradition of demonology.

A particularly striking detail is the conviction that the familiar needed to be “breastfed” by its owner, who for this developed a special “witch mark” – a protuberance similar to a nipple and usually located near one’s privates, from which the animal could suck blood. This mark was, alongside ugliness, another physical evidence of the status of a witch and a signifier of her increasing distancing from the mundane reality and of her entrance into the realm of the supernatural.

The witch mark was likewise an important element in England witchcraft trials, where the presence of a witch mark was one of the more concrete evidence that prosecution could bring to a trial.

Reasons for this obsession were that breastfeeding was a dangerous act, exposing the mother to abscesses and infections, and that lactation remained, on par with the rest of female sexual biology, a mysterious process for early modern medicine: milk was considered blood that was purified by the breast but that nonetheless maintained the blood’s intrinsic uncleanness<sup>91</sup> and contemporaries were therefore obsessed with the purity of maternal milk, which was the source of many anxieties.

- Recourse to wet nurses was a frequent occurrence, but these were nevertheless required to have given birth no longer than a month before beginning their service, as waiting longer supposedly spoiled the milk<sup>92</sup>.

---

<sup>91</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-144.

- The alternative of using animal milk implied on the other hand the risk of transferring animal-like qualities to the newborn <sup>93</sup>.

These anxieties were projected onto witches and witchcraft beliefs: colostrum, in the conception of the time insufficiently purified milk, was known as “witch’s milk” and witches, believed to be incapable of purifying blood into milk, were accused of stealing or spoiling animal milk and of turning maternal milk into blood <sup>94</sup>. This inability, the reason for which familiars sucked blood and not milk, is echoed in *The Witches of Lancashire* by the words of Mrs Generous, when she implores her husband to forgive her, insisting that her tears are “tincur’d in blood, blood issuing from the heart” as if her body were incapable of producing regular tears (IV. ii. 183-185).

Familiars are likewise present in *Lancashire* where, in line with the farcical inclination of the play, they are not presented as the upsetting creatures of demonological tradition, but simply as helpers that aid the witches in playing their “prank[s]” to the village (II. i. 6-9).

They nonetheless share many traits with the more disturbing familiars described in certain trial accounts or literary works, among which the need for blood-sucking. During the first apparition of the coven, the witch Mawd invites her familiar Puckling to “take [her] teat” (II. i. 14-15) and later, during the scene of the witches’ banquet, Moll refers to her familiar as “suckling” (IV. i. 108), while the whole group, in chorus, chant for the familiars to:

Fall each to his duggy,  
While kindly we huggy  
As tender as nurse over boy.  
Then suck our bloods freely

(IV. i. 110-113)

---

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-144.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-144.

Similar words recur in the fourth Act, when the falsely repentant witch Mrs Generous asks her accomplice Moll if her familiar “hath [...] yet suck’d upon [her] pretty duggy” (IV. iv. 1-2).

The more diabolical coven of *The Witch* has appropriately more sinister familiars. Hecate has a spirit named Malkin which looks “like a great cat” and whose size reflects the greater power of the conjurer. Her lesser sister Stadlin likewise has a bat, which hangs at her lips and sucks her blood (III. iii. 7-8). Both nourish their spirits with *semina cum sanguine* “barley soak’d with infant’s blood” (V. ii. 42-44), an image certainly closer to the gruesome continental and learned demonology, than to the popular and somewhat domestic English image of the breastfed familiar.

Of the three plays, however, the one where the familiar takes a more pivotal role is surely *The Witch of Edmonton*.

Initially, Mother Sawyer possesses only a vague idea of what a familiar is supposed to be. She speaks of a generic “thing called Familiar” (II. i. 35-36) and then specifies:

I have heard old beldams  
Talk of familiars in the shape of mice,  
Rats, ferrets, weasels, and I wot not what,  
That have appeared, and sucked, some say, their blood;  
But by what means they came acquainted with them  
I am now ignorant.

(II. i. 102-107)

She later becomes more adept in the familiar’s lore, especially after signing her contract and obtaining the services of her black Dog Tom. Blood has a capital role in this scene, with the Dog ordering her twice to “seal [the pact] with [her] blood”, after which act he immediately “sucks her arm”, amidst “thunder and lightning”, a stylized signifier for witchcraft in Jacobean theatre (II. i. 136-147).

With this, she becomes a witch and accordingly develops a witch mark, a “teat” she will offer to the Dog allowing him to suck blood from it (IV. i. 151-156). Cuddy Banks also refers to this tradition when, approaching the end of the play, he reproaches the Dog for his habit of “creep[ing] under an old witch’s coats and suck[ing] like a great puppy” (V. i. 173-174).

Her real-life 1621 counterpart was likewise found having:

A thing like a Teate the bigness of the little finger, and the length of half a finger, which was branched at the top like a teate, and seemed as though one had sucked it, and the bottome thereof was blew, and the top of it was redde <sup>95</sup>.

In the play, the witch mark is not used as an evidence during the examination: the only proofs of Mother Sawyer’s guilt are her fellow townfolks’ accusations and her own scolding attitude. Real-life Elizabeth Sawyer, instead, confessed during her interrogation that she had allowed the Devil to suck blood from this lump, which was found “a little above [her] fundament”, in order to “nourish him” <sup>96</sup>.

These beliefs regarding breastfeeding began to collapse when court medic William Harvey accurately described for the first time the mechanism of the circulation of blood and the role of the heart in it, in 1628 <sup>97</sup>, and had almost disappeared by the time of Charles I. In 1634 the King entrusted Harvey himself to investigate the Lancashire case, conduct a rigorous search for the alleged witch marks and examine if these protuberances could in fact secrete either blood or milk – the actual motive of this being to prove the impossibility of such a feat.

---

<sup>95</sup> GOODCOLE H. *ibid.*, in MUCCI C., *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-144.

### 1.4.2. Children and affection.

In the early modern world, and especially in the countryside, children were a crucial source of physical labour and were held of the utmost importance. Infanticide of those born outside of a marriage (usually in cases of rape or seduction) was a frequent occurrence but it was gravely despised, as early modern mothers were supposed to – and did – love their children <sup>98</sup>.

However, children also engendered, many of which still exist in the modern world: the language of the demonic offered a vocabulary to express in an acceptable way perturbing thoughts such as those regarding the mother's inadequacy or her repressed desire of hurting her offspring and lead a better life without them <sup>99</sup>; hence, they oftentimes crystallized in the form of witchcraft beliefs, some of which continued to exist into the XX century <sup>100</sup>. For instance:

- Complimenting a child was bad luck, and showing excessive interest in or knowledge about a child was sometimes enough to arouse suspects of witchcraft <sup>101</sup>;
- Accounts exist of children who were thought to be victims of *maleficium*. They were reported moving as if “strangely handled” by invisible forces, vomiting utensils, or showing animal-like behaviours such as loss of speech <sup>102</sup>;
- Un-weaned children were considered particularly vulnerable, lacking the protection supposedly conferred by the sacrament <sup>103</sup>.

As beings that needed to be breastfed and thus emanations and extensions of the mother's body, familiars were described with the same vocabulary. They

---

<sup>98</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 63-111.

<sup>99</sup> PURKISS D. *ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-118.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-103.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-103.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-103.

sometimes showed child-like disobedience, while other times they provided for food, as children were supposed to do once they reached adult age. These accounts address common fears and hopes regarding children, particularly the fear that they were a weight on the family's resources.

Like a child for the mother, a familiar could be an object of affection for the witch. One sign of this are the names attributed to them:

- In *The Witches of Lancashire* names of familiars are “Tib, Nab, and Jug” (IV. v. 100);
- In *The Witch* appear “Titty and Tiffin, Suckin and Pidgen, Liard and Robin” (I. ii, 1-3) and “Firedrake, Pukey” (V. ii. 64);
- In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer calls her Dog Tom, Tom-boy, Tommy, Tomalin.

These names either have popular origins (Tom, Robin), are appropriate for small creatures (Tib, Nab, Jug, Suckin, Pidgen, Liard, Firedrake) or are downright affectionate (Titty, Tiffin, Tom-boy, Tommy, Tomalin). The use of pet names, or even of a popular name such as Tom, denotes the existence of a loving and sometimes possibly maternal relationship between the witch and her familiar.

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, the first promise that the Dog makes to Mother Sawyer is that of love, with this word recurring three times in six lines:

Come, do not fear; I love thee much too well  
To hurt or fright thee; if I seem terrible,  
It is to such as hate me. I have found  
Thy love unfeigned; have seen and pitied  
Thy open wrongs; and come, out of my love,  
To give thee just revenge against thy foes.

(II. i. 124-129)

He later insists that he “loves” and “affects” her (II. i. 140-143).

This promise of love is particularly efficacious because it responds to one of Mother Sawyer's basic needs, who is a lonely, friendless woman living at the margins of society: when she is discovered by the Justice, she asks the Dog for "comfort" (IV. i. 154) and once again reaffirms her affection towards him:

Ho, ho, my dainty,  
My little pearl! no lady loves her hound,  
Monkey, or parakeet, as I do thee.

(IV. i. 162-164)

Her real-life counterpart had likewise shown affection to her familiar, despite the fact that she was married and had children. In Goodcole's *Wonderfull Discouerie*, she is reported having "handled" the dog, and having said about him:

Yes, I did stroake him on the backe, and then he would becke unto me  
and wagge his taylor as being therewith contented <sup>104</sup>.

However, in both the pamphlet and the play, the familiar remained a diabolical creature: he could feign love in order to win the witch's trust but remained unloving and unreliable.

In *The Witches of Lancashire*, Doughty asks the witch Meg, now in his custody and abandoned by her *incubus* Mamilion:

Have  
you known so many of the devil's tricks and can  
be ignorant of that common feat of the old juggler,  
that is, to leave you all to the law when you are  
once seized on by the talons of authority?

(V. v. 158-162)

This theme is expanded on in *Edmonton*, where fidelity and its betrayal are among the central themes of the play. This is apparent not only in the love triangle

---

<sup>104</sup> GOODCOLE H., *ibid.*, in HARRIS A. J., *ibid.*, p. 100.

plot, with Frank betraying the loyalty of both Winnifride and Susan, but also in the witchcraft plot, where Mother Sawyer is shown putting her trust in the Dog only to be ultimately discarded by him.

The betrayal of the Dog is the centre of the play and the object of a major part of the first scene of Act Five. In her cottage, Mother Sawyer despairs because Tom has abandoned her to the scorn of the townfolks, a detail present in Goodcole as well <sup>105</sup>; among her regrets is that of having lost her “best love” (V. i. 9) and, in the course of the Act, she calls the dog her “darling” (V. i. 12) and “dear love” (V. i. 35), underlining her affection towards him.

Eventually the Dog appears, his betrayal concretized in his change of colour from black to white. This new tint, similar to the light which displays the witch’s “old rivelled face”, is devised to mock Mother Sawyer by reminding her that she has been discovered by the Justice (V. i. 45-47); likewise, the comparison to ghosts and funerary shrouds informs her that her death is impending (V. i. 35-37). The colour white also emphasizes to Mother Sawyer the sin that is the reason of her punishment – having prayed to the Devil – and alludes to the Dog’s inevitable betrayal, which she was unable to predict:

DOG.            Yes, if the dog of hell be near thee; when the devil comes to thee  
                    as a lamb, have at thy throat!

MOTHER.      Off, cur!

DOG.            He has the back of a sheep, but the belly of an otter; devours by  
                    sea and land. "Why am I in white?" didst thou not pray to me?

(V. i. 39-43)

---

<sup>105</sup> HARRIS A. J., *ibid.*, pp. 98-109.

## 1.5. HOUSEHOLD MAGIC.

Alongside taking care of her children, another early modern housewife's duty was keeping the boundaries of the home sound and well-defined. Anxieties about liminality and the loss of distinction extended to the reality of the household; as a woman was supposed to maintain her body chaste, the housewife was entrusted with the responsibility of keeping her house closed to outside interference and to monitor its intake and the outflow of people and resources, upholding the same borders by which she was bound in her daily life <sup>106</sup>. The obligation to offer hospitality and observe communal festivities, and the necessity to introduce food and materials in the building represented breaches in this impermeability which, according to the culture of the time, the witch could exploit to insinuate her *maleficium*.

House-related magic was believed to require that the contact between the witch and her target to be excessively close, turning into invasion and creating the indistinctness of confines which allowed the incantation to pass. To achieve this, witches were believed to create a symbolic contact between themselves and the household they intended to curse by leaving an object on its threshold, hiding something under a bed, or exchanging objects with the victim <sup>107</sup>. Giving things to a witch could likewise strengthen her power on someone <sup>108</sup>.

In *The Witches of Lancashire*, the Boy seems aware of this risk, so that, when the witch Gillian offers him a coin, he refuses:

GILLIAN     Stand up, my boy, for thou shalt have no harm.

Be silent, speak of nothing thou hast seen,

And here's a shilling for thee.

BOY    I'll have none of your money, gammer, because you are a witch!

---

<sup>106</sup> PURKISS D. *ibid.*, pp. 91-118.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91-118.

<sup>108</sup> THOMAS K., "The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft", in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 47-80.

Witches were also commonly reported to use household items as part of their magic, an occurrence which alludes to a connection between their figure and that of the housewife.

One example are the pail and the broom which *Lancashire's* Moll moves with her magic: Robert recalls when “t’other day” she had her broom “sweep the house without hands” (II. vi. 23-26) and, later in the same scene, Moll has her milk-pail magically come to her and go away without touching it (II. ii. 40-66).

The pail episode was likewise present in the real-life Lancashire trial in which, however, Moll Spencer denied it, stating that what was being reported was just a game she played as a girl, which her accusers misinterpreted as witchcraft. Her deposition reads:

When she was a young girl and went to the well for water, she used to trundle the collock, or peal, down the hill, and she would run after it to overtake it, and did overeye it sometimes, and then she might call it to come to her <sup>109</sup>.

### **1.5.1. Fire and cooking.**

Another common household feature which frequently emerged in legal accounts was fire, which was oftentimes used in the conviction that it would counter the witch’s “magic”. It was the case of a woman called Bennet Lane who, thinking her spindle to be bewitched, put it into the fire until it turned red-hot, after which the curse on her appeared to be lifted and her spinning resumed as normal <sup>110</sup>.

Likewise, fire appears in *Edmonton* as a means to hinder maleficent magic: the townsfolks burn a thatch taken from Mother Sawyer’s roof in order to summon her to the place and identify her as a witch (IV. i. 15-21). This expedient also

---

<sup>109</sup> MUCCI C., *ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>110</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 94.

appears in Goodcole's *Wonderfull Discouerie* where, however, it is defined "an olde ridiculous custome"<sup>111</sup>.

The hope that burning something belonging to the witch would have alleviated her magic or forced her to reveal herself was a widespread belief: people are reported having burned the witch's hair, clothes, or the animals they thought to be bewitched in order to stop the *maleficium*<sup>112</sup>.

Another instance of fire used as a counter magic appears in *The Witches of Lancashire*, when Parnell recounts the destruction of the cursed cod-point which made him impotent, with the word appearing in almost every line:

Marry, we take the point and we casten the point  
into the fire, and the point spittered and spattered  
in the fire, like an it were (love bless us) a live  
thing in the fire, and it hopped and skipped and  
wriggled and frisked in the fire, and crept about  
like a worm in the fire, that it were work enough  
for us both with all the chimney tools to keep it  
into the fire, and it stinked in the fire, worsen than  
any brimstone in the fire.

(V. v. 48-56)

This use of fire and heat recalls of course the activity of cooking, which is important in every human civilization not only for its sanitary benefits, but also because it turns a natural product (food) into a cultural one (a meal) in a process known as *culturation*<sup>113</sup>. It is also an activity in which things can go wrong in a variety of unpredictable manners, which were sometimes explained as the effect of malevolent witchcraft.

---

<sup>111</sup> GOODCOLE H., *ibid.*, in HARRIS A. J., *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>112</sup> SHARPE J., *Instruments of Darkness*, London, Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 161-162.

<sup>113</sup> Term used in PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 97.

Disrupting the making of beer or butter was believed to be a common effect of *maleficium*<sup>114</sup>: the already mentioned Bennet Lane, continuing her deposition, recounts that a curse prevented her milk from skimming correctly and her butter from coming<sup>115</sup>.

The plays likewise allude to this incident. When the Dog in *Edmonton* lists to Mother Sawyer a series of misdeeds he committed against the townsfolk, he includes the disruption of butter-making:

The maid has been churning butter nine hours; but it shall not  
Come.

(IV. i. 165-166)

Similarly, in *Lancashire* the witches harass a Miller, who laments that “All last summer, [his] wife could not make a bit of butter” because of them: he and the wife “both together churned almost [their] hearts out, and nothing would come but all ran into thin waterish gear” (V. i. 35-41).

Likewise, when the witch Moll makes her pail move through magic, Robert exclaims that the devil’s influence over it:

Will tum all the milk shall come  
In't these seven years, and make it bum too till it  
Stink worse than the proverb of the bishop's foot!

(II. vi. 49-51)

Witches were not only believed to obstruct cooking, but also to reverse it. In *The Witch*, Hecate and her sisters use a cauldron not to produce healthy food, but instead to concoct eldritch brews and potent poisons. In the first witch-scene of the play, all the witches except for Hecate are off-stage (“within”) “sweating at the vessel” (a cauldron, another household object) while they prepare the flight ointment which they plan to use that night (I. ii. 9-16). Later, Hecate herself is

---

<sup>114</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 47-80.

<sup>115</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 95.

shown distilling a poison which is supposed to kill the Duke in a few hours' time (V. ii. 10-12).

Instead of edible ingredients, the members of the coven use toxic materials: Hecate asks Stadlin for a dish to "squeeze" some serpents before the moon rises<sup>116</sup>; during the play, the witches are shown using other disgusting components taken from the vilest part of various animals which contemporaries considered sinister, many of which were often believed to be familiars:

- "The brain of a cat" (II. ii. 27-28);
- "A little bone in the nethermost part of a wolf's tail" (II. ii. 29-30);
- "Six lizard's and three serpentine eggs" (III. iii. 23);
- "Some lizard's brain" (V. ii. 49);
- "The blood of a bat" (V. ii. 69);
- "The juice of toad, the oil of adder" (V. ii. 72).

In other occasions, they use herbs which are poisonous or which were considered having mystical properties, listed with their Latin names, and often taken directly from Scot's *Discoverie*<sup>117</sup>.

The most taboo and dreadful ingredient was human flesh, which appears in this fashion two times: the first when Hecate gives Stadlin the body of a baby, "an unbaptisèd brat", for her to "boil it well; preserve the fat" (I. ii. 18-19); the second when she requires Firestone to: "fetch [her] three ounces of the red-haired girl [she] killed last midnight", in particular the "hip; hip or flank" (V. ii. 55-57).

Middleton most likely inserted these lists with the aim of increasing the occult charisma of his witches and the shock value of the scenes in which they were involved.

---

<sup>116</sup> CORBIN P., SEDGE D. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

### 1.5.2. Food and banquets.

Just as witches were thought to menace the process of cooking, they were also supposed to attack the means of its production: in Essex witchcraft trials, the death of animals appeared as the third most common reason for the charge of *maleficium*, and damage to farming produce or equipment as the fourth <sup>118</sup>.

This theme is present in all three plays. In *The Witches of Lancashire*, Meg encourages the other witches to “dance a round” in order to magically grow weeds – “cockle, darnell, poppia” – and suffocate the grain inside a “churl’s ground” (II. i. 16-19). Later, the Miller reports that one of his pigs drank the “waterish gear” which he got instead of butter and that it “ran out of his wits upon’t, till we bound his head and laid him asleep, but he has had a wry mouth ever since” (V. ii. 41-46).

*The Witch’s* Hecate boasts about having cursed a farmer’s and his wife’s animals, precisely “seven of their young pigs [...] of the last litter, nine ducklings, thirteen goslings, and a hog”. She also expresses her intention to hit sheep and cows afterwards: the snakes she is squeezing will steal their milk (I. ii. 57-66).

Believing that Sebastian came to her for envy of the “fat prosperity” of a neighbour, Hecate offers to call forth Hoppo, since she:

[with] Her incantation  
Can straight destroy the young of all his cattle,  
Blast vineyards, orchards, meadows, or in one night  
Transport his dung, hay, corn, by ricks, whole stacks,  
Into your own ground.

(I. ii. 143-148)

In the second Act of *The Witch of Edmonton* Mother Sawyer, who has yet to undertake the devil’s compact, lists “forspeak[ing]” of the cattle and

---

<sup>118</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, pp. 152-154.

“bewitch[ment]” of corn alongside the forms of *maleficium* for which the townspeople unjustly accuse her (II. i. 166).

This lamentation resounds in the fourth Act, when Old Banks accuses the “jadish witch Mother Sawyer” of hexing his horse such that it:

Runs most piteously of the glanders, whose nose  
yesternight was as clean as any man's here now coming from the barber's  
(IV. i. 1-2)

However, this last time the claim is probably accurate, since later Mother Sawyer asks the Dog if he has “struck the horse lame as [she] bid [him]”, to which he answers affirmatively (IV. i. 161-162).

As contemporaries believed that witches spoiled their food sources, making them poorer, they also believed witches had access to a reserve of food abundance. In *The Witch*, Almachildes – who is invited by Hecate to have a meal with her – fears that she eats “fried rats and pickled spiders”; instead, she reveals that she dines with “the best meat i’th’ whole province”, provided to her by her spirits (I. ii. 222-228).

Sometimes, the witch’s wealth and the neighbours’ scarcity were related, as exemplified by the two banqueting scenes in *The Witches of Lancashire*. The first of these revolves around the wedding of Lawrence and Parnell. During this ceremony, a spirit hidden “above” the characters makes the nuptial cake disappear and substitutes it with bran in a farcical episode (III. i. 48-59) – an incident in which Doughty, who throughout the play goes comically back and forth between scepticism and faith in witchcraft, recognizes the devil’s intervention: “Crumbs? The devil of crumb is here”. (III. i. 53).

Soon after, the spirit plays a similar prank to the parade of meat-based dishes which Seely had prepared for his guests:

'For forty people of the best quality, four messes  
of meat, viz: a leg of mutton in plum broth, a dish

of marrowbones, a capon in white broth, a sirloin  
of beef, a pig, a goose, a turkey, and two pies. For  
the second course: to every mess four chickens in  
a dish, a couple of rabbits, custard, flan,  
Florentines, and stewed prunes.'

(III. i. 86-92)

The spirit makes all the dishes disappear, the meat replaced with “snakes, bats, frogs, beetles, hornets, and humble-bees” and the vegetables with “Jew’s-ears, mushrooms, and puckfists, and [...] cow-shards”. The horn of a ram takes the place of a leg of mutton: a humorous detail, but also an allusion to the principle of sympathetic magic (III. i. 99-126).

The spirit’s final stunt is filling the pie with live birds (III. i. 115-117), which is enough to send Doughty in a panicked fit:

Witches, live witches! The house is full of witches!  
If we love our lives, let's out on't.

(III. i. 118-119)

The destination of all the food stolen during this scene is revealed in the second banqueting episode of the play: the dishes were taken to the “brave feast” which the witch Gillian had envisaged to the Boy in the second Act (II. v. 41).

At night, the coven meets in an “old barn”. From the ceiling hang several ropes which, when pulled, make the dishes fall from above and land on the table at which the “bedlams” are dining. The witches feast on “sirloin of roast beef”, “wine and beer”, “poultry, fowl, and fish”, “butter, milk, whey, curds, and cheese”. Meanwhile Robert, arrived here while serving as horse for Mrs Generous, is stranded outside the barn, reduced to “feed upon [...] nothing but cold salads” (IV. i. 45-69).

Once the stolen food is over, the witches draw out the more extravagant meats of badger and porcupine; the impression of the supernatural already

established by these exotic dishes is enhanced by the claim of the Boy (who has tasted some drink and a little food) that the meat:

[has] no taste, and drink [...]  
no relish, for in neither of them is  
there either salt or savour.

(IV. i. 87-89)

While the former banquet was an invention of the playwrights, this second episode is significantly inspired by the 1633-1634 account. The real-life “Boy”, the eleven-years-old key witness and accuser Edmund Robinson, testified that a witch (in the play, Gillian) forced him to ride with her to an isolated locality called Hoarstones at Fence. Here many tables were prepared and around each one <sup>119</sup>:

Hee saw six [witches] kneelinge and pulling at six several roapes which were fastened or tyed to y<sup>e</sup> toppe of the house, at which pulling came then in [his] sight flesh smoakeinge, butter in lumps, and milke as it were syleinge from said roapes, all which fell into basons whiche were placed under said ropes <sup>120</sup>

In both accounts, the witches eat proteins, fats, and dairies: the nutrients which the poorer classes – the ones from which the majority of *maleficium* accusations stemmed – lacked.

Both the Boy and Edmund eat some bites of food in their respective stories. In witchcraft narratives, this was a risky proposition, since accepting food from a witch, as accepting any item from her, meant becoming vulnerable to her *maleficium*. For instance, a woman named Elizabeth Lord is reported to have cursed a man, John Francis, by bringing him a drink which killed him, and a

---

<sup>119</sup> BARATTA L., ““Great sums were gotten at the Fleet to show them, and publick Plays were acted thereupon’: the Famous Case of the Lancashire Witches”, in DENTE C., TRONCH J. (edited by), *Offstage and Onstage. Liminal Forms of Theatre and Their Enactments in Early Modern English Drama to the Licensing Act (1737)*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2015, pp. 93-94.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

servant-girl, Joan Roberts, by giving her an apple-cake which made her get sick<sup>121</sup>. In fact, many *maleficia* can be explained as either voluntary or accidental poisoning<sup>122</sup> to the point that, as been seen, the two crimes seemed to be interchangeable<sup>123</sup>.

The caution about ingesting food is not the only similarity between Edmund's tale and a fairy story: Edmund, in fact, acts in his fantasy as a folktale hero. He – and, in the play, the Boy – begins his story as an economic loss to his family: the opening of his account depicts him playing while he should have been tending to the family's cattle. After that, however, he enters the magical realm of Hoarstones/the “old barn”, discovers the abundance of the banquet, and becomes a food provider – since his staged accusations and consequent blackmailing were quite lucrative for a while.

---

<sup>121</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>122</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 5-39.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-63.

## 2. THE WITCH IN HER COMMUNITY. POVERTY AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS.

The aforementioned deposition of Bennet Lane was part of a witchcraft trial held in the village of St Osyth, Essex, in 1582. Its object was Agnes Heard, a woman who would eventually be sentenced for having bewitched “to death a cow, 10 sheep and 10 lambs”<sup>124</sup>.

Bennet recounted having given Agnes a pint of milk inside a dish; when Agnes neglected to give the dish back, Bennet asked Agnes’s daughter to remind her mother about it. Agnes returned the dish but, after that, Bennet discovered “she could no longer spin or make a thread to hold”<sup>125</sup>. She tried smoothening the spindle at the grindstone but this produced no results, as the thread continued breaking; hence, she “put it into the fire and made it red-hot, and then cooled it again and went to work, and then it wrought as well as ever it did at any time before”<sup>126</sup>.

### 2.1. POVERTY.

This deposition emphasizes humble everyday activities, such as cooking or spinning<sup>127</sup>, the latter of which was part of the home industry system which employed many women of the lower classes<sup>128</sup>: this contributes to a depiction of both the stereotypical witch and her victim as members of the poorer classes.

Emblematic of this vision is Anne Ratcliffes’ episode in *The Witch of Edmonton*, where the fact that Elizabeth Sawyer’s sow licked “a little soap” belonging to Anne escalates into a full-blown lethal *maleficium*, underlining the

---

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>127</sup> PURKISS D., *The Witch in History*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 94.

<sup>128</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 112-156.

importance of such a unassuming good in the two women's mental framework (IV. i. 168-173).

This hypothesis is likewise corroborated by some observations regarding actual trials and accusations:

- The conviction of being witches, which might bring to spontaneous confessions or a damning reputation, was common especially among the poor <sup>129</sup>, who lacked other avenues to power such as legal action or physical force <sup>130</sup> and also the means to defend themselves if exploited as scapegoats <sup>131</sup>;
- This was also a consequence of malnutrition, which afflicted members of the poorer classes and which could lead to visions and hallucinations mistaken as the effects of witchcraft <sup>132</sup>;
- The most common cause of precipitation of supposed witchcraft attacks were quarrels over simple gifts or loans of food, money, or utensils <sup>133</sup>.

In 1584, the sceptic Reginald Scot divided the people which were convinced of possessing malevolent magic in "two degrees", the first of which comprised those who were "in great miserie and pouertie". These, the Devil "alluers to follow him, by promising vnto them great riches and worldly commoditie" <sup>134</sup>; as already seen, envy for the "fat prosperity" of a neighbour is one of the reasons for which people ask for Hecate's help (*The Witch*, I. ii. 142-143).

---

<sup>129</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 40-63.

<sup>130</sup> TEMPERA M., *The Lancashire Witches: lo stereotipo della strega fra scrittura giuridica e scrittura letteraria*, Imola, Galeati, 1981, p. 36.

<sup>131</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 174-176.

<sup>132</sup> CENTINI M., *La stregoneria*, Milano, Xenia, 1995, pp. 83-88.

<sup>133</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>134</sup> GOODCOLE H., "The Wonderfull Discouerie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch", in TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, p. 25.

Further proof is the fact that global economic crises such as the XVI century inflation exacerbated not only poverty, but also witch-hunts and the use of *maleficium* by people convinced of its efficacy <sup>135</sup>. The unprecedented demographic growth of the XVI and XVII centuries exacerbated this situation widening the gap between the rich and the poor, so that beggars, especially women, moved from being perceived as objects of Christian charity to being viewed as a dangerous social class more likely to be accused of witchcraft <sup>136</sup>.

### 2.1.1. Charity refusal.

Another reason for this shift was the institution, between 1597 and 1601, of the Elizabethan Poor Law, which offered State assistance to the poorest parts of the population.

Before its introduction, the poor depended on their richer neighbour's Christian charity: refusing aid to a beggar carried a social stigma and could, in the belief of the time, lead to a retaliatory *maleficium* by the offended part: in this sense, witchcraft acted as a "conservative social force", the main function of which was to uphold the moral code by menacing consequences in the case of its breaking <sup>137</sup>. The Poor Law created an ambiguity in the image of the poor in the eyes of contemporaries.

Poor Law encouraged to not give charity, since the State already provided to the poor, but doing so caused people to feel guilty. Then, when misfortune happened, they sometimes tied it to this sense of guilt and found a way to reverse this feeling: accusing the source of the guilt – the poor – of a more severe infraction to the moral code than the refusal of charity, that of having used *maleficium* to cause the misfortune.

---

<sup>135</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 40-63.

<sup>136</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>137</sup> MARWICK M. G., *Sorcery in its Social Setting. Study of the Northern Rhodesian Cewa*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1965, p. 221.

In addition, it was believed that giving objects to a witch could strengthen her power over the giver, so that people who were already suspected of being witches were even more likely to be refused charity <sup>138</sup>.

However convincing, though, these observations are nevertheless not to be taken as undisputable evidence of a correlation between witch-hunts and economic condition: there is no systematic correlation between agricultural Malthusian crises and the numbers of witchcraft trials <sup>139</sup>, and the Essex legal corpus, the foundation for the charity refusal → guilt → accusation theory, produces no convincing evidence of a tie between contingent economic situation and witch-hunts <sup>140</sup>.

Moreover, while the Essex corpus is a priceless source thanks to the exceptional number of cases registered in the Assize Circuit of the region, this same exceptionality turns into an issue since other parts of the country did not comply to Essex's high amount of trials, nor to its charity refusal model <sup>141</sup>.

### **2.1.2. Class issues in *The Witch of Edmonton*.**

The economic aspect of witchcraft beliefs is one of the major themes in *The Witch of Edmonton*.

“Poor” is the first adjective which Mother Sawyer uses to qualify herself: “I am poor, deformed, and ignorant” (II. i. 3). In addition, she is displayed “gather[ing] a few rotten sticks to warm [her]”, an activity which immediately identifies her as belonging to the beggar class (I. ii. 20). This is, notably, before she accepts the devil's compact: the text presents Mother Sawyer as a poor before

---

<sup>138</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 91-118.

<sup>139</sup> DI SIMPLICIO O., “On the Neuropsychological Origins of Witchcraft Cognition: The Geographic and Economic Variable”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 522-524.

<sup>140</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, p. 149-156.

<sup>141</sup> GASKILL M., “*Witchcraft Trials in England*”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 287.

showing her as a witch, emphasizing that witchcraft is a product of society and only after that of the diabolical.

The class theme emerges with particular relevance during Mother Sawyer's plead in front of the Justice: it is at the centre of the speech. Being poor is, in addition to being an woman and old, a cause of mistreatment and suspicion (IV. i. 76-79). In fact, poverty is a necessary condition for an old woman to be considered a witch:

An old woman,  
Ill-favoured grown with years, if she be poor,  
Must be called bawd or witch.

(IV. i. 122-124)

Moreover, Mother Sawyer emphasizes the class implications of many witchcraft trials by listing a series of characters which are more deserving of the name of witch than herself. These include:

- Noblemen, “men in gay clothes, whose backs are laden with titles and with honours, [...] within far more crookèd than [she is]” (IV. i. 87-89);
- Merchants' wives, “city-witches who can turn their husband's wares, whole standing shops of wares, to sumptuous tables, gardens of stolen sin; in one year wasting what scarce twenty win” (IV. i. 115-118);
- Lawyers, “whose honeyed hopes the credulous client draw – as bees by tinkling basins – to swarm to him from his own hive to work the wax in his” (IV. i. 130-133).

The only difference between Sawyer, who undergoes a trial for witchcraft, and these people, who are never touched by similar suspicions, is that Sawyer is poor and they are not.

The same critique regarding the existence of a privileged richer class resounds in the words of the bewitched Anne Ratcliffe, when she asserts that “all

the golden meal runs into the rich knaves' purses, and the poor have nothing but bran" (IV. i. 179-181).

The corruption of the rich and powerful is likewise hinted to by the Dog, when he speaks of the "Briarean footcloth-strider, which has an hundred hands to catch at bribes, but not a finger's nail of charity" whom he is going to "serve" after Mother Sawyer's execution – a confirmation that these people are no less tainted and diabolical than literal witches (V. i. 184-186).

The economic theme actually extends wider than Mother Sawyer's storyline, resonating in the love triangle plot. The Carters are the only morally sound characters of the play, and yet Old Carter is motivated by the desire for social rise as much as by the hope of a happy marriage for his daughter: the Carters are rich, but they lack titles (I. ii. 1-5). On the contrary, the Thorneys are aristocratic but in need of money, an economic necessity which drives Frank to polygamy and ultimately to his execution, and which gives the audience a depiction of Old Thorney's motives and character which is mostly negative.

Old Banks is likewise rich and respectable, "loving to the world and charitable to the poor" (II. i. 159-160) but in spite of this he is also one of the main villains of the plot who, not counting the Dog, all belong to the aristocracy and small gentry and act for economic motives.

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, witchcraft is the product of poverty in a corrupt society driven by economic interests, social ambition, and concerns which are oftentimes compared to – and amplified by – the diabolical. The only character who is aware of these issues is the beggar Mother Sawyer; on the contrary the Frank, who comes from the small gentry and who is almost single-handedly the cause of his own fall, seems oblivious to this issues, blaming his wrongdoings on "Fate" (I. ii. 193).

### 2.1.3. Revenge.

Another reason for the fact that many of the people suspected of *maleficium* belonged to the “lower levels of the settled community”<sup>142</sup> was the fact that unprivileged categories, (women, the elderly, the poor) could not easily take revenge.

The second of the “two degrees” in which Scot classifies the people who delude themselves into believing that they have magical powers is he or she who, “though riche, yet burnes in a desperate of reuenge” and which the Devil “allures [...] by promises, to get their turne satisfied to their hartes contentment”<sup>143</sup>. In reality, however, the rich and powerful had access to a plethora of available options, such as social influence, money, or Law

Members of disadvantaged groups on the other hand lacked those avenues, especially older women who could not even resort to the use of physical force. Therefore, if one did wrong to an aristocrat or a rich person, they could anticipate many forms of retaliation; if instead they harmed a poor, an old person, a woman, or a mix of the three, they were more likely to expect vengeance under the form of *maleficium*, and were therefore more likely to attribute any subsequent misfortune to hostile magic.

In most witchcraft trials, in fact, the alleged victim felt the witch had a specific reason to begrudge them, often the refusal of socially mandated neighbourly help, such as lending milk, beer, tools, or little sums of money<sup>144</sup>.

In addition, since the majority of early modern people believed in the existence of magic, poor folks were actually attempting to use *maleficium* when trying to get revenge: by doing this, they could create evidence which later contributed to the believability of the accusations. This was of course more

---

<sup>142</sup> BEVER E., “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>143</sup> GOODCOLE H., *ibid.*, in TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>144</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 47-80.

frequent among members of disadvantaged categories than within the wealthier and more privileged groups.

This correlation between *maleficium*, revenge, and lack of power is further confirmed by the fact that the motives which supposedly moved witches to enact their magic were often rather petty. For example, in the 1612 Lancashire trial, allegations against the “witches” included:

- Killing a woman because she laughed at one of them;
- Killing a man because he talked behind the back of one of them;
- Killing a woman because she drove one of them out of her house in an impolite manner;
- Killing a man because he denied one of them an old shirt;
- Killing a man because he denied one of them a penny <sup>145</sup>.

Motives this trivial would not have constituted a credible basis for the prosecution, had they not been preceded by a history of previous abuses, which of course fell especially frequently on the weaker segments of the population and which would have justified such a radical retaliation.

Alleged witches’ concern with revenge is another notable aspect of Bennet Lanes’s deposition, where Agnes’s *maleficium* is described striking only after Bennet did Agnes wrong by asking for her dish back <sup>146</sup>.

Theatrical texts likewise use revenge as a motive for the witches. In *The Witches of Lancashire*, the Miller is a frequent object of the witches’ pranks. Besides disrupting his and his wife’s butter-making, they also turn into monstrous cats which “for their hugeness [...] might be cat o’ mountains” in order to have fun by giving the Miller a scare and some scratches (II. ii. 194-202).

Moreover, the Miller later recounts that:

One night in

---

<sup>145</sup> TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>146</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 94.

my sleep they set me astride, stark naked, atop of  
my mill, a bitter cold night too. 'Twas daylight  
before I was waked, and I durst never speak of it to  
this hour, because I thought it impossible to be  
believed.

(V. i. 28-32)

These overall innocuous endeavours may be interpreted as a form of vengeance: millers were in fact “notoriously corrupt”<sup>147</sup> and frequently suspected of adulterating their flour with cheap materials<sup>148</sup>. This reality is likewise recognized within the text, where the Miller admits that people “say we millers are thieves” (II. ii. 207) and Doughty calls him “a miller and a close thief” (V. i. 100).

Another instance of revenge is the object of the play-within-the-play in which Mrs Generous summons a parade of spirits: her aim is to comically avenge the offence which Arthur, Shakestone, and especially Bantam had caused to her nephew Whetstone by calling him a bastard (II. iv. 37). Whetstone offers to show the three young gentlemen their fathers but, when they accept, spirits appear under the shape of a “pedant”, a tailor, and a servant who worked for the three’s parents, implying their mothers to be adulterers and their fathers to be cuckolds (IV. v. 24-94).

Likewise, in *The Witch*, Hecate boasts about having killed animals belonging to a couple of farmers who:

Denied [her] often flour, barm and milk  
Goose-grease and tar, when [she] ne'er hurt their charmings,  
Their brew-locks, nor their batches, nor forspoke,  
Any of their breedings.

---

<sup>147</sup> WALLACE J. “A Note on the Staged reading”, in EGAN G. (edited by), *The Witches of Lancashire*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2002, p. vii.

<sup>148</sup> EGAN G. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 148.

(I. ii. 53-56)

Besides harming their cattle, Hecate has shaped a heart made of wax which she “stuck [...] full with magic needles” and put two wax figurines representing the farmer and his wife inside a fire, in order melt “their marrows” so that “three months’ sickness sucks up life in ‘em”. (I. ii. 46-52).

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, revenge is an important motive for the titular character. During the first scene of the play with Mother Sawyer, Old Banks verbally and physically abuses her, calling her a witch, a hag, “and worse [he] would, knew [he] a name more hateful”. After this, he beats her (II. i. 14-30).

This kind of maltreatments is a habitual part of Mother Sawyer’s life, as she makes clear on her entrance on stage, and retaliating against those who torment her is the reason she desires diabolical powers in the first place. In the soliloquy which calls the Dog to her, she promises herself to any power “good or bad” which were able to “instruct [her] which way [she] might be revenged upon this churl”. She would “go out of [her]self, and give this fury leave to dwell”, and commit any sort of blasphemy to “revenge upon this miser, this black cur”, this “canker”, upon which she wishes “vengeance, shame, ruin” (II. i. 107-120).

Mother Sawyer’s and the Dog’s first dialogue feel, appropriately, like a bargaining over a contract. During this negotiation, the would-be witch makes it clear that she seeks revenge but does not hope to improve her life through it:

I know not where to seek relief: but shall I,  
After such covenants sealed, see full revenge  
On all that wrong me?

(II. i. 137-139)

She confirms this proposition near the end of the play, when she states that “revenge to [her] is sweeter far than life” (V. i. 7), an understandable affirmation, considering the bleak reality in which she lives.

This control, however, is for the most part imaginary, and the sceptical dramatists of *Edmonton* “are at pain to show that a pact with the devil brings no real power to Elizabeth Sawyer” <sup>149</sup>, making Sawyer a sympathetic figure which remains human until the end, despite the fact that, in the play, she is indubitably a witch.

The authors, however, do not depict her as a unilaterally good character: her revenge, in fact, does not strike only villains such as Old Banks, but also innocent people. Since Old Banks is “loving to the world and charitable to the poor”, the Dog cannot hit him directly and must resort to curse not only his cattle (II. i. 156-166) but also Bank’s innocent son Cuddy. Sawyer asks the Dog to “to scandal and disgrace pursue” him and his love interest Katherine Carter in order to “the father’s wrong wreak [...] upon the son” – this despite her acknowledgement that Cuddy seems to be “a good young man” (II. i. 208-270).

Another innocent Elizabeth Sawyer’s victim is Anne Ratcliffe: for the fault of having “struck and almost lamed” her pig, Sawyer orders the Dog to “touch her”. This throws Anne in a madness so devastating that her husband says that “she's become nothing but the miserable trunk of a wretched woman”. Completely mad, Anne “beat[s] out her own brains, and so die[s]” (IV. i. 168-210). This punishment is disproportionately more severe than the crime: it is significant that it occurs towards the end of the play, when the Dog’s grip over Sawyer is the strongest.

---

<sup>149</sup> PURKISS D., “Witchcraft in Early Modern Literature”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 138.

## 2.2. SUSPICION AND REPUTATION.

If two identical misfortunes happened, it was possible that one was attributed to *maleficium* while the other was not. The distinguishing factor was that the victim of the first misfortune felt a sense of guilt <sup>150</sup>: at the moment in which the “victim” formulated the suspicion of having suffered hostile magic, they might imagine that they had offended someone and suspected that person of having enacted a maleficent ritual against them <sup>151</sup>.

The usual process preceding an accusation was the following <sup>152</sup>:

- An antipathy existed between the “victim” and the “witch”;
- A misfortune happened to the “victim”;
- The “victim” questioned the possible causes of the misfortune and decided that it had been caused by a *maleficium*;
- They examined the list of people to whom they had caused offence and found the “witch”;
- They decided the “witch” was the source of the misfortune and formulated the accusation.

Examples of an opposite process existed, with the disgrace preceding the antipathy and leading to the search for a culprit and to an accusation, but the first model was nonetheless what the majority of cases followed <sup>153</sup>.

One notable exception to this were family relationships: while possible, it was certainly possible to suspect someone within the family <sup>154</sup>. This was probably a result of the belief that witches transmitted their powers to their kin (not

---

<sup>150</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, pp. 174-186.

<sup>151</sup> THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 526-531.

<sup>152</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., “Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 81-102.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-102.

<sup>154</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970, pp. 168-169.

genetically, but as a trade)<sup>155</sup>. One could potentially be instructed in magic by a friend or a professional; however, as other trades such as for example brewing, clothmaking, and printing, witchcraft was thought to usually run in the family<sup>156</sup>.

This meant that, if one knew for a fact that their family was not one of witches, they were less likely to suspect some of its members to possess magical powers. It also made it a dangerous proposition to accuse of witchcraft someone within one's own kin, since it would have made everyone in the family a potential suspect.

It was common, in fact, for women in a renowned witch's family to be accused of witchcraft themselves. This occurred, for instance, in the 1612 Lancashire witch-hunt, when the Demdike and Chattox clans ended up decimated by a chain of sentences which followed the family lines<sup>157</sup>.

### **2.2.1. Divination.**

After formulating suspicions, the alleged victim needed to confirm them. One tool available for this task was the enactment of a divination ritual, a magical procedure aimed at obtaining, deciphering, and elaborating information through supernatural means<sup>158</sup>. In modern days, divination is most commonly associated with fortune telling; in the early modern age, instead, its most common uses were finding treasures or lost items and identifying culprits<sup>159</sup>.

Some demonologists held divination to be as satanic and damning as more overtly hostile forms of magic, or even more dangerous since it looked innocuous.

---

<sup>155</sup> TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, pp. 38-41.

<sup>156</sup> PURKISS D., *The Witch in History*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 143-147.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>158</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 216-269.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-269.

In spite of this, however, the Law treated it rather leniently and common people resorted to it regularly <sup>160</sup>.

Some procedures were so simple that a lay person could perform them without resorting to professional help. One of these was the so-called “sieve and shears” ritual: a sieve was suspended from a pair of shears in such a fashion to allow movements, which were then interpreted to obtain a response.

Other examples of easily performed rituals were those which compelled the culprit to reach the place where the divination was happening, such as the thatch-burning illustrated in *The Witch of Edmonton*. Analogous suggestions were given by some cunning folks to their clients: to “fill a bucket of water in the name of Satan” and “put it under the bed” to compel the suspected witch to appear; or to mix “the urine of a sick person with wax and a piece of cloth in a glass [in order to] cause the person responsible for the sickness to come within 12 hours” <sup>161</sup>.

However, more complex forms of divination such as geomancy or the evocation of spirits were thought to require a more professional figure: therefore, when someone thought themselves to be the victim of a curse, they could require the help of cunning folks.

These fortune tellers usually limited themselves to simply discovering and confirming the suspicions that the client had already in their mind <sup>162</sup>, but this does not mean they were invariably quacks. While some were certainly plain scammers, whose “magic” seemed to work only thanks to dumb luck or to the client’s satisfaction, others used legitimate methods to arrive at their conclusions, such as:

- Using a maieutical approach to help the client produce answers he or she already knew and then confirming them, sometimes as simply as

---

<sup>160</sup> KIECKHEFER R., “Magic and its Hazards in the Late Medieval West”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 13-31.

<sup>161</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>162</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., “Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 81-102.

asking a man who had become lame who he taught was the responsible  
<sup>163</sup>;

- Making the client observe a reflective surface, such as an opaque mirror or a crystal, looking for an image of the culprit. This form of divination, known as scrying, could actually work through self-suggestion (the client saw their own blurred reflection and interpreted it as that of the suspect they already had in mind) or even by provoking actual hallucinations which allowed the client to tap into their unconscious knowledge <sup>164</sup>;
- Intimidating the culprit and make them reveal themselves, or directly prevent them from committing a crime in the first place <sup>165</sup>. This was especially true if the divination was conducted via an ordeal, such as in the infamous *swimming* to which many suspected witches were subjected: this ordeal consisted in immersing a suspect witch in a body of liquid to verify if she sunk (acting as a natural creature and thus resulting innocent) or floated (in which case it was thought that the water repelled her as a diabolical creature) <sup>166</sup>;
- Utilizing the diviner's logical deduction and proficiency "in gathering information through gossip networks" to put the client in contact with already circulating rumours and help them produce a credible suspect <sup>167</sup>.

---

<sup>163</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>164</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 216-269.

<sup>165</sup> THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 216-221.

<sup>166</sup> MAIR L., *La stregoneria*, Milano, Il Saggiatore di Alberto Mondadori Editore, 1969, p. 223.

<sup>167</sup> STEWART P. J., STRATHERN A., *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 153.

### 2.2.2. Gossip and rumours.

Gossip networks actually played a wider role in witch-hunting. In Bennet Lane's deposition, the accusation usually triggered only with a critical mass of precedents and suspicions: as far as we know, Bennet did not report what she perceived as Agnes's crime when it happened; rather, she offered her testimony only later, in the course of a larger trial, alongside a mass of other depositions regarding offences supposedly committed by Agnes over the years.

In this accumulation of suspicions, gossip was crucial. Just as witchcraft belief, gossiping is a phenomenon which exists especially within small communities where everyone knows everyone else and where it could severely undermine an individual's social standing.

Larger societies, on the other hand, tend to rely more on rumours, which act as "improvised news" which people could search in order to close their information gaps <sup>168</sup>. Compared to gossip, which is invariably linked to a specific individual, a rumour is impersonal, untraceable, and "not only unverified, but also perhaps unverifiable or in a large part simply inaccurate", especially because for the early modern person it was difficult to compare different sources and form a more well-rounded and accurate opinion <sup>169</sup>.

A rumour is also vague, a fact which could help its diffusion, which is easier the more its evidence is ambiguous and its object important; however, as it spreads – as in a children's game of "telephone" – a rumour can adapt: it connects to people's interest, it creates narratives which fit their fears and presuppositions, and it acquires detail, until it ultimately evolves into a definite gossip regarding a specific person <sup>170, 171</sup>.

---

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-20.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>171</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 93-108.

The procedure of antipathy → misfortune → suspicion → accusation presupposes a history of gossip about the object of the antipathy, in order to drive the suspicion to that particular individual <sup>172</sup>.

*The Witch of Edmonton* provides a fitting example. Mother Sawyer's first lines are largely about people spreading gossip about her:

And why on me? why should the envious world  
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?  
[...]  
Must I for that be made a common sink  
For all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues  
To fall and run into? Some call me witch,  
And being ignorant of myself, they go  
About to teach me how to be one

(II. i. 1-10)

Mother Sawyer's condition as a poor, old woman is not sufficient to make her a witch; rather, it just puts her in the position of being considered one and thus an ideal target for the townsmen's gossiping (the "scandalous malice" and the "filth and rubbish of men's tongues") which will in turn make her interested in witchcraft.

Later, she calls Old Banks:

This miser, this black cur,  
That barks and bites, and sucks the very blood  
Of me and of my credit

(II. i. 115-118)

The diabolical image – Old Banks is compared to a blood-sucking familiar, except that he feeds on "credit" – compares the witch's state to the mere reputation

---

<sup>172</sup> STEWART P. J., STRATHERN A., *ibid.*, pp. 17-20.

of being one: “witches” are not created by devils, familiars, or magical powers, but by the people’s conviction that some people can become one.

Gossips and rumours were also crucial after the accusation happened, when they could induce a sense of social hysteria which could lead to covert or overt forms of violence. This was especially true in the case of the continental large-scale witch-crazes <sup>173</sup>. In England, the most notorious instance of witch-craze was Matthew Hopkins’s infamous witch-hunt: it was fuelled by the witch-finder’s ability to catalyse local gossip with an efficacy which the more objective Assize judges could not achieve <sup>174</sup>.

This dynamic is likewise exemplified in *Edmonton*. The first scene of the fourth Act opens with the townfolks gossiping about the damage they suppose Mother Sawyer has brought to the community – making Old Banks’s horse sick and another Countryman’s wife an adulterer (IV. i. 1-14). This instigates them first to a form of covert violence, the burning of Mother Sawyer’s thatch (IV. i. 15-21) and subsequently to overt lynching: only the Justice’s arrival stops them before they can “Hang her, beat her, kill her!” (IV. i. 27-30).

### **2.2.3. Reputation.**

Having the reputation of being a witch could be convenient. People believed to be witches were feared by their fellow townfolks, who tried to please them: Scot reports that “few dare offend them, or denie them anie thing they aske” <sup>175</sup> and the moderate sceptic George Gifford has one of the characters of his *Dialogue* say about a woman thought to be a witch that “I have been as careful to please her as ever I was to please mine own mother, and to give her ever and anon

---

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 140-168.

<sup>174</sup> DILLINGER J., “Politics, State-Building, and Witch-Hunting”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 528-547.

<sup>175</sup> GOODCOLE H., *ibid.*, in SHARPE J., *ibid.*, p. 150.

one thing or other”<sup>176</sup>; the two most powerful “witches” condemned in the 1612 Lancashire trial, Demdike and Chattox, both admitted to having used their dreadful reputation to extort money from their neighbours<sup>177</sup>.

Despite its benefits, however, this status was not something a woman actively sought. Instead, it was a label applied to her by an external intervention, a procedure which erased any agency she could have claimed over the narrative which regarded her<sup>178</sup>.

The importance of reputation in witchcraft beliefs is likewise exemplified by the fact that the use of the witch’s name was an integral part of some unwitching rituals<sup>179</sup>.

People might also be willing to lose this reputation. Sometimes this was strong enough to motivate a person to spontaneously confess and undergo an ordeal to clear a long-lasting stain on their name<sup>180</sup>. However, an acquittal was not always sufficient, as demonstrated by the fact that some particularly disreputable or dreaded people were tried multiple times during their lives: this was, for instance, the case of a woman named Elizabeth Fraunces, from the Essex village of Hatfield Peverel, who was accused three times in thirteen years<sup>181</sup>.

Moreover, reputation could be a hazard as well as an advantage since it could serve either as a trigger for episodes of popular violence, or as evidence in a formal trial. In that setting, the bad reputation and the relationship network required by the cunning folks’ profession could figure alongside more concrete

---

<sup>176</sup> GIFFORD G., “A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts”, in SHARPE J., *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>177</sup> TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, pp. 38-41.

<sup>178</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>179</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970, pp. 107-112.

<sup>180</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 518-519.

<sup>181</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, p. 95.

proof such as the possession of a book of magic or of the utterance of overt threats in front of witnesses <sup>182</sup>.

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, after saving Mother Sawyer from the impending lynching, the Justice and Sir Arthur interrogate her. During this trial, Sir Arthur plays the role of prosecution and, among other evidence, he also presents Mother Sawyer's reputation:

I can, if need be, bring an hundred voices,  
E'en here in Edmonton, that shall loud proclaim  
Thee for a secret and pernicious witch.

(IV. i. 94-96)

In *The Witches of Lancashire*, after listening to the Miller recount all the mischiefs which the witches have inflicted to him and his family, Doughty comments that he has:

Heard of a hundred such  
Mischievous tricks, though none mortal, but could  
Not find whom to mistrust for a witch

(V. i. 48-50)

Once again, an accumulation of precedents, suspicions, and gossip builds into a negative reputation: this is shown to be crucial in the construction of a witchcraft accusation.

Despite these risks, people were still believed to enact nefarious magic rituals because “they learned that the actions could be efficacious and that the power bestowed” – including the social power of which Scot and Gifford speak – “compensated for the social stigma they brought” <sup>183</sup>.

---

<sup>182</sup> KIECKHEFER R., *ibid.*, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 13-31.

<sup>183</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 159.

However, in *Lancashire*'s time, 1633-1634, such a reputation seems to have lost its efficacy: when the witch Gillian is discovered by the Boy, she does not try to use it in order to terrorize him into silence, but instead tries to buy his discretion with a "shilling" (II. iv. 26-28).

### **2.3. TENSION AND CATHARSIS.**

The connection between social class and revenge, and with gossip and reputation, point to a function of witchcraft beliefs within the dynamics of the social sphere.

Bennet Lane's deposition corroborates this hypothesis by highlighting the fact that witchcraft accusations involved neighbours: Agnes and Bennet lived in the same village and were clearly acquainted with each other, as shown by the exchange of daily goods which opens the deposition and by the familiarity which Bennet displays towards Agnes's daughter.

This was not true for each and every trial or witch-hunt; however, it was sufficiently common to make it credible that many *maleficium* accusations existed as a result of community dynamics.

#### **2.3.1. The context of the early modern village.**

According to modern anthropology, witchcraft beliefs to appear where social interaction is intense but not well defined, and hierarchy is lacking<sup>184</sup>. This seems to be in line with the fact that, in early modern England, the majority of allegations for *maleficium* took place within country villages with less than 2,000 inhabitants, or small towns with less than 5,000<sup>185</sup>.

Larger cities – those with 5,000 or more inhabitants – nonetheless held witchcraft trials, but they mostly revolved around cases of plague spreading,

---

<sup>184</sup> MUCCI C., *ibid.*, pp. 159-182.

<sup>185</sup> LEVACK B. P., *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, Harlow, Pearson Education Limited, 2006, pp. 138-139.

collective possession, and political reasons (charging a political rival for *maleficium* in order to reduce their popularity <sup>186</sup>). They were therefore distant from the average occurrence, which regarded a poor elderly woman living at the margins of society and involved in a conflict with her slightly richer neighbour over the infraction of local community norms <sup>187</sup>.

The village, on the contrary, created the ideal conditions for witchcraft beliefs:

- Social interaction was intense: the population was small; people lived close to each other and interacted daily;
- The rules were defined but also contradictory. The customs establishing what was or was not acceptable were meant to enforce social harmony within the community; however, they also generated tension between the inhabitants;
- A hierarchy existed which regulated many aspects of the day-to-day existence but, similarly to social norms, it also created its own contradictions and aroused tensions;
- Moreover, villages and towns were far from central authorities and did not have their own courts of justice: in order to deal with felonies, they had to wait for the biannual Assize Courts to reunite on location <sup>188</sup>.

These rules existed to maintain social harmony, an understandably capital value for a small community. Many institutions reinforced this precept: examples were the communal celebrations, absence from which could elicit suspicions <sup>189</sup>; the mass, during which preachers could pronounce homilies which alerted the participants against the dangers of a broken harmony <sup>190</sup>; and the creation of

---

<sup>186</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 535-540.

<sup>187</sup> LEVACK B. P., *ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>188</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>189</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 526-528.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151-176.

“gossips”, groups of women who assisted a birthing mother: the exclusion from these groups was often considered a sufficiently credible motive for the use of *maleficium* <sup>191</sup>.

Other practices reinforced social harmony. There was little tolerance for people who violated this principle, as for example adulterers. The concern with harmony and the necessity of interacting frequently between neighbours lead to an utter lack of privacy: because of this, violators were easily discovered and incurred into a variety of different punishments going from derision or public exposure on the pillory, all the way to actual lynching <sup>192</sup>.

### **2.3.2. Scolding.**

A person who represented a menace for social harmony was the scold. The typical scold was an elderly woman with a propensity for a high level of verbal aggression. This stereotype was rooted in the “widespread cultural belief that physical violence was characteristically a male attribute, while verbal aggression was a female one” <sup>193</sup>, thus making it easier for the contemporaries to imagine scolds as women.

Being old, female, and possessing a bad temperament were attributes which the stereotypical scold shared with the stereotypical witch: in fact, not surprisingly, the two figures oftentimes overlapped <sup>194</sup>. Moreover, the act of scolding was sometimes entirely indistinguishable from that of *maleficium*: a XVII century scholar even registered the case of two women literally scolding a third to death <sup>195</sup>. The word “spell” itself betrays the verbal nature attributed to magic.

---

<sup>191</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, pp. 100-106.

<sup>192</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 526-531.

<sup>193</sup> SHARPE J., *ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>194</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 177-179.

<sup>195</sup> HARRIS A. J., *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century Drama*, Manchester, Manchester, pp. 152-154.

This feature is exemplified in *The Witches of Lancashire*, where Seely recognizes the source of his misfortunes in an offence to a “weird woman” who:

With an ill look and an hollow voice,  
She mutter'd out these words: 'Perhaps ere long  
Thyself shalt be obedient to thy son.'

(V. v. 88-95)

This episode also represents a good example of the habitual process leading to an accusation: Seely has an antipathy, suffers a misfortune, and re-reads a particularly suspicious episode as the source of the misfortune.

Many alleged witches were convicted on the basis that they were habitual cursers <sup>196</sup>: among them figured the real-life Elizabeth Sawyer, the evidence against whom included “cursing, swearing, blaspheming, imprecating” <sup>197</sup>.

Her theatrical counterpart shares this propension and is frequently shown cursing against her neighbours or scolding them. Already during her first encounter with Old Banks, Mother Sawyer scolds him and curses against him:

You [...] churl, cut-throat, miser! – there they be  
[*Throws the sticks down*]  
Would they stuck cross thy throat, thy bowels, thy maw,  
Thy midriff!  
[...]  
Now, thy bones ache, thy  
Joints cramp, and convulsions stretch and crack thy sinews!

(II. i. 23-29)

Angered by Mother Sawyer’s attitude, Old Banks beats her, to which she responds, once he leaves the stage, with more cursing:

Strike, do! – and withered may that hand and arm

---

<sup>196</sup> SHARPE J., *ibid.*, p. 153-154.

<sup>197</sup> GOODCOLE H., *ibid.*, in SHARPE J., *ibid.*, p. 154.

Whose blows have lamed me drop from the rotten trunk.

Abuse me! beat me! call me hag and witch!

(II. i. 31-33)

Significantly, Mother Sawyer's familiar is summoned by cursing instead of a more traditional invocation. The Dog appears spontaneously and immediately states: "Ho! have I found thee cursing? now thou art mine own". These words underline both the Dog's treacherous nature— since Mother Sawyer has not signed the compact yet, his affirmation that she is "his own" is false – as well as the key value of cursing for the titular character of the play (II. i. 121).

In Goodcole's *Wonderfull Discouerie*, yelling obscenities against her accusers is Sawyer's only available defence: Dekker expands this observation into the fully blown social critique which occupies the scene in act Four <sup>198</sup>.

Summoned by the thatch-burning, Mother Sawyer appears on stage and immediately starts cursing:

Diseases, plagues, the curse of an old woman

Follow and fall upon you!

[...]

Shall I be murdered by a bed of serpents?

[...]

A crew of villains, a knot of bloody hangmen,

Set to torment me, I know not why.

(IV. i. 21-33)

Later, Mother Sawyers says goodbye to Old Banks by wishing that "Rots and foul maladies eat up [him] and [his family]" (IV. i. 69); and adds: "Be hanged thou in a third, and do thy worst!" (IV. i. 222); and: "Prick thine own eyes out. Go, peevish fools!" (IV. i. 257).

---

<sup>198</sup> HARRIS A. J., *ibid.*, p. 102-106.

The Justice is a positive balanced character, unlike the homicidal and frenzied townsmen from which he defends Mother Sawyer (IV. i. 33-43): however, even he admonishes Sawyer for being “too saucy and too bitter”, not the modest behaviour women were supposed to keep (IV. i. 82).

Mother Sawyer’s fool tongue is both the original cause of her sin and the instrument of her eventual fall. Sir Arthur in fact declares:

By one thing she speaks  
I know now she's a witch, and dare no longer  
Hold conference with the fury.  
(IV. i. 147-149)

After this, he and the Justice leave, concluding the trial.

### **2.3.3. The cathartic effect of witchcraft beliefs.**

Many of the beliefs surrounding the representation of the witch and many of the facts regarding the actual witch-hunts seem to suggest an equivalence between the stereotypical witch and the archetypal bad neighbour <sup>199</sup>:

- “Quarrelsome or disreputable elderly women” were the chief suspects in witchcraft charges <sup>200</sup>;
- The association between witchcraft and revenge reflected the concern with people holding hidden grudges and the fear of a hidden enemy <sup>201</sup>;

---

<sup>199</sup> ROWLANDS A., “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 449-467.

<sup>200</sup> BEVER E., “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>201</sup> MAIR L., *Witchcraft*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, pp. 235-242.

- The disagreements revolving around the loaning or the gifting of food, tools, or money represented the last straw in a process of degradation of an already deteriorating neighbourly relationship <sup>202</sup>.

At the same time, the alleged victims also felt to be themselves offenders of good neighbourly practices, as exemplified by the cases of refused charity in Essex <sup>203</sup>.

All this points to a key function of witchcraft belief, known in anthropology as its cathartic effect <sup>204</sup>:

- The “witch” and her “victim” were “two persons who ought to have been friendly towards each other but were not” because one or both felt fear, envy, animosity, or hostility towards the other. This enmity was a source of tension which the precept of social harmony could not tolerate <sup>205</sup>;
- However, that same principle barred the easy resolution of severing the tie between the two: whoever did it would have given the impression of an attack against social harmony and would consequently have brought blame upon themselves.

Witchcraft beliefs provided a solution for this impasse. A witchcraft accusation, in fact:

- Gave an outlet in a socially acceptable fashion;
- Allowed the accuser to truncate the undesired relationship without guilt, since the offended part (the “witch”) was actually more culpable than the offender (the “victim”).

---

<sup>202</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>203</sup> WILLIS R. G., “Instant Millenium: The Sociology of African Witch-cleansing Cults”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 134.

<sup>204</sup> MAIR L., *ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>205</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 560-561.

Most alleged witchcraft victims (nine tenth of them in the Essex village of Hatfield Peverel) were adults, and thus people actively participating in the social dynamics of the village. Children and animals were often believed to be “cursed” in place of adults, for example because their parents or owners were protected by their own behaviour or by defensive counter magic <sup>206</sup>.

An example of the cathartic role of witchcraft accusations in the plays revolves around Generous and his wife’s marriage, in *The Witches of Lancashire*. This relationship becomes clearly undesirable when Generous discovers that, unbeknownst to him, his wife leaves their conjugal bed during the night (IV. ii. 1-27). Fortunately, the revelation to Generous that his wife is a witch provides a positive (for the audience of the time) conclusion (IV. ii. 94-119).

Generous, faithful to his name, initially forgives Mrs Generous’s misbehaviour and promises to keep her secret (IV. 199-209); however, she later proves to be unredeemable declaring she is “once and ever a witch” (IV. iv. 28-29). This will be her ruin: when she takes part to the nightly “attack” to the Soldier in the mill, he cuts her paw while she is in the form of cat, so that her hand, still wearing the wedding ring, is found the next morning and recognized by Generous who “too well can read it” (V. iii. 94-106). He therefore renounces his wife, although with a bleeding heart (V. iv. 54-68).

This resolution is gladly accepted by the whole village: no character objects when Generous rejects his wife’s niece Whetstone “discard[ing] him in her blood” (V. v. 142) and neither when, speaking of her, he states:

My prayers for her soul's recovery  
Shall not be wanting to her, but mine eyes  
Must never see her more.

(V. v. 236-238)

---

<sup>206</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., “Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 131-139.

Alternatives existed to lift the perceived curse without provoking a fracture in the social tissue of the community, relying on public apologies or amends: for example, the “victim” could pay the “witch” a sum as a compensation for the initial wrongdoing, and in exchange the “witch” would teach them how to lift the curse <sup>207</sup>.

On the contrary, allowing the tension to persist by avoiding confrontation with the “witch” was believed to be dangerous, as it could have made one more vulnerable to her power. It was the case of Hugh Lucas, a child who, after refusing to answer a notorious witch’s question, fell into fits, which stopped only when he ease the tension by beating her <sup>208</sup>;

Further proof of the cathartic value of witchcraft beliefs and accusations is that:

- Some witchcraft accusations emerged by the necessity to justify in one’s eyes the success of a political or business rival which otherwise might have been unexplainable, thus relieving the tension felt between the two <sup>209</sup>;
- The most efficient persecution on English soil, in terms of convictions and executions, was that lead by Matthew Hopkins; among the reasons for its efficacy figured the fact that the infamous witch-finder was proficient in reading and exploiting the social tensions and animosity within the communities <sup>210</sup>.

---

<sup>207</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>209</sup> THOMAS K., “The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 47-80.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-80.

## 2.4. MISFORTUNE AND SCAPEGOATING.

According to the allegations, the most common effects of *maleficium* were human death and illness <sup>211</sup>. The charges stemming from these events followed the same pattern of antipathy → misfortune → accusation of domestic incidents; however, death and sickness were indubitably the source of stronger anxieties. This suggests a further function of witchcraft belief, separate from that of purging social tension: explaining misfortune.

### 2.4.1. Death and disease.

XV-XVII century England was afflicted by pestilence and illness, and had a high mortality rate, a considerable part of which was represented by child mortality <sup>212</sup>; moreover, its society lacked instruments (such as statistics or modern medicine) which not only reduce the occurrence of these calamities, but also explain them <sup>213</sup>. The belief in *maleficium* rationalized surprising or sudden deaths and inexplicably lingering diseases, which caused sufferings possibly lasting for months <sup>214</sup>.

Image magic was believed able to provoke such sicknesses. In this form of sympathetic magic, the sorcerer creates an image of the victim, possibly incorporating a part of the victim's body (such as hair or nails) or an object of their property; then, the magician subjects the image to a destructive process, believing to inflict a similar fate to its original.

Real-life Edmund Robinson, recounting his imaginary incursion in the witches' barn, recalled seeing "three pictures [...], in which pictures many thornes

---

<sup>211</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970, pp. 152-154.

<sup>212</sup> THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 3-24.

<sup>213</sup> MAIR L., *ibid.*, pp. 8-13.

<sup>214</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., "La stregoneria nell'Essex in epoca Tudor e Stuart", in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *La stregoneria. Confessioni e accuse, nell'analisi di storici e antropologi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 129-131.



The coven's power to inflict death and disease is actually so strong that, according to Firestone, Hecate and her sisters "are able to putrefy [..], to infect a whole region" (III. iii. 16-18).

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer lacks Hecate's large-scale powers, but she is nonetheless implicated in two episodes of sudden death or disease. First, she mentions having sent her Dog to "nip [a] sucking child": this attack probably would result in the baby dying, getting sick, or at least showing inexplicable bitemarks (IV. i. 162).

The second incident happens when she commands the Dog to "hit" Anne Ratcliffe. Tom "rubs" against the woman, after which Anne exclaims:

O, my ribs are made of a paned hose, and they  
Break. There's a Lancashire hornpipe in my throat. Hark how it  
Tickles it, with doodle, doodle, doodle, doodle!

(IV. i. 190-193)

This episode is noteworthy because, alongside the purely physical sickness, the Dog inflicts on Anne a psychosomatic illness, which will ultimately bring her to suicide – a rare occurrence in the prosecutions of the time, which focused more often on bodily diseases <sup>216</sup>.

Interestingly, Mother Sawyer is also accused for a case of madness and death of which she is not the direct cause: the murder of Susan Carter. Old Thorney in fact asks her:

Did not you bewitch Frank to kill his wife? he could never have  
Done't without the devil.  
(V. iii. 26-27)

Witches were likewise believed to be able to cause collective catastrophes such as the outbreak of storms. James VI of Scotland was allegedly targeted by

---

<sup>216</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970, pp. 181-184.

such an attack when witches at the service of his rival, the Fifth Earl of Bothwell, created a storm in an attempt to shipwreck the King and his wife <sup>217</sup>.

This belief was more typical of the continent than of England <sup>218</sup>; it is only appropriate that it should be invoked by James when he was still king of Scotland, since Scottish witchcraft beliefs were based on continental folklore <sup>219</sup>. It also appears only in the most continentally inspired of the three plays, *The Witch*, where Hecate says of Stadlin that:

She raises all your sudden ruinous storms  
That shipwreck barks and tears up growing oaks,  
Flies over houses and takes *Anno Domini*  
Out of a rich man's chimney – A sweet place for't!

(I. ii. 135-138)

Middleton's inspiration is to be found in Scot's *Discoverie*, where the witch Stadlin (the direct inspiration for her homonymous in the play) is said to be able to "make haile, tempests and flouds, with thunder and lightning" <sup>220</sup>.

#### **2.4.2. Scapegoating, prevention, and countermagic.**

In spite of this, *maleficium* was not used to justify every catastrophe. In fact, early modern English society could explain randomly occurring events as a result of causes different from witchcraft, such as the influx of the stars, Providence, a

---

<sup>217</sup> DILLINGER J., "Politics, State-Building, and Witch-Hunting", in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 531.

<sup>218</sup> THOMAS K., "The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft", in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 47-80.

<sup>219</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 47-80.

<sup>220</sup> SCOT R., "The Discoverie of Witchcraft", in CORBIN P., SEDGE D. (edited by), *Three Jacobean witchcraft plays. Sophonisba. The Witch. The Witch of Edmonton*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986, p. 224.

God's punishment for a sinner, or the plots of the enemies of the State, usually Papists <sup>221</sup>.

Witchcraft was believed to explain only unusual individual misfortune, such as a tree falling in absence of wind, or a clean woman suddenly finding herself full of lice <sup>222</sup>. Thus, it was not invoked whenever a tragedy happened, but whenever it happened without an apparent reason or with not natural explanation. More than how the misfortune happened, witch beliefs explained why it happened, and especially why it did to that particular person at that particular moment <sup>223</sup>.

However, the most satisfactory explanation for witchcraft accusations remains the necessity of relieving tensions between townspeople, rather than the need to rationalise misfortune: for these reason, it would be plausible to say that *maleficium* allegations in early modern England served firstly a cathartic function, and, secondly, an explanatory one <sup>224</sup>.

Early modern England offered other avenues to vent the anxiety of a personal or collective catastrophe, from the consumption of alcohol and tobacco or the practice of gambling, all the way up to brute-force aggression, arson, madness, and suicide <sup>225</sup>; however, these methods were probably deemed unpractical, as suggested by their low occurrence in the official records <sup>226</sup>.

Lacking more effective means, people looked for scapegoats onto which to blame their problem. During the Middle Ages, lepers, Muslims, Jews, and heretics

---

<sup>221</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 47-80.

<sup>222</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., "La stregoneria nell'Essex in epoca Tudor e Stuart", in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *La stregoneria. Confessioni e accuse, nell'analisi di storici e antropologi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 129-131.

<sup>223</sup> MAIR L., *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>224</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 131-134.

<sup>225</sup> THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 17-20.

<sup>226</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 131-134.

were the categories most commonly blamed for negative events <sup>227</sup>; in modern age England, Jews were blamed, together with Catholics, of collective disasters against the State; to explain personal misfortune, people resorted to divine Providence, when they felt that the misfortune was a result of their sin, or to witchcraft, when they felt they had offended a neighbour <sup>228</sup>.

Since misfortunes of that kind happened daily, witches were thought to be extremely common. As a Morris Dancer says, in *The Witch of Edmonton*:

'Faith, witches themselves are so common now-a-  
Days, that the counterfeit will not be regarded. They say we have  
Three or four in Edmonton besides Mother Sawyer.

(III. i. 12-14)

Compared to other solutions, finding a scapegoat offered the attractive, although for the most part delusional, possibility of taking action to undo the misfortune, an opportunity which other explanations lacked. For example, theology not only attributed some misfortunes God, but also forbade the use of counter magical remedies, deemed by clerics such as George Gifford as diabolical as the problem they answered <sup>229</sup>.

Witchcraft, on the other hand, was believed to offer three possible solutions. One could:

- Act in such a way to prevent the misfortune from happening;
- Undo it with mundane remedies or counter magic;
- Counterattack the source of the misfortune with violence or through the Law.

---

<sup>227</sup> MUIR E., *Ritual in Early Modern Europe. Second edition*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 47-62.

<sup>228</sup> THOMAS K., "The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft", in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 47-80.

<sup>229</sup> MAIR L., *ibid.*, pp. 183-187.

To defend themselves from witchcraft, people avoided living near those reputed to be witches, and were careful when exchanging goods with neighbours. A pious and virtuous life was believed to be a particularly effective protection<sup>230</sup>: godly people were believed to be immune or at least resistant to disease<sup>231</sup>, and the divine person of the monarch was thought to be protected from witchcraft as “un homme de Dieu”, as was said of James VI of Scotland at the time of his escaped shipwreck<sup>232</sup>.

The protection offered by virtue is evident in the plays. The Dog in *Edmonton* cannot attack Old Banks because Banks is “loving to the world and charitable to the poor” (II. i. 159-160); likewise, Hecate in *The Witch* brags about having lamed a hog “after evensong too”, implying that the farmer’s attendance to the service would have protected his animals against a less powerful sorceress (I. ii. 59)<sup>233</sup>.

When a misfortune happened, the first solution was usually to cure its effects. Some avenues early modern people tried were mundane: for example, Bennet Lane tried to sharpen her non-functioning spindle at the grindstone, before resorting to counter magic<sup>234</sup>. However, in the contemporary perception, there was no substantial difference from such a remedy and one which by a modern sensibility would be perceived as supernatural<sup>235</sup>: countermeasures for illness and other misfortunes included prayer, penance, and counter magic such as Bennet Lane’s “cooking” of the spindle<sup>236</sup>.

---

<sup>230</sup> MACFARLANE A. D. J., *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970, pp. 103-106.

<sup>231</sup> THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 78-112.

<sup>232</sup> DILLINGER J., *ibid.*, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 531.

<sup>233</sup> CORBIN P., SEDGE D., (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>234</sup> PURKISS D., *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>235</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 253-256

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 78-112.

Many of these counter magical measures were of Catholic origins. However, with the institution of State Church, “popery” became associated with witchcraft <sup>237</sup>: for example, the adoration of relics was compared to idolatry or even to necromancy, since both practices were based on the belief that physical bits of the dead conferred powers to the living <sup>238</sup>. This caused an increase in the number of witch trials after the Anglican Schism, further evidence of the grass-root nature of witch-hunts <sup>239</sup>: when lay people lost what they perceived as an important line of defence against the supernatural attack of *maleficium*, this in turn made them resort more often to formal authority as their protection of choice <sup>240</sup>.

### 2.4.3. Violence and repression.

Eventually, the last solution available to undo a misfortune was to attack its source. Sometimes this happened with violent means: the already mentioned Hugh Lucas, the child subject to fits, met the woman he thought to have caused them and “tripped up her heel, beat her, and so had never any more fits” <sup>241</sup>. Another boy, who was believed to have been made mute by an old woman, “ran furiously upon her and threw her pottage into her face and offered some other violence to her”; after this the woman, recognized by some bystanders as a witch, was taken to jail and blackmailed into removing the curse <sup>242</sup>. Sometimes,

---

<sup>237</sup> GASKILL M., “Witchcraft Trials in England”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 290-291.

<sup>238</sup> PURKISS D., “Witchcraft in Early Modern Literature”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>239</sup> HARRIS A. J., *ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>240</sup> THOMAS K., “The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 47-80.

<sup>241</sup> PURKISS D., *The Witch in History*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 129.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

however, people were convicted for using violence against alleged witches: this was the case of three men hanged at York for the murder of an alleged witch <sup>243</sup>.

*The Witch of Edmonton* displays three instances of similar violence-based remedies. The first is thatch-burning, which involves destruction of the witch's property and an implied threat to her person (IV. i. 15-21) and the second is the mob's gathering with the intention to lynch her (IV. i. 21-33).

The third happens during Anne Ratcliffe's episode: mad Anne commands Mother Saywer to "let [Anne] scratch [Sawyer's] face" (IV. i. 184-185). This act, according to the belief of the time, would sever the power of the witch on her victim: one of the characters of Gifford's *Dialogue* says that "Some wish me to beate and claw the witch untill I fetch blood on her, and to threaten her that I will have hanged" <sup>244</sup>; a real-life girl, who thought she was bewitched, scratched the alleged witch's hand "and seemed to be marveilous joyfull that she had gotten bloud" because she believed that lifted the curse <sup>245</sup>.

A common belief was that the imprisonment of a witch would dispel her magic. Towards the end of *The Witches of Lancashire*, Gregory Seely – returned an obedient son – tells his father:

Sir, I have heard  
That witches apprehended under hands  
Of lawful authority do lose their power,  
And all their spells are instantly dissolv'd

(V. v. 95-98)

If this was not sufficient, however, a more definitive solution was the execution of the alleged witch. This seems to be Doughty's intention, turned witch-finder in the last act of *Lancashire*, when he says about the Boy and himself:

---

<sup>243</sup> SHARPE J., *ibid.*, pp. 159.

<sup>244</sup> GIFFORD G., "A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts", in SHARPE J., *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>245</sup> SHARPE J., *ibid.*, p. 160.

He and I will worry all the witches  
In Lancashire.  
[...]  
Though we leave not above three  
Untainted women in the parish, we'll do it.

(V. i. 12-16)

The intervention of the official authorities required the belief in the threat of witchcraft to be disseminated not only among the populace which made the accusation, but also among the learned élites from which the judges and the magistrates came <sup>246</sup>.

Ultimately, the aim of the learned authorities would have been that of repressing witchcraft altogether. For this to happen, society had at its disposal several tools:

- Common people feared that the transgression of a single witch could bring divine retribution upon the whole community, so they enacted countermeasures such as insult, ostracism, or popular violence <sup>247</sup>; positive reinforcements could be employed as well: people were more helpful towards those whom they perceived as good neighbours, and well-behaving people had the advantages offered by a good reputation in what remained in large part a honour-based society <sup>248</sup>;
- Clerical authorities used sermons and homilies to discourage popular magic (albeit with little success) and secular authorities tried and punished those who practised it. At the local level, a trial was perceived as a tangible reality where the judges evaluated concrete facts about real people and condemned individuals <sup>249</sup>;

---

<sup>246</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 186-201.

<sup>247</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 339-432.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 339-432.

<sup>249</sup> TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, pp. 25-27.

- The results of trials, often published in the form of pamphlet, could influence the higher authorities, for which a trial represented a facet of the universal conflict between hierarchy and those who opposed it. Monarchs and their counsels could consequently enact measures to prevent what they perceived as the source of the disorder, such as emanating laws to punish disorderly conduct <sup>250</sup>.

---

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27.

### 3. THE WITCH IN SOCIETY. DEVIANCY AND DIABOLISM.

The establishing of a deviant is essential in this mechanism of scapegoating and repression. Such a figure plays two roles:

- It acts as a scapegoat when a misfortune happens;
- It acts as a negative example to discourage behaviours which are considered undesirable.

The stereotypical witch was an example of such a figure.

#### 3.1. DEVIANCY.

In order to act as a scapegoat, the deviant needs to be in a disadvantageous position, so that it is more difficult for them to react to the accusations: the stereotypical witch had numerous traits which put her at a social and pragmatical disadvantage.

The deviant also needs to be considered dangerous. In the case of the stereotypical witch, this connotation was highlighted by the lexicon used to refer to her: “dangerous” was by far the most frequently recurring term <sup>251</sup>.

Lastly, the deviant tends to accumulate on themselves traits which society desires to extirpate. According to modern anthropology, witch-figures appear in “unstructured” areas of society and “attract fear and dislikes” on themselves, as they are attributed powers which “symbolize their ambiguous, inarticulate status” <sup>252</sup>; they are therefore able to adapt to the different misfortunes and negative stereotypes which society may wish to charge upon them.

According to this theory, a witch-figure could be one of two kinds:

---

<sup>251</sup> TEMPERA M., *The Lancashire Witches: lo stereotipo della strega fra scrittura giuridica e scrittura letteraria*, Imola, Galeati, 1981, p. 33.

<sup>252</sup> DOUGLAS M., *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London and New York, Routledge, 1966, p. 104.

- “External”, whose function is to define the boundaries of a community by embodying the elements which come from outside it and which are to be excluded from it <sup>253</sup>;
- “Internal”, whose function is to define boundaries internal to the community, such as those between factions, levels of a hierarchy, or between accepted norm and deviancy <sup>254</sup>.

The early modern English witch corresponds to the second kind.

### 3.1.1. Arcane language.

One way in which deviancy is established in the plays is through the witches’ anomalous language. In both *The Witches of Lancashire* and *The Witch*, witches oftentimes speak in rhyme, especially when talking to each other. This is particularly the case of the scenes in which the witches meet in a coven, such as:

- When the witches of *Lancashire* meet to recount past mischiefs and plan new ones (II. i) and when they feast together at the banquet (IV. i);
- Hecate’s first appearance in *The Witch* (I. ii) and the episode of the witches preparing for their nocturnal flight (III. iii).

Words had an enchanting power per se: an example of this is Mrs Generous’s use of the keyword “enchant” when she recalls the speech her husband gave her in order to make her repent from being a witch:

Some passionate words mix'd with forc'd tears  
 Did so enchant his eyes and ears,  
 I made my peace, with promise never  
 To do the like.

---

<sup>253</sup> DOUGLAS M., “Introduzione. Trent’anni dopo Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *La stregoneria. Confessioni e accuse, nell’analisi di storici e antropologi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 18-19.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

(IV. iv. 25-28)

The magical power of the word is most evident in the act of spellcasting, which etymology recalls the act of speaking: it is not accidental, then, that the plays' witches talk in rhymes when they invoke their magic.

One example of this is the formula with which Mrs Generous commands Robert, transformed into a horse:

Horse, horse, see thou be,  
And where I point thee carry me.

(III. ii. 103-104)

Likewise, Hecate and her sisters are frequently involved in long chunks of speech during which they recite, in rhyme, some kind of magical formula. One example of this is Hecate's opening, an invocation of the diabolical spirits who serve her:

Titty and Tiffin,  
Suckin and Pidgen,  
Liard and Robin,  
White spirits, black spirits;  
Grey spirits, red spirits;  
Devil-toad, devil-ram;  
Devil-cat, and devil-dam.

(I. ii. 1-8)

Most of the times, these formulas are in song, an element which further enhances the grotesque mixture of nonsense, comic and horror which characterizes Middleton's witches. One example of this is the long and elaborate song *Come away, come away* which the witches chant during their nocturnal airborne revelries (III. iii. 38-76); another is the incantation the coven intones when Hecate concocts the poison for the Duke (V. ii. 60-76).

One more way for language to underline the witch's deviancy and obscurity is the use of Latin. Hecate frequently lists long series of ingredients and plants with their Latin names, such as *eleoselnum*, *aconitum*, and *frondes populeus* (I. ii. 40-41); *marmaritin*, *mandragora*, *panax*, and *selago* (III. iii. 26-28); and *acopus* (V. ii. 57).

In act One she gives a charm to Almachildes, which allows him to seduce the maid Amoretta: the invocation written on it is also in Latin (II. ii. 10-14); likewise, when the Duchess doubts Hecate's powers, the witch utters a pompous exaltation of her own magic, also in Latin (V. ii. 18-24). Middleton adapted these passages from Vergil's eight eclogue<sup>255</sup> and from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>256</sup>, with minimal changes.

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer's language classifies her as a dangerous deviant more because of the scolding attitude than because of its opacity. However, Sawyer too speaks a little Latin: the Dog teaches her the formula *sanctibicetur nomen tuum*, which she recurrently uses to command him (II. i. 175-178) and which confounds the unlearned Cuddy Banks, prompting him to ask her if she "and [her] goblin [did] spout Latin together" (II. i. 246-247).

As a testament to her illiteracy, Mother Sawyer mispronounces different parts of the Latin formula whenever she utters it. The only exception to this is, curiously, a different phrase which the Dog did not teach her, and which appears only once in the play: *contaminetur nomen tuum* (II. i. 181).

---

<sup>255</sup> CORBIN P., SEDGE D., *Three Jacobean witchcraft plays. Sophonisba. The Witch. The Witch of Edmonton*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986, *ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

### 3.1.2. Day-witch and night-witch.

The image of the witch as a dangerous deviant corresponds to what anthropology defines as “day-witch”: an actual person whose features are deemed undesirable and who is a prime suspect whenever it is believed that a *maleficium* is enacted <sup>257</sup>.

Opposite to her is the “night-witch”, a supernatural being which is attributed every characteristic considered evil and opposed to society; instead of being dangerous neighbours, night witches are supposed to participate in a form of anti-society separated from and opposite to that of humans <sup>258</sup>.

The day-witch is closer to the English depiction of the witch, whereas the night-witch is more similar to the continental imagery. However, the distinction is far from definite. First, England was not impenetrable to continental beliefs, which might arrive through Scotland and within demonological treatises available to the learned élites (King James’s *Daemonologie* being an example of both possibilities). In addition, while most societies acknowledge only one of the two aspects of the witch, a uniquely European characteristic was the union of the two models, so that the term “witch” could refer indifferently to either a human practitioner of magic, or to a supernatural creature more akin to a hag or a fairy-like being <sup>259</sup>.

In theatre, some plays, such as *The Witch of Edmonton*, are sympathetic to the witch in her path to damnation: these tend to be based on real-life events, producing an depiction of the witch closer to the day-witch’s model. Conversely, plays as *The Witch* are interested in witchcraft mostly for its shock value; these tend to prefer classical sources and feature witch characters closer to the night-witch’s imagery.

---

<sup>257</sup> MAIR L., *Witchcraft*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson., 1969, pp. 39-43.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-43.

<sup>259</sup> HARRIS A. J., *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century Drama*, Manchester, Manchester, pp. 1-3.

*The Witches of Lancashire* instead exemplifies the fusion of the two aspects: it is based on real events, but it is also chiefly interested in witchcraft as a plot device and for its entertainment value. Not accidentally, in fact, it sways between the two representations of the witch, who are humans but sometimes exist in a separate reality, that of the banquet.

### 3.1.3. Shapeshifting.

In England, the witch was believed to transgress social norms; since the foundations of these norms are the same in every society, witches are attributed common traits among each culture <sup>260</sup>. One of these traits is the ability to shapeshift into animal forms. This belief was probably corroborated in early modern England by the property of some hallucinogens to engender the sensation of fur growing on the user's skin, producing the illusion of shapeshifting <sup>261</sup>.

This ability was attributed to witches among, for instance, the Navahos, the Greeks and the Romans <sup>262</sup>; it is also present in *The Witches of Lancashire*. In this play, the witches transmute themselves into monstrous cats to terrorize the odious Miller (II. ii. 194-202) and, least successfully, his successor the Soldier (V. ii. 24-30). They can assume other shapes as well. When Arthur, Bantam, and Shakestone go hunting, the witches Meg and Gillian transform respectively into a hare and a greyhound: in this way, the three young gentlemen end up following a prey they cannot catch, while their dogs are thwarted (II. i. 48-69).

At one point, Whetstone swears that he:

Knew a hare, close hunted, climb a tree.

[...]

Another leap into a river, nothing appearing above  
water save only the tip of her nose to take breath.

---

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-97.

<sup>261</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 93-150.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37.

[...]  
another who to escape the  
dogs hath taken a house and leapt in at a window.

(II. iv. 27-34)

Whetstone says that it is common for witches to turn into hares: “witches take their shapes [...] oft” (II. ii. 58). It is then plausible to think that the weird-acting hares of which Whetstone speaks are something more than a silly delusion of his.

The Boy is likewise involved in a metamorphosis episode. He finds the witch Gillian in dog-shape; since the “dog” does not obey him, the Boy beats it, whereupon Gillian returns to a human shape and forces him to follow her and join the nightly banquet (II. v. 16-24).

Both of these episodes are taken from the deposition of the real-life Edmund Robinson. The authors expanded the hunting episode from Edmund’s allusion that a “hare rose very near before him”; the scene with the greyhounds is instead taken almost word-by-word from his recounting.

Edmund said that, while in the woods, he found two dogs. “He cried Loo, Loo, Loo, but the Dogs would not run”; angry with them, Edmund tied them to a bush and beat them with a stick “and in stede of the blacke greyhound one Dickonson’s Wife stoode upp [...] and in steade of the browne greyhound, a litle boy”<sup>263</sup>.

The “litle boy” in Edmund’s fantasy was Gillian Dickinson’s familiar spirit. In fact, demonic spirits were believed to be even more capable than their human “masters” to assume different shapes to suit various needs. In *Lancashire*, the Demon-child transmutes into a horse at Gillian’s command, in order to carry her

---

<sup>263</sup> BARATTA L., “‘Great sums were gotten at the Fleet to show them, and publick Plays were acted thereupon’: the Famous Case of the Lancashire Witches”, in DENTE C., TRONCH J. (edited by), *Offstage and Onstage. Liminal Forms of Theatre and Their Enactments in Early Modern English Drama to the Licensing Act (1737)*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2015, p. 94.

and the Boy to the banquet (II. v. 48-60) which Gillian will later leave riding nothing less than a tiger (IV. i. 139); Mrs Generous enacts a similar transformation of Robert into a horse to reach the same banquet (III. ii. 96-104).

The various forms of the familiars are further examples of this shapeshifting ability. According to *The Witch of Edmonton*, these creatures could look like:

DOG            [...] Dog, or cat, hare, ferret, frog, toad.

CUDDY BANKS    Louse or flea?

DOG            Any poor vermin.

(V. i. 117-119)

In addition, diabolical spirits were also deemed able to assume human shape, as in the *Lancashire* episode in which they assume the appearance of various house-servants in order to “avenge” Whetstone (IV. v. 24-94).

This power is also displayed by *The Witch’s incubi*, which transform into specific humans to satisfy Hecate’s voracious sexual appetite (I. ii. 196-198). Spirits likewise display this ability in *The Witch Of Edmonton*: one of them assumes the aspect of Katherine Carter and leads Cuddy Banks to an unexpected dive (III. i. 75-96).

Towards the end of the play, Cuddy asks his friend the Dog for an explanation of this process and is given a rather detailed and macabre one:

The old cadaver of some self-strangled wretch

We sometimes borrow, and appear human;

The carcass of some disease-slain strumpet

We varnish fresh, and wear as her first beauty.

(V. i. 139-142)

One last aspect of this power could be considered the ability of spirits to turn invisible. The Dog alludes to this feat when he promises Cuddy that he will be at the Morris dance “unseen to any but [him]”.

He makes abundant use of this power when devising Frank's ultimate downfall: Tom is present, invisible, when Frank murders Susan (III. iii. 1-3); after this, he helps Frank tie himself to a tree to temporarily cover the crime; at the same time, he possibly steals the incriminating knife (III. iii. 69-72). He is on stage, unnoticed, when Katherine finds the knife in Frank's pocket: it is implied that it was the Dog to put it there, in order for it to be found and reveal Frank's crime (IV. ii. 64-69).

### **3.2. THE CUMULATIVE CONCEPT OF WITCHCRAFT.**

The more satanic vision of witchcraft, corresponding to the aspect of the night-witch, rested on four pillars <sup>264</sup>:

- The existence of a Devil, head of a host of demons and creator of illusions, whom the witches worshipped;
- The possibility of making pacts with him in order to obtain magical powers;
- The ability of performing nocturnal flights to reach remote destinations;
- The existence of the sabbath, a blasphemous feast which reversed the norms of Christian society.

Initially, these core beliefs existed in different forms from the ones which were associated with witchcraft beliefs:

- The Devil was believed to be an anti-Christ, a preacher of hate instead of love, not an anti-God, an evil deity to be worshipped <sup>265</sup>;
- The compacts regarded learned male sorcerers using black magic to bind devils to their will, not subservient female witches surrendering their soul to a master in exchange for power <sup>266</sup>;

---

<sup>264</sup> LEVACK B. P., *ibid.*, pp. 37-59.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-43.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-47.

- The nocturnal flight was associated with metamorphosis or with female pagan deities such as Diana and Holda, not with the Devil <sup>267</sup>;
- The anti-social revelries of the sabbath were associated with heretics, not with witches <sup>268</sup>.

However, during the XII and the XV centuries, a cumulative process took place among the learned European élites. This process functioned as such <sup>269</sup>:

- An accuser, judge, or inquisitor held a belief, and used torture and legal procedures to confirm it;
- They influenced treatises, handbooks, and pamphlets which disseminated the belief among the learned élites;
- The élites in turn spread the belief to the illiterate masses and to new accusers, judges, and inquisitors.

By undergoing this process, the four core beliefs shifted from their original forms to the witchcraft-related ones and became the basis of the “cumulative concept” <sup>270</sup> of witchcraft.

### 3.2.1. The Devil.

The first of these beliefs was in the Devil’s existence. The Old Testament did not require such a figure: YHWH was the Jewish people’s tribal God and His enemies were the other tribes’ gods; if a misfortune happened, it was interpreted as God’s punishment, not as the agency of an evil force <sup>271</sup>. The narrative of Satan as God’s adversary (a rebel angel cast out of heaven) originated between II century BCE and I century CE in apocrypha such as *The book of Enoch* and in the

---

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-59.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-54.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-72.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>271</sup> COHN N., “The Myth of Satan and his Human Servants”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 3-16.

Dead Sea Scrolls; it was influenced by the Iranian Zoroastrian religion, which revolved around the struggle between the good deity Ormazd and the evil deity Ahriman. From these writings, it was later integrated within the newborn Judaic demonology, which in turn became a part of Christianity <sup>272</sup>.

The Devil's figure continued to become more and more concrete because of the belief that Satan will reign on Earth as a physical Antichrist before Christ's second coming, and because of the Fathers of the Church's tendency to reinterpret the pagan gods as anthropomorphic demons <sup>273</sup>.

This idea spread during the Middle and early modern ages: Satan was perceived as a concrete entity, immanent in the world and set on influencing people's lives to acquire human souls <sup>274</sup>. Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Gospels confirmed this belief, alluding to the idea of people who lost their soul for devotion to the Devil <sup>275</sup>.

The accusation of devil-worshipping was used to discredit political and religious opponents, and the workings of Satan and his demons were used to explain catastrophes and the existence of evil. The Devil was a recurring figure in magic belief, either as an entity invoked during *maleficia*, incantations, and blasphemous prayers, or as a physical being which enacted the sorcerer's will <sup>276</sup>.

He and his minions were also recurring characters in theatrical plays: in *The Witches of Lancashire*, they are corporeal enough that Robert fears to be "devil-torn" would he dare reveal to others that Moll is a witch (III. ii. 18-20). Devils and demons appear on stage as the spirits and familiars which help the witches, give them comfort or even sexual pleasure, bond relationships with them, betray them, and corrupt other characters.

---

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>274</sup> THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 472-477.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>276</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 151-213.

The most glaring example of such a concretely active diabolical figure is the Dog in *The Witch of Edmonton*: compared to the other spirits, which act more as “special effects” than anything else, Tom is a full-fledged character with real personality and motives.

Another corporeal devil appears in *Lancashire*: it is the Demon-child who accompanies the witch Gillian during her first encounter with the Boy (II. v. 16-19). Towards the end of the play the Boy becomes, as his real-life counterpart Edmund Robinson, a key informer who reveals all the witches’ misdeeds and initiates the conclusive witch-hunt. Among the magical misadventures he recounts figures a “combat with the Devil”, which saw the Boy grappling with an opponent “about [his] own bigness”: in all probability, Gillian’s Demon-child (V. i. 63-65). The Boy recalls that the Demon-child asked his name and “where [he] dwelt [...] but in a quarrelsome way” (V. i. 66-71), after which:

He told me he would know or beat it out of me,  
And I told him he should not, and bid him do his  
Worst, and to't we went.  
[...]  
We fought a quarter of an hour, till his sharp nails  
Made my ears bleed.  
[...]  
I wondered to find him so strong in my hands,  
Seeming but of mine own age and bigness, till I,  
Looking down, perceived he had clubbed cloven  
Feet, like ox feet, but his face was as young as mine.

(V. i. 74-85)

The nature of this devil is so anthropomorphic that he (comically) speaks and acts as a human child. This makes his quarrel with the Boy resemble a children’s fight than to the episode recounted by Edmund, which the play otherwise follows rather faithfully. In his testimony, Edmund narrates that he met a man with cloven

feet, fought with him and “had his eares made very bloody by fighting”<sup>277</sup>. “Beeinge greatly affrighted” Edmund ran away “and in the way hee sawe a light like a lanthorne” carried by a witch, which scared him even more<sup>278</sup>. This conclusion is replicated in the play, where it is embellished by the details of the witch being “in white upon a bridge” and of the Demon-child, once again a very concrete presence, hitting the Boy strong enough to knock him out and leave him “for dead” (V. i. 90-93).

The Devil and his hosts were supposed to influence the corporeal world in ways more subtle than physical manifestation. One of these was the faculty of entering human bodies, not only corpses as explained in *The Witch of Edmonton*, but also those of the living, possessing them.

In the modern world, cases of alleged diabolical possession are usually explained as strong occurrences of hallucinations, schizophrenia, or dissociation, usually involving young people, or as the misunderstanding of a person’s own inner monologue as an outside voice speaking in one’s head<sup>279</sup>.

These “demonic voices” acted as a way to attract attention and to express forbidden thoughts and feelings. This hypothesis seems justified by some observations:

- A high number of possessions in early modern age occurred within strongly religious communities such as Puritans, where they constituted a more effective way to attract attention. Within these communities, possession was also a more expected event; this expectation might activate and direct the mechanisms of self-suggestion which originated some cases, making them more frequent where the belief in them was stronger<sup>280</sup>;

---

<sup>277</sup> BARATTA L., *ibid.*, in DENTE C., TRONCH J. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>279</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 67-92.

<sup>280</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, p. 481.

- Many times, so-called possession cases began with an act of sexual misconduct: the belief of being possessed provided an avenue to express the forbidden thoughts and feelings originated by this act. This also explains why most people who believed to be hit by this phenomenon were women: since women had a stricter sexual moral than men, it was easier for them to break it and feel guilty about it <sup>281</sup>.

Besides acting as a valve to explain and express forbidden urges, the belief in possession also functioned as a mechanism to contain these impulses: early modern society urged people to distrust and suppress thoughts which they perceived as the Devil's prompts <sup>282</sup>. Moreover, the perception that people's actions somehow contributed to the cosmic struggle between God and the Devil helped people to recognize the importance of their behaviour on a larger scale than that of their local community <sup>283</sup>: circulating through Europe, the idea of the Devil gave unity to beliefs and cultures alongside the continent <sup>284</sup>.

In early modern England diabolical possession was perceived as a real and frequent occurrence, which became particularly worrying after the institution of Church of England deprived people of the Catholic rite of exorcism. In the Protestant doctrine this lack was compensated with prayer and fasting; in the practical reality, with charms, spells, and the help of cunning folks <sup>285</sup>.

Witches were believed to be able of causing possession. This is implied in *The Witches of Lancashire* by Doughty who, speaking of the unruly son of Seely, so advises the friend:

Had I a son to  
serve me so, I would conjure a devil out of him.

---

<sup>281</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 67-92.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-92.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-92.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 219-270.

<sup>285</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 480-487.

The belief that the Devil was an anti-God implied that some people worshipped him as their deity, in a perversion of the Christian ritual. During the Middle Ages (between XII and XIV century) groups which the Church deemed to be dangerous, such as the Templar knights and many heretical sects, were accused of such a crime<sup>286</sup>. From XIV century the perception of these groups as dangerous waned, but the Church “discovered” a new threat in witches, who became the new object of the accusation of Devil worshipping. As heretics before them, witches were accused of holding inverted masses during which they prayed to demons, killed infants, ate human flesh, participated in orgies, and consumed hosts made of garbage and dirt<sup>287</sup>.

These acts are examples of a process called inversion: “the use of socially unacceptable materials, or behaviors, or the misuse of socially valued items and rituals”<sup>288</sup> in order to strengthen the user’s will and scare their enemies through anti-social behaviours<sup>289</sup>. It is plausible that some people made actual use of similar process, since they might prove effective, but the reality of Devil worshipping was greatly exaggerated by the contemporaries and by the inquisitors’ prejudices and beliefs<sup>290</sup>.

In spite of this, fantasies revolving around satanic cults took a firm hold of the contemporary imagination: for some demonologists and theologians such as George Gifford the real witches’ crime was not the use of *maleficium*, but instead Devil worshipping<sup>291</sup>.

---

<sup>286</sup> COHN N., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>287</sup> MUIR E., *Ritual in Early Modern Europe. Second edition*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 62-88.

<sup>288</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-213.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-213.

<sup>291</sup> MAIR L., *ibid.*, pp. 184-187.

One example of such a blasphemous faith is presented in *The Witch of Edmonton*, where Cuddy Banks aptly calls Mother Sawyer's prayer *sanctibicetur nomen tuum* "the devil's paternoster" (II. i. 186).

This Devil's vision as evil deity is also mentioned: at the end of the play, the Dog, explaining his change of colour from black to white, asks Mother Sawyer: "Didst thou not pray to me?" (V. i. 43). He assumed the holiest colour because Mother Sawyer treated him as the holiest thing.

One more example of misplaced devotion is the practice of the anal kiss. Inquisitorial accounts recurrently insisted on the perverted image of a witch kissing the anus of a devil or of a diabolical animal such as a goat. The same image, albeit in a comical fashion, is alluded to in *Edmonton*: Old Banks is forced to admit in front of the Justice that "the whole town of Edmonton has been ready to bepiss themselves with laughing [him] to scorn" because he is affected by a weird compulsion:

Ten times in an hour, [I] run to the cow, and  
Taking up her tail, kiss – saving your worship's reverence – my cow  
Behind.

(IV. i. 55-59)

### 3.2.2. Diabolical compacts.

Another pillar of the cumulative concept of witchcraft was the belief in the Devil's compact. This idea features prominently in the plays. In *The Witches of Lancashire*, the diabolical compact is an object of discussion when Generous discovers that his wife is a witch:

GENEROUS    Yet resolve me,  
Hast thou made any contract with that fiend,  
The enemy of mankind?  
MRS GENEROUS                    Oh, I have.  
GENEROUS    What, and how far?

MRS GENEROUS

I have promis'd him my soul.

(IV. ii. 162-165)

In the play, entering the pact is a foolish act, which only foolish people could undertake. When Shakestone expresses his surprise at the (incorrect) idea that Whetstone possesses magical powers, he says:

SHAKESTONE           Who would have thought such a fool as he could  
Have been a witch?

BANTAM                Why, do you think there's any  
Wise folks of the quality? Can any but fools  
Be drawn into a covenant with the  
Greatest enemy of mankind?

(V. v. 11-15)

Sometimes, the pact is imagined as an actual contract, complete with terms and conditions. It is the case of the pact which Hecate has made in *The Witch*: she even knows its exact expiration date. Speaking with her son Firestone about his inheritance, she says:

Thou shalt have all when I die: and that will be  
Even just at twelve o'clock at night come three year.

(I. ii. 69-70)

This certainty about the moment of her death is given to Hecate by the terms of her pact, which precisely establishes the time when the Devil is going to claim her soul.

Rather contract-like is also the compact which, in *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer literally signs, “seal[ing] it with blood”, with the Dog.

The first meeting between the two characters is actually constructed like a bargaining between two commercial parties. The Dog makes promises he is unable to keep, such as that of “do[ing] any mischief unto man or beast”, which fails as soon as Sawyer orders him to hit Old Banks (II. i. 130). He also tries to

compel Mother Sawyer to hastily accept the pact, recurring to threats such as that of “tear[ing her] body in a thousand pieces”, despite his initial claim that the “deed of gift of soul and body” should be “uncompelled” (II. i. 133-137).

Mother Sawyer, on her part, initially questions the Dog’s nature (“Bless me! The devil?”. II. i. 123) and his sincerity (“May I believe thee?”. II. i. 129). After this, she tries to better understand the conditions of the pact she is going to subscribe: first, she verifies the cost she has to pay (“My soul and body?”. II. i. 135); then, she asks confirmation of the benefits she would receive:

Shall I,  
After such covenants sealed, see full revenge  
On all that wrong me?  
(II. i. 138-140)

Finally, she even displays unexpected cunning, trying to reduce the price through the clever use of theological equivocation:

MOTHER SAWYER Then I am thine; at least so much of me  
As I can call mine own—  
DOG Equivocations?  
Art mine or no? speak, or I'll tear—  
(II. i. 144-146)

The last conversation between Cuddy Banks and the Dog also regards the compact which, according to Cuddy Banks, is the sole source of the witch’s powers. He says to the Dog that Mother Sawyer:

Knows no more how to kill a cow,  
Or a horse, or a sow, without thee, than she does to kill a goose.  
(V. i. 100-101)

### 3.2.3. Nocturnal flight.

The third core belief of the cumulative concept of witchcraft was that the witches were able to fly at night, crossing extraordinary distances. As the belief in of shapeshifting, nocturnal flight is a recurrent theme among the societies believing in the existence of a night-witch figure.

Sometimes this power is declined as the ability of transforming into nocturnal birds: one example of this are the Roman *strigae*, hags capable of assuming the shape of owls which still take their name today. This particular belief is probably the source of the association which Middleton establishes between witches and nocturnal birds of prey: in *The Witch*, Hecate says of Stadlin that “the very screech-owl lights upon [her] shoulder and woos [her] like a pigeon” (III. iii. 9-11). Likewise, she promises the Duchess that the poison for the Duke “shall be conveyed in at howlet-time [...] raven or screech-owl never fly by the door” (V. ii. 38-40).

Other times the flight was imagined as a ride on flying mounts or items, or as the ability to soar through the air. During the XIV century many people, especially women, believed they flew through the night in order to join a *ludus*: a festivity presided by a female deity (Diana, Herodias, Holda, or the *Bona Dea*) or by a more mundane noblewoman (known as *Domina ludi* or *Domina Abundia*).

The night flight imagery was disseminated along Europe, and seriously discussed by theologians and demonologists. A lively debate existed around the possibility of the nocturnal flight: one party claimed that witches actually travelled long distances either in body or spirit to join their nightly revelries <sup>292</sup>; others argued that the flight was nothing more than an illusion created by the Devil in order to beguile his followers and convince them they possessed actual powers

---

<sup>292</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 93-150.

<sup>293</sup>. The latter position was confirmed by the authoritative X century Canon *Episcopi*, while the former was more popular among more recent sources <sup>294</sup>.

A possible psychophysiological explanation for this belief is to be found in the experiences of dreaming and trancing. Both may produce the sensation of flying; in addition, both are influenced by narratives to which one is exposed during the waking period: if one hears stories about night flights during the day, this could influence their fantasies when they sleep or trance <sup>295</sup>.

Witches were believed to achieve nocturnal flight in one of two ways: by riding flying mounts or domestic implements (such as cauldrons or the now iconic broom) or by anointing themselves with transvection salves.

The first of these means features abundantly in *The Witches of Lancashire*, where the witches fly on an imaginative plethora of demon-horses, metamorphosed victims, and a tiger. This kind of flight is firstly hinted to when Robert insists that Mrs Generous “ride[s Generous’s horse] abroad to take the air” (II. ii. 83-84).

Robert is also the protagonist of two nocturnal flight episodes which are, as usual for the play, declined in a comedic fashion. The first time he flies together with his sweetheart Moll, who summons a demonic black horse and takes Robert to an overnight cavalcade to London (II. vi. 54-59). Their mount is so fast that the two are able to ride “above three hundred miles in eight hours”, fetch Generous’s favourite wine, and find the time to do a winking “something else too” (III. ii. 13-28).

His second night cavalcade sees Robert in the undignified role of Mrs Generous’s horse. Having discovered that his wife leaves their house at night, Generous forbids Robert from lending her his favourite gelding. Robert obeys, but this angers Mrs Generous, who “bridles him” with an enchanted implement

---

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-92.

<sup>294</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 54-59.

<sup>295</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 93-150.

and turns him into a horse (III. ii. 92-104). She then proceeds to ride him to the night banquet and to mock him for the lesson she thinks she has taught him (IV. i. 1-31). However, Robert learns the witch's trick and ultimately reverses the roles, saddling Mrs Generous and riding her back to Generous's stable, where he reveals her for the witch she is (IV. i. 142-147). The speed of a horse transmuted with the magic bridle is so incredible that it "may be rid as far as the Indies within [a] few hours" (IV. ii. 131-132).

Another example of flight is found in the Boy's encounter with Gillian: the witch has her Demon-child take the shape of a horse, which she and the Boy ride and "the earth [...] thread not, but the wind. For [they] must progress through the air [...] up and away" (II. v. 53-60).

According to witchcraft beliefs, the second available avenue to achieve the nocturnal flight was the use of witch-salves which, if used to anoint one's body, conferred the ability to soar through the air.

In *The Witch*, Hecate is shown intent in the preparation of such an ointment, made with the dead body of an "unbaptisèd brat". She orders Stadlin to:

Boil it well; preserve the fat.  
You know 'tis precious to transfer  
Our 'nointed flesh into the air,  
In moonlit nights.

(I. ii. 19-22)

This gruesome image was of continental inspiration and it arrived to Middleton through Scot's *Discoverie* <sup>296</sup>.

The necessity of using salves to fly is confirmed later, when Hecate asks Stadlin if she had prepared the "ointments" necessary for the coven's revelries (III. iii. 12). Hecate "'noint[s]" herself in order to reach her sisters who are already singing and dancing in the nocturnal sky (III. iii. 48). In *The Witch* too the speed

---

<sup>296</sup> CORBIN P., SEDGE D., (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 222.

of the flight is uncanny: in a single night, the witches are able to cross “more [than] five thousand miles” (III. iii. 2-4).

In real-life trials, witch-salves were rarely found – or even searched for – during investigations, which relied mostly on confessions, gossip, ordeals, and the search for witch marks. However, some recipes were found and survived until today. The composition of witch-salves could explain their role in validating the belief in the nocturnal flight: many, in fact, contained plants such as nightshade, mandrake, and thorn apple, which have hallucinogenic properties.

As dreams and trances, drug-induced hallucinations are influenced by cultural expectations: it was thus probable for an early modern person to hallucinate a nocturnal flight, since it was part of the framework of expectations of the time <sup>297</sup>.

Moreover, even if hallucinogens were not involved, the preparation of slaves could act as a priming tool. “Priming” is the process of seeding one’s dreams in advance through a preparatory procedure performed during the waking period; “witches” convinced themselves of possessing the ability to fly while concocting and applying their ointments, and by doing so primed their dreams, “realizing” their fantasy while they slept <sup>298</sup>.

#### **3.2.4. The sabbath.**

The fourth core belief of the cumulative concept of witchcraft is the existence of the sabbath, a blasphemous feast where the witches gathered to worship the Devil and indulge in those anti-social behaviours which members of a dominant religion usually attributes to minor rival religions, such as cannibalism, orgiastic sex, and infanticide <sup>299</sup>.

---

<sup>297</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 93-150.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-168.

<sup>299</sup> MAIR L., *Witchcraft*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, pp. 231-238.

The beliefs from which sabbath originated can be traced back to the *ludus* imagery, and to the inverted masses which heretics were accused of holding. Through the cumulative process, these images shifted from an association with heretics and heathens to one with witches; at the same time, the various deities these people were accused to worship were reinterpreted as devils <sup>300</sup>.

The belief in the existence of nocturnal feasts might also have been influenced by the use of hallucinogens: people who use them tend to populate their hallucinations with other intelligences, sometimes convincing themselves of having interacted with other people or of having participated to feasts and gatherings. Moreover, the effects of such substances can last for days or even become permanent, possibly explaining some cases of people who were convinced of talking with the Devil <sup>301</sup>.

In the early modern age people actually met in secrecy to take drugs together, well conscious that they were partaking in a forbidden activity <sup>302</sup>. Those who were convinced to be witches, or who aspired to become such, likewise surreptitiously gathered to teach and learn magic, and to enact rituals or celebrate feasts <sup>303</sup>. However, nothing similar to the sabbath described by inquisitors and demonologists ever existed: the authorities never busted one of these celebrations, and accounts of people who supposedly took part at the same sabbath oftentimes contradicted each other <sup>304</sup>.

In spite of this, the sabbath was a striking image which excited the fantasies of the contemporaries. For this reason, it appears not only in pamphlets and handbooks, but also in the plays.

In *The Witches of Lancashire*, the representation of the sabbath adheres to the carnivalesque tone of the play, so that the coven's gatherings appear more as

---

<sup>300</sup> CENTINI M., *La stregoneria*, Milano, Xenia, 1995, pp. 57-60.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-150.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-150.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-150.

<sup>304</sup> LEVACK B. P., *ibid.*, p. 22.

festive revelries than as the satanic orgies of the continental tradition. Mrs Generous herself confirms this:

This night we'll celebrate to sport:  
'Tis all for mirth, we mean no hurt.

(IV. iv. 61-62)

The grim rituals are substituted with jolly dancing, and the aim of causing misfortunes is replaced by the ultimately innocuous will to punish an odious “churl” by withering his crops (II. i. 16-17) and to “spoil the hunters’ sport” by giving them a false hare and greyhound to follow (II. i. 45-46).

Nonetheless, these meetings are frequent: Robert is sure that Mrs Generous leaves her house “Oftener [...] than she goes to church, and [...] Wednesdays and Fridays” (II. ii. 89-90); Mrs Generous and Moll later confirm this observation, adding that they also meet at holy festivities, such as at Good Friday and during All Saints’ night (IV. iv. 9-12).

Even during the “sabbath” scene of the play, the banquet in the fourth Act, the “satanical sisterhood” (IV. i. 34) seems more interested in enjoying the food the spirit has stolen from the Seelys (IV. 51-96) and in singing silly nonsensical songs while dancing with their familiars (IV. i. 97-124), then in worshipping the Devil or having orgiastic sex.

The sabbath scene in *The Witch* is appropriately more sinister. Here as well, the witches “feast and dance” (I. ii. 28) with their spirits; however, both the satanic and the sexual component are heavily emphasized.

The former is especially evident in the means that the witches use to reach the air (ointments made with squashed infants, I. ii. 19-22) and in the effects of such a feast, including a pestilence (III. iii. 16-18) and the killing of a red-haired girl (V. ii. 55-56).

The sexual aspect is highlighted by the fact that Hecate and her sisters plan to “kiss and coll” with *incubi* assuming the shape of any “young man [they] wish

to pleasure [themselves with]” (I. ii. 29-30). The song *Come away. Come away*, sung during the sabbath, confirms that the witches “kiss”, “coll”, and “toy” with “troops of spirits” (III. iii. 50-67).

The location is also relevant: instead of taking place in a mundane barn, the sabbath happens “hundred leagues in the air” (I. ii. 28) so high that no “canon’s throat [their] height can reach” (III. iii. 75) as if underlining the dreadfully unnatural and almost omnipotent nature of this particular coven.

### 3.3. WITCHES’ ANTI-SOCIETY.

The heights of the night sky and the isolated barn share the trait of being far removed from the mundane realities of Ravenna and Lancashire: the night-witches of *The Witch* and, for some aspects, those of *The Witches of Lancashire* dwell in a reality which is parallel to that of the humans.

In this sense, in *Lancashire*, the Boy/Edmund Robinson acts as if he were the protagonist of a folktale, navigating across the two worlds<sup>305</sup>: he enters the magical reality of the banquet when Gillian kidnaps him (II. v. 16-24); he later leaves it by escaping the barn (IV. i. 125-127); and, after this coming-of-age initiation, he returns to the human reality as a hero able to identify the witches and put an end to their misdeeds (V. i. 1-13).

This impression of parallel realities is reinforced by the fact that the covens display a hierarchy which mirrors that of the real world. Real-life Margaret Johnson describes the witch’s organization as a two layered structure: witches were divided into “regular” witches with the usual witch marks, and more powerful “grand witches”, who used a special pointy bone to allow their spirits – the “grand divills” – to suck blood<sup>306</sup>.

In *The Witch*, Hecate has five sisters, of whom Hoppo and Stadlin are the most prominent; they are less powerful than Hecate and hierarchically under her

---

<sup>305</sup> TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

(V. ii. 37). This difference is visible, for instance, in the nature of their familiars: Hecate's spirit is the "great cat" Malkin, whereas Stadlin's is a simple bat, small enough to hang from her lips while it sucks blood (III. iii. 7-8). Moreover, while Hoppo can cause storms, and Stadlin destroys crops, Hecate is able to overturn the entire nature, making the rivers retire, driving sea, clouds, and wind, commanding earth, rocks, and woods, and pulling the moon out of the skies (V. ii. 18-24).

The existence of this parallel hierarchy implies some willingness to make the witches' world more familiar and comprehensible for both the witness/playwright and their audience. However, it also underlines how the supernatural dimension follows its own separate rules, thus emphasizing its otherness and its dangerousness<sup>307</sup>.

### 3.3.1. Misrule and disorder.

There was, then, a marked contraposition between what was perceived as the mundane reality, ordered in the rightful hierarchy of divine inspiration, and the parallel dimension inhabited by Satan-worshipping witches. The dominant belief was that God established a rightful order, of which the Kings and Queens were the guarantors; on their part, the Devil and the witches worked to overthrow this good rule, bringing disorder and tyranny<sup>308</sup>: witches thus brought "hell" on Earth or at least, in Generous's words, in the house they inhabited (V. iv. 72-74).

The most glaring example of this inversion of good rule appears in *The Witches of Lancashire*, a play which reflects on the difficulties of ruling a remote, illiterate, and traditionally Catholic province. In particular, this is the theme of the subplot revolving around Seely and his family, who are forced by a curse to act in the opposite of what was considered "good rule" by contemporary standards.

---

<sup>307</sup> TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.



The discovery and arrest of the witches restores harmony within the family: Gregory instantly repents for his previous behaviour and Seely kindly excuses Gregory's errors as the result of "some violent infection, quite contrary to nature" (V. v. 70-84).

Likewise, Parnell partakes in an inversion of good rule when she beats her husband Lawrence because of his witchcraft-caused impotence (IV. iii. 90-98). Once again, only the elimination of the source of the bewitchment – the cursed cod point – is able to bring conjugal peace to the couple (V. v. 19-56).

Another overt attack against the institution of marriage features in *The Witch of Edmonton*: the uxoricide committed by Frank against his second wife Susan. The influence of Mother Sawyer in this is indirect but undeniable, since the inspiration for the murder comes from Sawyer's diabolical servant/master, the Dog.

Tom is on stage during the whole scene, invisible to the other characters; he alludes to the crime before it is committed, presenting himself as its instigator, and sets the events in motion by rubbing against Frank and instilling in him a homicidal impulse which was not present before: Frank "had no purpose, [he is] unarmed" (III. iii. 1-22). Moreover, just before stabbing Susan, Frank says that she has "dogged [her] own death" (III. iii. 39): the word *dogged* sounds unnatural in this context and for this reason achieves a key connotation. The Dog also "helps" in the subsequent phases of the crime and its discovery, by tying Frank to a tree and providing him with an alibi (III. iii. 69-72) and later by putting the bloodied knife where Katherine can find it (IV. ii. 64-69).

Lawrence's beating and Susan's murder reinforce the association, already strong in the early modern mind, between women and disorder<sup>309</sup>. That of being "disorderly" was an accusation frequently made against women, who were charged with wanting to upturn the social order.

---

<sup>309</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 278-302.

The idea of a woman taking a man's place, in Parnell's case by physically overpowering him, was the object of many plays, including those revolving around women disguised as men <sup>310</sup>.

This association between femininity, witchcraft, and misrule is particularly prominent in *Edmonton*, where Mother Sawyer's trial and execution are strongly motivated by gendered reasons. Through the Dog, she is also involved in the uxoricide: a similar attack against the patriarchal institution of marriage seemed to require a feminine intervention, even if it is ultimately perpetrated by a male.

However, the correlation between women, disorder, and magic existed since the Middle Ages: it is visible, for instance, in the tractates about women believed to worship fairies and female goddesses of fertility <sup>311</sup>, and in the feminine characterization attributed to quasi-magical activities such as healing <sup>312</sup>. This tendency was exacerbated at the beginning of the early modern age by the publication of strongly misogynistic witch-hunting handbooks such as Nider's *Formicarius*, Molitor's *De Lamiis et Phytonicis Mulieribus*, and the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinrich Kramer (Institor) and Jacob Sprenger (whose name was possibly added fictitiously with the purpose of increasing the work's prestige <sup>313</sup>) <sup>314</sup>.

In *Edmonton*, witchcraft brings chaos even to the Morris dance. This dance would be disorderly by itself <sup>315</sup>, as testified by the young gentleman Warbeck's observation that "absurdity's in [his] opinion ever the best dancer in a morris". In this already unruly situation, another element of confusion is created by Cuddy Banks, who insists on having a witch among the characters (III. i. 7-11); later,

---

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303-336.

<sup>311</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 151-213.

<sup>312</sup> CENTINI M., *ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>313</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 278-302.

<sup>314</sup> CENTINI M., *ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>315</sup> MUCCI C., *Il teatro delle streghe. Il femminile come costruzione culturale al tempo di Shakespeare*, Napoli, Liguori, 2001, pp. 174-184.

indirectly, the Dog further increases the chaos, when the news of the uxoricide he instigated ruins the Morris (III. iv. 64-66).

### 3.3.2. Maintaining order.

The association with social disorder was one of the reasons for the success of the cumulative concept of witchcraft, and for the efficacy of the witch's figure as a universal scapegoat. In turn, the strength of this association was predicated on an endemic fear of sedition, which is exemplified by the figure of Jean Bodin: the advocate philosopher of absolutism, who was also a supporter of witch-hunting. The witch, in fact, represented the ultimate rebel, who renounced God, society, and nature through the diabolical compact <sup>316</sup>.

The monarch was considered God's viceregent on Earth: therefore, fighting servants of the Devil was then one of his or her duties, a failure in which was believed to issue divine retribution on the kingdom. Kings and queens were believed to be guided by God in such a way that their persecution of His enemies could not fail <sup>317</sup>; if, on the contrary, they refused His guide and issued policies which displeased Him, they were punished with adverse fortune in battle<sup>318</sup>, and with revolts and misfortunes upon their domains <sup>319</sup>.

When they felt they had lost God's favour, monarchs sometimes resorted to witch-hunting to demonstrate the strength of their faith: in this sense, the belief in witchcraft acted as a bugbear which unified the population against a common enemy and reinforced its trust in the king or queen. This feat was particularly vital

---

<sup>316</sup> LEVACK B. P., *ibid.*, pp. 78-81.

<sup>317</sup> DILLINGER J., "Politics, State-Building, and Witch-Hunting", in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 531.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 530-531.

<sup>319</sup> THOMAS K., *ibid.*, pp. 78-112.

during reassessment periods such as that following the Stuarts' installation on the English throne <sup>320</sup>.

Witch trials, in fact, could be perceived as influencing three levels <sup>321</sup>:

- A lower order, which displayed the conflict between the alleged witch and the judge who ordered her execution. The object of the quarrel was the victim's physical person, put in danger by the threat of *maleficium*;
- A middle order, which contraposed the monarch to the familiar. The object was the "witch's" juridical person and her loyalty, contested between the divine right of the monarch and the diabolical pact;
- A higher order, which concerned God and the Devil. The object of the dispute was the witch's soul, endangered by sin.

Trials and play, which publicly staged narratives of witchcraft, were felt to be exposing a threat to the early modern hierarchy. At the same time, since authority figures – judges and authors – were able to direct the ending of such a narrative, such staging was also a means to construct and control a larger discourse, turning a dreaded bugbear into a useful tool to maintaining social order: it is the case of the farcical *Witches of Lancashire* and of the ghastly but ultimately innocuous Hecate in *The Witch*.

On the contrary, the same instruments and themes could be used to expose social injustices which were justified and resolved through the lens of witchcraft beliefs but which, in reality, revolved around issues of gender, class, and scapegoating: it was the case of *The Witch of Edmonton*.

---

<sup>320</sup> WIESNER-HANKS M., *ibid.*, pp. 278-302.

<sup>321</sup> TEMPERA M., *ibid.*, pp. 25-27.

## CONCLUSION. THE WITCH-CULT.

The most successful and dangerous of all witchcraft narratives was the belief in the existence of a unified global witch-cult. According to this narrative, every witch and coven were part of a larger, cohesive religion, a Devil's anti-Church which spanned across all Europe and put the entire Christianity in peril.

A basis for this narrative did exist:

- Witchcraft beliefs stemmed everywhere from a similar substratum of daily anxieties and social tensions <sup>322</sup>; thus, they naturally shared some common traits, such as the images of nocturnal flight and sabbath; this reinforced the impression that their object – the single witches and covens – were part of a larger, unified entity <sup>323</sup>;
- Medieval heretics were believed to constitute a unified pan-European anti-Christian religion; when the beliefs about them were shifted to referring to witches, this idea of an anti-religion carried over as well <sup>324</sup>;
- The Church and its theologians believed in the existence of the diabolical compact; this promoted a popular superstition to the rank of official “reality”, and reinforced the idea that everyone who allegedly possessed mystical abilities did so in virtue of their belonging to a blasphemous anti-Religion <sup>325</sup>. This belief was the most crucial contribution of learned culture to witchcraft beliefs, cementing the idea

---

<sup>322</sup> COHN N., “The Myth of Satan and his Human Servants”, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 3-16.

<sup>323</sup> BEVER E., *ibid.*, pp. 93-150.

<sup>324</sup> LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012, pp. 48-54.

<sup>325</sup> MAIR L., *ibid.*, pp. 222-230.

that a witch-cult existed, and allowing and encouraging its persecution  
<sup>326</sup>.

These convictions were reinforced by the practice of torture. Contrary to modern belief, the purpose of torture was not to fabricate a convenient (for the torturer) truth, a use which was equated with incompetence; instead, torture was used either to “encourage” the tortured to confirm an unreliable testimony, such as one against themselves, or to confess a truth which the torturer believed to already know <sup>327</sup>. By confirming what the torturer already believed to be true and by extending these “truths” to an ever-widening web of suspects, torture had a crucial role in the construction of the imaginary witch-cult.

There is, however, no evidence that either an anti-Christian Devil’s religion <sup>328</sup> or a surviving and persecuted pagan cult of a matriarchal goddess <sup>329</sup> ever existed as something more than an illusion created and maintained by State, Church, and individual delusion and paranoia <sup>330</sup>.

---

<sup>326</sup> BEVER E., “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 60.

<sup>327</sup> PURKISS D., *The Witch in History*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 243-250.

<sup>328</sup> COHN N., *ibid.*, in DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *ibid.*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>329</sup> ROWLANDS A., “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe”, in LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *ibid.*, p. 452.

<sup>330</sup> BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 93-150.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### PRIMARY SOURCES

- CORBIN P., SEDGE D. (edited by), *Three Jacobean witchcraft plays. Sophonisba. The Witch. The Witch of Edmonton*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986.
- EGAN G. (edited by), *The Witches of Lancashire*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2002.
- GIFFORD G., *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts*, Brighton, Puckrel Publishing, 2007.
- KRAMER H, SPRENGER J., *Malleus maleficarum. Il martello delle streghe*, Sesto San Giovanni, Jouvence, 2020.
- PRICE G. R. (edited by), *Thomas Dekker*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1969.
- ROWLEY W., DEKKER T., FORD J., *La strega di Edmonton. Traduzione, introduzione e cura di Manuela Rastelli*, Napoli, Liguori, 2005.
- SCOT R., *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Dover, Dover Publications Inc., 1990.
- SHAKESPEARE W., *Macbeth. Traduzione e cura di Agostino Lombardo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2007.

### SECONDARY SOURCES

- BEHRINGER W., *Le streghe*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005.
- BEVER E., *The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- BIONDI A., *Umanisti, eretici, streghe. Saggi di storia moderna*, Modena, Archivio storico, 2008.
- BRADLEY A C., *Shakespearean Tragedy. Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth.*, London, Macmillan, 1974.

- BRAYMAN HACKEL H., *Reading Material in Early Modern England. Print, Gender, and Literacy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- BRUSTER D., WEIMANN R., *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre. Performance and liminality in early modern drama*, London, Routledge, 2004.
- BUTLER E. M., *Il mito del mago. Ascesa, declino e rinascita di un archetipo*, Genova, ECIG – Edizioni Culturali Internazionali Genova, 1997.
- CENTINI M., *La stregoneria*, Milano, Xenia, 1995.
- CHAMPION L. S., *Thomas Dekker ad the Traditions of English Drama*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 1987.
- CLARE J., PUGLIATTI P. (edited by), *Journal of Early Modern Studies. Volume Two. Shakespeare and Early Modern Popular Culture*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2013.
- CORSANI M., *Il linguaggio teatrale di Thomas Middleton*, Genova, Il Melangolo (Università), 1979.
- CORTI C., *Macbeth: la parola e l'immagine*, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 1983.
- D'AVASCIO R., *La scena crudele. Performance dell'eccesso nel teatro di John Ford*, Napoli, Liguori Editore, 2011.
- DE ANGELIS V., *Il libro nero della caccia alle streghe. La ricostruzione dei grandi processi*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 2002.
- DENTE C., TRONCH J. (edited by), *Offstage and Onstage. Liminal Forms of Theatre and Their Enactments in Early Modern English Drama to the Licensing Act (1737)*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2015.
- DI GESARO P., *I giochi delle streghe. Stregonerie confessate nei processi del cinque e seicento e convalidate dai massimi demonologi*, Bolzano, Praxis 3, 1995.
- DI NOLA A. M., *Inchiesta sul Diavolo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1978.
- DINZELBACHER P., *Santa o strega? Donne e devianza religiosa fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna*, Genova, ECIG – Edizioni Culturali Internazionali Genova, 1999.

- DOMENICHELLI M., *Il limite dell'ombra. Le figure della soglia nel teatro inglese fra Cinque e Seicento*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1994.
- DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *La stregoneria. Confessioni e accuse, nell'analisi di storici e antropologi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980.
- DOUGLAS M. (edited by), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004.
- DOUGLAS M., *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London and New York, Routledge, 1966.
- DUSINBERRE J., *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996.
- EVANS-PRITCHARD E. E., *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976.
- FARR D. M., *John Ford and the Caroline Theatre*, London, The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1979.
- FILDES V. (edited by), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England. Essays in memory of Dorothy McLaren*, London, Routledge, 2013.
- FINKELPEARL P. J., *John Marston of the Middle Temple. An Elizabethan Dramatis in His Social Setting*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1969.
- FOGLIA S., *Il libro delle streghe*, Milano, Rusconi, 1981.
- GARNER S. N., SPRENGNETHER M. (edited by), *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, Bloomington e Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996.
- GIBSON M. *Early Modern Witches. Witchcraft cases in contemporary writing*, London, Routledge, 2000.
- GIBSON M. *Reading Witchcraft. Stories of early English witches*, Abingdon-on-Thames, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1999.
- GINZBURG C., *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba*, Milano, Adelphi Edizioni, 2017.

- GLUCKMAN M., *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collected Essays with an Autobiographical Introduction*, Abingdon-on-Thames, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2004.
- GRAZIATI M. (edited by), *Trasparenze ed epifanie. Quando la luce diventa letteratura, arte, storia, scienza*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2016.
- HAPPÉ P., HÜSKEN W. (edited by), *Interludes in Early Modern Society. Studies in Gender, Power and Theatricality*, Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi, 2007.
- HARRIS A. J., *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century Drama*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1980.
- HOLLAND P., HORGEL S. (edited by), *From Script to Stage in Early Modern England*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- HOLMES D. M., *The Art of Thomas Middleton. A Critical Study*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970.
- JÜTTE R., *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- LEGGATT A. *English Drama: Shakespeare to the Restoration, 1590-1660*, London, Longman, 1988.
- LEVACK B. P. (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- LEVACK B. P., *La caccia alle streghe in Europa*, Bari, Laterza, 2012.
- LEVACK B. P., *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, Harlow, Pearson Education Limited, 2006.
- LOMBARDO A., *Lettura del Macbeth*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2010.
- MACFARLANE A. D. J., *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970.
- MAIR L., *La stregoneria*, Milano, Il Saggiatore di Alberto Mondadori Editore, 1969.

- MAIR L., *Witchcraft*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969.
- MARENCO F., *Thomas Middleton e il teatro barocco in Inghilterra*, Genova, Il Melangolo (Università), 1983.
- MARWICK M. G., *Sorcery in its Social Setting. Study of the Northern Rhodesian Cewa*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1965.
- MAUGINI A., *Studi su Thomas Dekker*, Messina, La Sicilia, 1958.
- MCLUSKY K., *Dekker and Heywood. Professional Dramatists*, London, MacMillan Press Ltd., 1994.
- MICHELET J., *La strega*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1977.
- MUCCI C., *Il teatro delle streghe. Il femminile come costruzione culturale al tempo di Shakespeare*, Napoli, Liguori, 2001.
- MUIR E., *Ritual in Early Modern Europe. Second edition*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- MURRAY G., *Macbeth, re guerriero. La vita e i tempi di un grande Re di Scozia*, Termoli, Strade Blu, 2001.
- PURKISS D., *The Witch in History*, London, Routledge, 1996.
- ROPER L., *Oedipus & the Devil. Witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002.
- SHARPE J., *Instruments of Darkness*, London, Penguin Books, 1996.
- STAGG L. C., *The Figurative Language of the Tragedies of Shakespeare's Chief 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Contemporaries. George Chapman, Thomas Heywood, Ben Johnson, John Marston, etc. An index*, New York, Garland, 1982.
- STEWART P. J., STRATHERN A., *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- TEMPERA M. (edited by), *Macbeth dal testo alla scena*, Bologna, Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice, 1982.
- TEMPERA M., *The Lancashire Witches: lo stereotipo della strega fra scrittura giuridica e scrittura letteraria*, Imola, Galeati, 1981.

- THOMAS K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.
- TREVOR-ROPER H. R., *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1967.
- VITTORINI F., *La soglia dell'invisibile. Percorsi dal Macbeth: Shakespeare, Verdi, Welles*, Roma, Carrocci, 2005.
- WIESNER-HANKS M., *Le donne nell'Europa moderna 1500-1750*, Torino, Einaudi, 2017.
- WIESNER-HANKS M., *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- WILKINSON J., *The Cripples at the Gate. Orson Welles's "Voodoo" Macbeth*, Roma, Bulzoni Editore, 2004.
- ZINATO S. (edited by), *Reharsals of the Modern. Experience and experiment in Restoration drama*, Napoli, Liguori, 2010.