

## MISOGYNY AND WITCHCRAFT IN THE JACOBAN PERIOD: THE CASE OF MOTHER SAWYER

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The object of this paper is to offer an analysis of the theories and ideas about women on which the concept of witchcraft was based in the seventeenth century, which could well be considered misogynist. For this purpose I have chosen a play, *The Witch of Edmonton*, in which these prejudices are clearly illustrated. I shall contrast the ideas held by the authors with the legal and theological notions on witchcraft current at the time, especially with the treatise written by James I, *Daemonologie*, which had an enormous importance in the subsequent ideas on witchcraft and magic.

The witchcraft and witch-hunt phenomena are frequently acknowledged nowadays as a clear case of victimisation and oppression of women.<sup>1</sup> This attitude towards the persecution of women brought about by witch-hunting is a hardly surprising reaction in our times, when almost everybody is or should be aware of the oppression and suffering of women throughout history. However, it is rather more surprising to find a play written at the time of these persecutions portraying these facts in a very similar manner. Such is the case in *The Witch of Edmonton*, written in joint authorship by Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley in the year 1621. The play is based on the accusation and conviction of Elizabeth Sawyer, executed as a witch at Tyburn in the same year, and presents an unusual approach towards witchcraft for the period, since the authors adopted a sympathetic stance towards the character of Mother Sawyer.<sup>2</sup> She is presented as a victim of circumstance, as the scapegoat of a rural community. Contained in Mother Sawyer's words at the beginning of the play is their own denunciation of the unfair blame laid on her:

And why on me? Why should the envious world  
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?  
'Cause I am poor, deform'd and ignorant,



And like a bow buckl'd 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  
To fall and run into? Some call me witch,  
And being ignorant of myself, they go  
About to teach me how to be one; urging  
That my bad tongue, by their bad usage made so,  
Forespeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,  
Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse.  
This they enforce upon me, and in part  
Make me to credit it.

(II. ii. 1-15).<sup>3</sup>

As it is evident from this early utterance and throughout the play, the force of Mother Sawyer's character lies in her power of speech. It is through this resource, and not action, that the authors give relevance to the personification of the accused witch. Hence, in the quoted soliloquy she is rueful about having been ostracised from her community, for she was berated as a witch long before she initiated her acquaintance with the devil. Her wish to summon a "familiar" stems from her vengeful impulses, but once the devil appears she accepts him as a means of escaping her loneliness.

*The Witch of Edmonton* raised the issue of women in rural Jacobean England by using a real case that clearly illustrated misogynist attitudes prevalent in that society. Thus, the reasons for this contempt towards Mother Sawyer can only be: she is a woman, she is old, and she is poor. That is to say, she has three qualities that make her the "weakest" member of the community. Her main accuser is Old Banks, one of her neighbours, who ill-treats her throughout the play and finally appeals for a licence to take her to court. The only possible motive he could have to call her "witch" or "hag" was the fact that she fitted the witch stereotype, as indeed witchcraft has often been associated with old age and the feminine.

The play shows that this was not as much a case of individual sinfulness, but a social problem -the result of a superstitious society in crisis



that heaped its sins on a scapegoat. This assumption has significant implications, since it came to confront the theological assertions current at the time, soon after James I had published his treatise *Daemonologie* (1597), where he stated the moral condemnation of these cases, that according to him were no more than deliberate pacts with the Devil, and served no other purpose than spreading his evil and preventing the glory of Christ.

Before the treatise was published, the indictment against witches in England was based on the *maleficium* or evil-doing of which they were suspected rather than on theological accusations related to their pact with the Devil. However, after the publication of *Daemonologie*, the concern of theologians and demonologists increased considerably, and these moral disquisitions were set against the local cases of rural witchcraft. The conflict between the legal concerns and popular superstition is well portrayed in the play, sometimes in a rather ironical fashion, as in the following lines, in which Old Banks complains in front of the authorities about the spell that has been cast on him by Mother Sawyer:

'So, sir, ever since, having a dun cow tied up in my back-side, let me go thither or but cast mine eye at her, and if I should me hang'd, I cannot choose, though it be ten times an hour, but run to the cow and taking up her tail, kiss -saving your worship's reverence- my cow behind, that the whole town of Edmonton has been ready to bepiss themselves with laughing me to scorn.'

(IV. i. 53-59).

The moral concerns of King James were reflected in the pamphlet from which the dramatist drew the information for the case, entitled *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch*,<sup>5</sup> and written by Henry Goodcole, the visitor of Newgate Prison, where she was kept. Instead of focusing on the *maleficium* and on the fact that there was not enough evidence against her, he lays stress on the evil of her cursing, and in the sinfulness of keeping an acquaintance with the devil, an attitude which is entirely in accordance with James' ideas.

King James' treatise was written, as we read in the introduction, as a response to the dilemma of witchcraft. He intended to offer an explanation of

some phenomena related to magic and at the same time to solve the judicial problem. The king was convinced of the veracity of these phenomena, in spite of the scepticism of some moralists at the time. His aim was to prove their existence, and also to state "what exact trial and severe punishment they merite".<sup>6</sup>

He maintained that witches, by the will of their Master, had certain powers of evil, such us to cure or to cast on disease, and the ability to awaken "the nature of some men, to make them unable for women: and making it to abound in others, more than the ordinary course of nature would permit" (ibid, xx). Let us emphasise the sexist connotations in this first approach, since from the very beginning he speaks in terms of female aggression towards men with the aim of self-benefit. Implicit in this declaration is the conception of witchcraft as a sexual countenance, as an attempt by the female sex to destabilise male roles.

He gathered most of his ideas from tradition before him. The belief in the possibility of an alliance with the devil was based in the early medieval legend of Theophilus, and in the theories of Thomas Aquinas and other theologists.<sup>7</sup> However, although intellectuals in medieval Europe made a distinction between natural and demonic magic, there is no place in James' explanations for the so-called natural magic, that is the one that exploits the *occult* powers within nature. He stresses so much the influence of the devil as to deny the existence of power or magical value in words, stones, herbs, etc., that he labels as "Deuilles rudimentes", "charmes" used by "commonlie daft wiues" (*Daemonologie*, p. 8). According to him, these were only devices used by the devil. Similarly, he defined the purpose of witchcraft as:

the enlarging of Sathans tyrannie, and crossing of the propagation of the Kingdome of CHRIST so farre as lyeth in the possibilitie, either of the one or other sorte or of the Devill their Master' (Ibid., p. 24).

This is why he raises the phenomenon of witchcraft to the category of a serious moral and theological problem. Viewed as a pact with the devil, as a renunciation of and enmity towards Christ and the Church, the eradication of witchcraft was an imperative.



According to King James, the causes that lead people to this pact are: curiosity, in the case of the magicians, and thirst of revenge or ambition caused through poverty in the case of the witches. These passions are viewed by him as a trap set by the devil, who would spy on people's feelings and choose the best moment to capture their souls. He differentiates between magicians and witches, for while the magicians or necromancers can command the devil to do whatever they wish, the witches are only slaves and servants, bound to follow the will of their master. We observe again the sexist undertones of his explanations. Witchcraft, commonly associated with women, has revenge (sin) as its motivating factor, while necromancy, commonly professed by men, is justified by curiosity. The fact that he links witchcraft with revenge implies also that there is something to be avenged, something to react to, and the second cause extended: ambition caused through poverty, points to the fact that they were trying to achieve by other means what they were denied in their world, which demonstrates that their situation was generally precarious. These are in fact the two motives that lead mother Sawyer to wish a pact with the devil.

Besides, in relation to the pact as such, James similarly differentiates between the use that necromancers make of the demon, that according to him is used by them to attain knowledge and to do extraordinary things, to achieve control; and witches, who are the dominated party in their acquaintance with the devil. And this is also reflected in the play, for the relationship between Cuddy and the devil is totally harmless, cordial, while Mother Swyer's is one of deceit and total dependency.

Thus, we can see that the play mirrors the aspect of the local cases, the concerns of the theologians, and the law. The moral concerns of the theologians, as we observe, are embodied in the figure of the devil, who appears in the form of a black dog. This character serves as a link to the subplots and his behaviour is entirely in accordance with the moral explanations given by King James. Similarly, the theory that witches were slaves of the devil is illustrated in the relationship between Mother Sawyer and the black dog. He conquers her with false promises and clearly deceives her. In fact, there seems to be a confabulation of all the forces of the play against her, leading only to her death. In that way the play shows how deceiving a pact with the devil can be, leading only to the destruction of body and soul. The details of the appearance and pact in the devil scenes, together with the explanations given to Cuddy by the devil himself about his ways of acting, follow the pattern



advanced by King James. In that sense, the king could not be offended despite the benevolence of the authors towards Mother Sawyer.

The rural conflicts are portrayed in the peasants' subplot, in their accusing and torturing of Mother Sawyer, showing the superstitious and cruel nature of rural people, and the underlying association of old women with witchcraft. However, there are also other strands in the plot: stories of love, marriages of convenience and social aspirations based on deceit, in accordance with the dramatic plots of the period. These subplots are not gratuitous, since they are all linked by the devil's intervention, deriving from this the deep meaning of the play. It shows a society in crisis, corroded by evil, symbolised by the black dog, an animal that is present every time a misdeed is about to be committed, which concurs with the explanations given by the Dog itself: every time a human does mischief, the devil is within him.

The play illustrates also the conundrum posed by witchcraft in relation to the judiciary. In that sense, the authorities are portrayed respectful of Mother Sawyer's rights, which demonstrates that the cause of unjust indictments in these cases was not so much due to bad intentions of the law but rather to their ignorance of the case. We must not forget that the play was to be performed at the Court of King James.<sup>8</sup> The authors stressed the impartiality and reputability of the law. In that sense, the relationship between Mother Sawyer and the authorities only deteriorates when she begins to curse and criticise the society upheld by them. Therefore, the reason for her indictment is not only her reputation as witch, but also the fact that she is a rebellious woman defying the authorities and criticising their social structure. At the same time, the guilt of one of the members of the authorities, Sir Arthur Clarrington, is detrimental to her case. Thus when she says: "Dare any swear I ever tempted maiden,/ With golden hooks flung at her chastity,/ To come and lose her honour, and being lost/ To pay not a denier for't?" (IV. i. 141-4), she is describing exactly the abuse committed by Sir Arthur, a landowner whose misdeed becomes the germinal force from which the play develops. He assumes that she is referring to his misdeed. Presupposing a correlation between witchcraft and the ability to divine hidden or past reality, he therefore condemns her. In that way the authors demonstrated how she received the guilt of every character, and how their sins had important repercussions in her condemnation. In fact, she is blamed for felonies carried out by characters unknown to her, for instance the



murder of Susan Carter committed by her own husband. It is no wonder she answers: "But is every devil mine?" (V. iii. 28).

Besides the cruelty and scorn shown towards Mother Sawyer, there are other details in the play indicating a misogynist attitude with regard to the phenomenon of witchcraft. Thus, the relationship between the Dog and Mother Sawyer is intended to portray the perils of an alliance with Satan. However, Cuddy Banks, Old Banks' son, is not only unharmed but benefits from his acquaintance with the Dog. Moreover, he attempts to persuade the creature to renounce his evil ways. Hence, the good nature and good sense of men. The devil fools Mother Sawyer but not Cuddy in spite of being the fool of the community because he is a man. This indicates how foolish women were considered to be. Latent in the play is therefore the presumption that women are weaker than men, which supposedly justifies the existence or alleged existence of a higher number of female witches. In his treatise, King James explains this in similar terms, declaring the weakness of women as follows:

The reason is easie, for as that sexe is frailer  
than man is, so it is easier to be intrapped in these  
grosse snares of the Devill, as was over well proved  
to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of Eva at the  
beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe  
sensine. (*Daemonologie*, p. 30).

The reason offered by King James is the 'inferiority' of women. This attitude was already held by the reformers of the late Middle Ages. Moralists often saw women especially prone to magic because of their supposed moral and intellectual weakness. This was a common concept in the treatises on witchcraft, and began with the *Malleus Maleficarum*.<sup>9</sup> One could argue, perhaps, that the cause of this association between women and witchcraft might have been their role as popular healers, but obviously they did not have the monopoly of magic. So it can only be explained by the precarious position they held in society. Since women were less trusted and more feared, it would be more difficult for them to defend themselves in court.

The more moderate theories concerning the causes of witchcraft purport that women were drawn to it because they needed to escape from the routine inherent in their lives, thus broadening their limited scope for action.



This involved an attempt to transcend the material limitations imposed by society on their lives, being this the case with Mother Sawyer. However, in some cases it could also have been a means of fighting the oppression to which they were subjected; a way of acting since they could not do so by legal means, which was hinted in the play with the use of this alliance as a means of revenge. Therefore, through witchcraft they might become a real enemy for these important men, executors afraid of the unknown. In that sense, the reason that led King James to write his treatise was the fact that he was directly affected by the affair of the North Berwick witches, since they had attempted to kill him.<sup>10</sup>

If we turn to mythology, there is a close connection between these phenomena and the Celtic myths of the hidden goddess. These myths symbolise the repression of the woman or the feminine forces, and when something is repressed it becomes the region of the devil. In that sense, Jean Markale, studying these myths, contemplates the connection between witches (or women in general) and the devil as emanating from the embodiment of the ancient mother goddess in the figure of Satan,<sup>11</sup> and interprets sabbath and other magical rituals such as Black Masses as a resistance to the repression exercised by the patriarchal society, in an attempt to rediscover a previous order:

Patriarchal society has hounded witches with such determined cruelty because they are creatures of the Devil, who had a feminine nature to begin with, as the many legends about the Devil and his dam show. She was the personification of the ancient mother goddess; and the witches' Sabbaths, which re-enacted the bacchanalias of antiquity, the orgies associated with the worship of Demeter and Isis, retained the last traces of the rebellion of the Flower-Daughter. (Markale p. 170).

He interprets these phenomena as an attempt throughout history to restore "woman's rights and privileges in a new human society" (ibid, p. 170). In that sense, we encounter in the play the depiction of the reversal of this notion: the emulation of a witches ritual performed by men, in which the devil intervenes. That is, if these witches sabbaths constitute an attempt to restore a primitive order, the Morris Dance would function in the play as a reinforcement of the



established order, through this reversal of roles. Thus, the Morris Dance serves to illustrate the "sexist" difference in this involvement with magic and rites.<sup>12</sup> It is performed by Cuddy and his friends repeatedly throughout the play, even in front of the authorities, without being punished, despite the fact that it was a remnant of the old religion. The association with the devil is evident, and is reinforced by the intervention of the Dog in the dance invited by Cuddy. Can we perhaps surmise that this celebration of fertility by men assuming male and female roles symbolises the appropriation of the female goddess, of women's roles? The devil is on the side of these men. However, he leads Mother Sawyer to her death. The Morris Dance seems to function as an advanced funeral. The mother is once more repressed.

Taking into account all of these observations regarding the treatise and the play, we may infer that the relationship between misogyny and witchcraft was a causal one. The witchcraft phenomenon would be a consequence of, or a reaction to, the misogynist or at least sexist configuration of society, a result of the oppression of women. This relationship acts in a double sense, since women were persecuted as witches more often than men owing to the widespread idea that women were prone to it, as illustrated in the play. This causality acts also in reverse, since the phenomenon of witchcraft was a clear example of misogynistic ideas well put forward in the way they are treated in the play.

Hence, Mother Sawyer is not the only woman in the play victimised by men. Although the authors followed the pamphlet written by Goodcole, they added, as stated before, other subplots, choosing stories in which women were bought or sold, deceived by important members of the community or even murdered by their own husbands. In that way they reflect, in general, the misogynist treatment of women in rural society. In fact, the relationship between Mother Sawyer and the Dog mirrors that of the main female characters and their beloved Frank. The three women stand in a position of unconditional dependence and loyalty towards the object of their affection, and in the three cases this affection turns out to be fatal.

Not only the actions are misogynist, but also the language various characters use with reference to women. Thus, in the plots with Cuddy and Frank Thorney, we find a close linkage between ways of speaking about women and witchcraft. There is the association "woman-witch-love-affairs", and the connection between loving a woman and being bewitched.<sup>13</sup>



Likewise, let us highlight the misogynist intervention of Old Banks referring to the wife of one of the yokels: " 'Catch her fast and have her into some close chamber,/ do, for she's as many wives are, stark mad' ". (IV. i. 196-7).

Similarly, Mother Sawyer is insulted terribly. Old Banks states that he calls her witch because he does not know a worse word.<sup>14</sup> However, he also calls her "hot whore", "she-hellcat", "hag", etc. Sir Arthur, in turn, calls her "hellhound". Even in Mother Sawyer's speech there is a connection between women and evil, when denouncing the courtesans. However, Mother Sawyer accuses not only these women, but men of law, respectable men like Sir Arthur who seek to cover up their transgressions, and other members of society, highlighting their evil-doing and stating that they credited the name of witch more than herself. Through this denunciation she is presented as a strong, free woman able to confront the authorities speaking her mind, which imbues the play with a remarkable feminist potential as a reaction to the undermining treatment of women by society. In that sense, the position of Mother Sawyer's characters correlates with that of many myths analysed by Markale in that she rises against the established order. Hence the cause of her final repression.

We may conclude by saying that the misogynist attitudes in relation to witchcraft in the Jacobean period were prevalent in society at two different levels: the lay population and the law. Thus, in the rural communities the stereotype image of the witch was that of an old, poor woman, often alienated by her neighbours, and anyone who fitted this stereotype was liable of suspicion. Besides, the theologians, concerned with the demonic pact, and the law, confronted by the dilemma of whether to pass judgements on the actual 'crimes' or on theological accusations related to the pact with the devil, were predisposed to view women as prone to witchcraft. For this reason, women were particularly vulnerable in court.

All this is well exemplified in *The Witch of Edmonton*: a play which corroborates the fact that the phenomenon of witchcraft has been nothing other than a problem ensuing from the victimisation of women. Ergo, the thematic nucleus of the play casts light on a rather polemic issue. It is not for nothing that its plot has been drawn from a contemporary case of witchcraft, and although the misogynist tendencies of the period are well illustrated throughout the play, its authors intended to offer a defence of Elizabeth Sawyer, thus



shaping her as a strong character, as a woman who stood against both the hypocrisy and the conventions of her own society.

## NOTES

1.- See Jean Markale, (1972) *Women of the Celts*, Vermont: Rochester, 1975. Trans. A. Mygind, C. Hauch and P. Henry, 1975. See also Kathleen MacLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, where she analyses several renaissance plays from a feminist perspective, including *The Witch of Edmonton*, and discusses the views of several feminist critics with regard to witchcraft.

2.- Dekker, who was responsible for dramatising the Mother Sawyer subplot, was well-known for his sympathy towards the oppressed. He wrote a considerable amount of plays about women, such as *The Virgin Martyr*, *The Honest Whore* and *The Roaring Girl*. In these plays there is a striking feminist connotation. The main character in the three cases is a woman, often victimised purely for reasons of gender. For further information on the playwrights and the staging of the play see Chambers, E. K., *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923, vol. III, pp. 241-273.

3.- Dekker, T., with Ford, J., and Rowley, W., *The Witch of Edmonton*, ed. S. Trussler, London: Methuen, 1987. All quotations from this edition.

4.- It was the common belief that the devil appeared to the witches in the form of an animal, which was referred to as "the witch's familiar".

5.- The full title is *The Wonderful Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch, Late of Edmonton, Her Conviction and Condemnation and death. Together With the Relation of the Divels Acces to Her and Their Conference together*. Goodcole, Henry (London 1621).

6.- James VI, *Daemonologie*, ed. in *Minor Prose of King James VI* by James Craigie. Edinburgh: Scottish Texts Society, 1982, p. xix. All quotations from the text are taken from this edition.

7.- For further information see Kieckhefer, Richard, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

8.- *The Witch of Edmonton* was performed at the Court of King James on 29 December 1621 by the Prince's Men. This company was under the patronage of Prince Charles. It was in this company that William Rowley, one of the authors of the play, served as a comic actor from 1609 to 1617.

9.- Kramer, Heinrich, and Sprenger, Jakob, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers. London: Pushkin, 1928.

10.- In fact, although King James has been considered as the originator of the witchcraze in his country, this assumption is unfair to him, as we read in the commentary to *Daemonologie* by James Craigie, *Minor Prose of King James VI*, Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh, 1982. He only became interested in these matters after some Danish witches had raised storms to prevent his wife,



Anne of Denmark, from crossing the North Sea. Later, the North Berwick coven of witches, as they had come to be known, confessed to have raised storms during the king's voyage to Denmark, and further attempts against his life on his return to Scotland.

11.- I do not concur with this equation. Witchcraft could well be considered a manifestation against patriarchal society and the reversion to a matriarchal one. Certainly, the study of ancient myths leads to the conclusion of the existence of an original female divinity, later obscured, parallel with a female oriented society, but the identification of the devil with this deity appears to me to be over-extended. The female side of the divinity should rather be searched for in the figure of God itself, as embodying the feminine qualities.

12.- This is a performance closely linked to pagan ritual. It can only be performed by men, and derives from the "ritual of the sword", which was a celebration of fertility. Besides, there are clear associations between the Morris Dance and witchcraft, and it bears a considerable resemblance to a witches' sabbath.

13.- Cuddy Banks asks Mother Sawyer for help to obtain the love of Kate, hence the connection "old women-witchcraft-love affairs". Besides, he acknowledges that he has been bewitched by the girl, that is, he establishes a correlation between being in love with a woman and having been bewitched by her.

14.- I do not agree with Kathleen McLuskie, *op. cit.*, in that she does not see a sexist cause in the accusation of Mother Sawyer by Old Banks, which I believe to be present, for example, in the language he uses when referring to her.