

## *The Witch of Edmonton*

Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) departs from the conventions established in previous witchcraft drama in relation to the depiction of scepticism. *Macbeth* and *Dr Faustus* depicted the scepticism and credulity of witches, using the discourse of demonology to illustrate the psychology of witch and devil's servant – a psychology which is characterised by both inappropriate and excessive credulity (towards the devil) and inappropriate and excessive scepticism (towards God). While the delusions of the witch are not irrelevant to *The Witch of Edmonton*, the play also examines the credulity and scepticism of its characters in relation to witchcraft itself. In doing so, *The Witch of Edmonton* acknowledges the existence of public credulity about witchcraft. But it is also able to define the boundaries of the possible in relation to witchcraft, and therefore to establish a plausible and coherent vision of witchcraft – one which depends on a particular cultural and theological conception of evil and demonic agency in the everyday world.

*The Witch of Edmonton* is unlike any other extant play from the period in that it portrays a character matching the stereotype of the village witch, a character who can reasonably be regarded as plausible in terms of her psychology. Prior to *The Witch of Edmonton*, there are sceptical plays depicting tricksters in a more or less realistic fashion (*The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*), and there are plays showing witches as lurid, supernatural agents of the devil (*Sophonisba*, *The Witch*). After it, there are two-dimensional comic witches (*The Late Lancashire Witches*, *The Lancashire Witches*). But Elizabeth Sawyer is the only stage witch who actually resembles a human being, complete with recognisably human motivations and desires. What is more, the play shows the audience how she becomes a witch. In this sense at least, her character actually develops during the play. This is not true of any witch characters in the

other plays mentioned: in those plays, the witches are simple, static characters.

Despite her psychological richness, however, Elizabeth Sawyer is not the play's central character, as Frances Dolan has pointed out.<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Sawyer is absent for the entirety of the first act, which concerns itself with what – despite the play's title – must be regarded as the main plot, the story of Frank Thorney and his bigamous marriage. A great deal of the first scene of the second act is devoted to Sawyer's exchange with Old Banks, to her soliloquising and to the pact she makes with the devil-dog; but in the next scene she has disappeared again, not to return until the fourth act. Sawyer is a major presence in just three scenes – II.1, IV.1, and V.1 – and aside from a few lines before her execution in the final scene (V.3), she is not on stage for the rest of the play. In total, she speaks 12.5 per cent of the lines in the play, compared to 18.5 per cent for Frank Thorney. In fact, Cuddy Banks – the central figure in the other subplot, and a character who has sometimes been ignored entirely by modern critics of the play – speaks more than Mother Sawyer, with 13.2 per cent of the lines. This is not to suggest that the significance of a character in a play can be measured simply by counting lines. But it does seem that the modern critical interest in witchcraft has led to an excessive focus on the character of Elizabeth Sawyer.<sup>2</sup>

It may seem eccentric to downplay Elizabeth Sawyer's importance in a study of the dramatic representation of witchcraft. But the marginality of the witch character, even in the play in which she is at her most central, is itself revealing. By providing a thoughtful, sensitive, and sympathetic depiction of the village witch, the playwrights take witchcraft beliefs as seriously as any other text of the period. However, two other aspects of the play are crucial in making its representation of a witch plausible: first, the less credible views of witchcraft dismissed by Henry Goodcole's pamphlet account, discussed in Chapter 1, are treated with scepticism – a partial and limited scepticism that is necessary to establish a firmer belief. Second, this seriousness about witchcraft is only possible within a larger story about demonic presence and agency, which is why it is necessary to embed a difficult-to-believe witch story in the context of a more

---

1 Dolan, p. 219.

2 Leonora Brodwin's article on 'The Domestic Tragedy of Frank Thorney in *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 7:2 (Spring 1967), 311–28, as the title suggests, is one exception.

credible domestic tragedy incorporating widely shared beliefs about the devil's involvement in human affairs.

While the play gives voice to scepticism about particular aspects of popular belief about witchcraft, this scepticism would have supported, rather than challenged, a general belief in the reality of witchcraft for most contemporary audience members. In this sense, the sceptical voices in the play can be regarded as expressing rhetorical scepticism. In this instance, no specific rhetorical aims can necessarily be attributed to the playwrights: a work of drama, after all, is not a polemic. Nevertheless, the play goes to great lengths to make its eponymous character a credible witch. Indeed, the reality of witchcraft as a pact with the devil is powerfully represented by the play in performance in a more visceral way than any pamphlet could hope to achieve. Lisa Hopkins suggests that 'a judge who had seen *The Witch of Edmonton* might well prove more sympathetic and enlightened than one who had not'.<sup>3</sup> More sympathetic, perhaps; but not necessarily more sceptical about the existence of witchcraft.

### Scepticism in *The Witch of Edmonton*

*The Witch of Edmonton* has frequently been regarded as a sceptical play, with a variety of critics admiring the play's exploration of Sawyer's victimisation by her neighbours in Edmonton.<sup>4</sup> Mother Sawyer's early speeches have struck many critics as subversive of the very idea of witchcraft. Her opening lines are especially in tune with modern views of witchcraft as a phenomenon produced by social disharmony:

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

3 Hopkins, p. 98.

4 To take just two examples, Viviana Comensoli in *Household Business* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) claims that the play goes beyond 'the pious indictments of both continental and English sceptics' (p. 126), while Kathleen McLuskie in *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) writes of the play 'subverting established views of witchcraft by its sympathetic treatment of Mother Sawyer' (p. 72).

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.

*Enter* OLD BANKS.

This they enforce upon me. And in part  
 Make me to credit it.<sup>5</sup>

In the confrontation with Old Banks which follows these lines, Sawyer reveals that she has been gathering firewood, or ‘gleaning’, on Old Banks’s land. According to the social historian Keith Wrightson this practice was, by the seventeenth century, ‘beginning, in some places, to be redefined and prosecuted as theft ... One Hertfordshire farmer attacked local women for gleaning on his land “as is usual for all the pore to do” in 1603.’<sup>6</sup> Sawyer’s gleaning is the trigger for Banks’s attack on her, a detail which hints at the social and economic relationships at the root of their enmity. Sawyer’s self-description as ‘poor, deformed and ignorant’ matches the analyses of many early twentieth-century historians so the speech can be read as sceptical of the idea of witchcraft, supporting instead the idea of witches as scapegoats.

It would have been just as easy for well-informed members of contemporary audiences to interpret the lines in this way, since the situation Elizabeth Sawyer describes tallies so closely with the views expressed by sceptics such as Scot, as well as by cautious believers, like John Gaule, who incorporated Scot’s claims about popular credulity into his own work.<sup>7</sup> According to these writers, witches

5 Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley, *The Witch of Edmonton*, edited by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), II.1.1–15. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses.

6 Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 164.

7 According to Scot, witches are ‘old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious, and papists’ (I.3, p. 7). John Gaule, in *Select Cases of Conscience Touching Witches and Witchcrafts* (London, 1646), a work confirming the existence of witches but also urging caution in prosecuting them, criticises those who see a witch in ‘every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furr’d brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voyce, or a scolding tongue’ (pp. 4–5). Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (London, 1603) describes the

are people – generally women – who are unpopular, victimised by others because of their appearance and perhaps also their behaviour and religious beliefs, or lack thereof. Sawyer goes on to suggest that she has nearly begun to believe herself to be a witch, which is in line with the arguments of Scot and Weyer, among others, about the relevance of melancholy.<sup>8</sup> The explanation Sawyer offers for her persecution as a witch is therefore a naturalistic one, consistent with thoroughgoing scepticism.

However, as David Nicol has pointed out, all this is said *before* Sawyer concludes her pact with the devil.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to pounce on this speech as evidence of scepticism if one is, as presumably all modern critics are, a sceptic oneself. But contemporary audiences would have included many people who were at least prepared to consider the possibility of witchcraft, and who already knew the outcome of the recent Sawyer case. Such an audience would be more likely to regard the sentiments expressed here, particularly Sawyer's despair, as ominously foreshadowing the conversion to witchcraft which they already knew was to come. While Sawyer denies that she is a witch, her speech apparently acknowledges the existence of actual witches, since she claims she is being pushed into becoming a witch by her ill-treatment at the hands of her neighbours. This stereotype of the witch was also appropriated by those who wished to justify witchcraft persecution. Keith Thomas points out, citing historical cases as well as this passage in the play, that some witches 'confessed that they had taken up witchcraft in order to avenge themselves upon neighbours who had falsely called them witches'.<sup>10</sup>

---

idea of a witch as 'an olde weather-beaten Croane, hauing her chinne, & her knees meeting for age, walking like a bow leaning on a shaft, hollow eyed, vntoothed, furrowed on her face, hauing her lips trembling with the palsie, going mumbling in the streetes' (p. 136).

8 See Scot, p. 30; Mora (ed.), pp. 183–86.

9 David Nicol, 'Interrogating the Devil: Social and Demonic Pressure in *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Comparative Drama* 38:4 (Winter 2004–5), 425–45 (p. 426).

10 Thomas, p. 628. Thomas assumes that the idea predates the writing of the play, but the cases he cites are from 1647, 1664–65, and 1667; all of them therefore postdate the play. While it is not possible to prove that *The Witch of Edmonton* is the first instance of this particular idea, I have not been able to discover any preceding it, and Goodcole's pamphlet account does not suggest that Sawyer became a witch out of frustration at being accused of witchcraft. It is therefore a real possibility that the play created a narrative which was later followed in prosecuting actual cases.

After suffering violent treatment at the hands of Old Banks and being verbally abused by the Morris dancers, but still before she has become a witch, Sawyer's despair deepens. She wishes for the devil to come and take possession of the 'ruined cottage' of her body, adding shortly afterwards: 'Tis all one / To be a witch as to be counted one' (II.1.125–26). This statement is open to interpretation. It could conceivably be taken to mean – as the pamphlet on Philip and Mary Flower discussed in Chapter 1 sometimes implies – that there are no real witches; in other words, the state of being a witch is literally identical with having the reputation of a witch. Some contemporary audience members or readers, if they thought about it at all, might have understood the lines in this way. But a much more likely interpretation, taking the lines in their context, is that Mother Sawyer is expressing her anger and despair at the way she is being treated: things have become so bad now that people consider her to be a witch that she feels she has nothing left to lose and might as well become one – which is exactly what happens. Mother Sawyer, in other words, actively chooses to become a witch. What might at first glance appear to be scepticism about witchcraft is better understood as dramatic irony.

Sawyer's opening soliloquy is used to generate a degree of sympathy for the witch-to-be that is unusual, perhaps unique, among extant Jacobean witch plays. This sympathy has frequently been remarked on, often with surprise, and it has itself been seized on as evidence of scepticism. Diane Purkiss takes a dissenting view, but acknowledges that the play is widely regarded as 'sceptical about witchcraft and sympathetic to the witch'.<sup>11</sup> Purkiss, rightly and importantly, identifies two separate issues which are frequently treated as identical:<sup>12</sup> on

---

Brian Gunter, who bullied his daughter into faking the symptoms of demonic possession, seems to have drawn inspiration from the pamphlet account of the witches of Warboys: Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, pp. 7–8, 135; Anon., *The Most Strange and Admirable Discoverie of the Three Witches of Warboys* (London, 1593).

- 11 Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 232. Ronald McFarland, "'The Hag is Astride": Witches in Seventeenth-Century Literature', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 11:1 (1977), 88–97, also comments that the play 'is indeed sympathetic, though it is not altogether sceptical or enlightened' (p. 91).
- 12 Julia Garrett, 'Dramatizing Deviance: Sociological Theory and *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Criticism* 49:3 (Summer 2007), 327–75, for example, writes that the play's 'sympathy in itself is noteworthy, given the censorious climate for any form of scepticism about witch crimes' (p. 328).

the one hand, the issue of scepticism about witchcraft, and on the other, sympathy for the character of Mother Sawyer. It is perhaps natural for present-day readers to view the two questions as inextricably linked. Modern readers tend to be sympathetic towards witches *because* they are sceptics about the existence of witchcraft, and therefore work from the assumption that witches were innocent victims who were, by definition, wrongfully accused. This being the case, when sympathy for a witch character is expressed, it is tempting to interpret it as grounded in scepticism about the existence of witchcraft – a scepticism as similar to our own as the sympathy seems to be. But sympathy for Elizabeth Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton* is not grounded in outright scepticism about witchcraft at all; it serves to make her human, which in turn serves to make her descent into witchcraft comprehensible, if not excusable.

There is, of course, much scepticism on display in *The Witch of Edmonton*, since some aspects of popular belief about witchcraft are denied or even mocked. One example is the supposed power of words. After she has agreed to become the devil's slave, Elizabeth Sawyer is taught a charm by the dog. The charm is a corrupted version of the Lord's Prayer in Latin, a detail taken from Goodcole's account. (The use of Latin is significant since this is the language of specifically Catholic prayer.) Sawyer repeats the phrase several times, getting it slightly wrong each time. There is no indication that the charm itself has any effect. Any mischief brought about by the witch's activities is caused directly by the devil, as the play later demonstrates when his touch is required to drive Anne Ratcliffe to suicide. After the scene in which Sawyer is taught her Latin prayer, it disappears from the play until the fifth act, when Elizabeth Sawyer recites it in an attempt to summon the dog back to her (v.1.25).<sup>13</sup> The words themselves, however, are a prayer to Satan, and therefore blasphemous. Sawyer has been duped by the devil into using a 'spell' which is both ineffective and extremely dangerous to her spiritual well-being.

Scepticism about the effectiveness of spoken charms relates to the play's evidently Calvinist vision of the world.<sup>14</sup> It is not an attempt

---

13 The devil does appear to Mother Sawyer after she recites the charm in the fifth act, but there is no suggestion that he is compelled to do so: he comes in order to torment her.

14 Nicol argues that the outlook of the play is not straightforwardly Calvinist, claiming that the play 'downplays' predestination (435) in favour of social causation, but social causation does not preclude predestination.

to cast doubt on the reality of witchcraft, but is dependent on a particular view of how witchcraft operates. The ineffectiveness of Sawyer's demonic prayer is in line with the views of Calvinist writers on witchcraft such as George Gifford and William Perkins, both of whom denied that charms, including verbal charms, could have any real power.<sup>15</sup> Catholic writers on witchcraft, committed to the view that the sacraments approved by the Church were effective by virtue of the words, objects, and actions involved and the office of the priest, had a more complex view on the efficacy of witches' charms. Jean Bodin and the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* are happy to confirm the real effectiveness of various charms (although, as noted in Chapter 1, Bodin also betrays a degree of scepticism towards verbal charms).<sup>16</sup> The play rejects anything which ought to have been regarded by educated Protestants as superstition.

The ability of witches to see into the future is also questioned in the play. After his bigamous marriage to Susan, and desperately resisting her attempts at intimacy, Frank resorts to telling her lies that are dangerously close to the truth: 'Twas told me by a woman / Known and approved in palmistry, / I should have two wives' (II.2.118–20). Susan fails to understand why this troubles Frank so

---

Frank frequently expresses a deterministic attitude, for example at the end of the first act: 'No man can hide his shame from heaven that views him. / In vain he flees whose destiny pursues him' (I.2.235–36).

- 15 Gifford, *Discourse*, sig. G1<sup>v</sup>; Perkins writes that 'a charme is onely a diabolical watchword, and hath in it selfe no such effectuall power or possibilitie to worke a wonder'. He goes on to devote fifteen pages to proving this claim, suggesting the importance of the issue (pp. 133–48). The anonymous author of *The Witches of Northamptonshire* (London, 1612) expresses a similar view, asking, 'Shall wee be so foolish as to imagine that things are effected by the vertue of words, gestures, figures or such like? All those are doubtlesse but to deceive' (sig. B1<sup>r</sup>). See also Holland, sig. F2<sup>r</sup>.
- 16 See, for example, Institoris and Sprenger, III.215A–B, pp. 553–54, which tells of heretics who could not be executed by either fire or drowning until 'a device for sorcery' was removed from them; cf. Cohn, p. 234. The authors are clear that these magical trinkets are used by the devil purely in order to increase the blasphemous and idolatrous nature of the sin of witchcraft, as Perkins and Gifford would have agreed; nevertheless, the charms are also genuinely effective. The *Malleus* also advises judges to use holy counter-magic: 'they should by all means carry with them salt that was exorcized on a Sunday and a Blessed Palm and Blessed Plants. These objects, along with Blessed Wax that is wrapped up and worn on the neck ... are wondrously effective at keeping a person safe' (III.214A).



much, and in telling him so comments that '[s]uch presages / Prove often false' (II.2.131–32). After reaching her own conclusions about what is troubling Frank – Susan thinks he has arranged to fight a duel with Warbeck – she chides him for attempting to 'flam me off / With an old witch' (II.2.164–65). This is a fairly clear expression of scepticism about the power of witches to foresee future events, and also trivialises the existence of witches. But although these predictions are said to be false 'often', they are not said to be worthless, and immediately after making this suggestion Susan goes on to consider the possibility that the prediction will turn out to be true. That the predictions of witches are often, but not always, accurate also aligns the play with demonological orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup>

The attitudes and credulity of the persecutors of witches are clearly parodied in the play. In the fourth act, a series of characters named in the original stage directions as 'Country-men' – perhaps significantly, since the play would primarily have been performed in London – blame various ills, including the infidelity of their wives, on Elizabeth Sawyer. The lines are packed with bawdy puns about falling, standing, and maypoles, and the absurdity of the accusations is clear. The laughter of the audience would have been at the expense of the countryman who, having caught his wife *in flagrante delicto*, is foolish enough to accept her excuse of bewitchment.<sup>18</sup> Later, Old Banks claims to have been compelled by witchcraft into kissing his cow under the tail, a story borrowed from George Gifford (IV.1.55–61). Gifford's main argument against the persecution of witches is that people blame witches for their problems rather than accepting their misfortunes for what they are – the judgement of God – and praying for forgiveness. The play represents a similar attitude in its depiction of the countrymen, and is similarly critical of it.

Instead of self-examination and obedience to the word of God, the villagers of Edmonton resort to a kind of magic themselves in order to confirm their suspicions. They burn some thatch from Mother Sawyer's roof in order to 'summon' her. Goodcole's account of the case dismisses this as 'an old ridiculous custom'<sup>19</sup> while simultaneously portraying it as having worked. The play follows

---

17 Perkins, for example, writes that 'the predictions of Satan are onely probable and coniecturall' (*Discourse*, p. 65).

18 Claims of witchcraft as an excuse for sexual indiscretions are taken seriously by very few authors – even Bodin refuses to do so (Bodin, p. 169).

19 Goodcole, sig. A4<sup>r</sup>.

Goodcole almost to the letter, with the Justice using the word 'ridiculous' (iv.1.48) to describe the test after it has been represented on stage as appearing to have worked. The similarity to Gifford's demonological work is again apparent. Gifford suggests that such measures can work, but only by the power of the devil, and also asks, in relation to those who persecute witches by extra-legal or magical means, 'when as they ascribe power unto such things to drive out devils, what are they but Witches?'<sup>20</sup> This question is echoed in *The Witch of Edmonton* when Elizabeth Sawyer, accused of witchcraft by Sir Arthur, declares 'A witch! Who is not?' (iv.1.116). Again, the play's levelling vision of the universality of human sinfulness reveals its broadly Calvinist assumptions. It is Gifford's view of what he would regard as superstitious and unchristian behaviour on the part of the accusers of witches that informs the critical depiction of the villagers in the fourth act. The countrymen are correct, albeit for the wrong reasons, in saying that Elizabeth Sawyer is a witch; but it is clear that their credulous excesses are also blameworthy.

Not all of the characters in the play are quite so credulous, however, and the less credulous characters are presented as more deserving of respect. The Justice is certainly sceptical about the burning of thatch as a test for witchcraft (despite the fact that the test appears to the audience to have worked). However, while the Justice is presented as the voice of reason in the fourth act, he is not quite the voice of outright scepticism about the existence of witches. Rather, he is open-minded, judging the claims made by various parties on their merits. He tacitly concedes that witches do exist, and even seems to be convinced that Elizabeth Sawyer is a witch, judging by his brief comments. After Sir Arthur concludes that Sawyer is definitely a witch, the Justice seems happy to take his word for it, telling her to 'mend thy life, get home and pray' (iv.1.162). Sir Arthur's word, as an educated, landowning gentleman, is worth much more than that of the countrymen, regardless of whether or not it is based on anything firmer than their superstitions, and in spite of his ethical shortcomings.

The other character in the play to express scepticism about witchcraft is Cuddy Banks. While he enlists Elizabeth Sawyer in his attempt to win Kate Carter's hand in marriage, Cuddy never seems to take her very seriously. Asked by Sawyer whether he believes

---

20 Gifford, *Discourse*, sig. H3<sup>r</sup>.

that her powers can achieve this, Cuddy replies: 'Truly, Mother Witch, I do verily believe so and, when I see it done, I shall be half persuaded so too' (II.2.247–48). Despite his exaggerated asseverations, Cuddy says he will only be 'half' persuaded, even after he has seen it 'done'. He is making fun of Sawyer, but this does not rule out his believing that she is a witch, or that she is in league with the devil. When Sawyer says that she learned her charm from a 'learned man', Cuddy comments '[l]earned devil it was as soon!' (l. 270). He also refers to the dog as 'your goblin' (l. 262), revealing his awareness that the dog is in fact a spirit. The scepticism expressed by Cuddy is the solidly Protestant variety which doubts the effectiveness of witchcraft, but not the existence or malice of witches and devils. The seriousness with which the devil is treated is a vital part of the play, which is discussed in the next section.

### The devil and sin in *The Witch of Edmonton*

A number of scholars have noted that the devil is the only character that links the three plots of the play.<sup>21</sup> Others have argued that this connection is insufficient, starting with Edward Sackville-West back in 1937:

We can, if we like, argue that the Dog acts as a sufficient binding force; but I do not think this argument holds, for the reason that that figure is made to do (since the stage is after all a simplifying medium) for two different devils: the revenge-lust of the witch and the self-destructiveness of Frank.<sup>22</sup>

Leonora Brodwin, like Sackville-West, points to the devil as the only point of contact between the Thorney and Sawyer plots, but finds that the Sawyer subplot is 'sketchy' and 'largely unrelated',<sup>23</sup> while David Atkinson feels the need to argue instead for the theme

---

21 Frances Dolan points to the dog as the 'dangerous familiar' providing a connection between the three plots (p. 220). John Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) refers to 'three plots ... united primarily by the common presence of one devil' (p. 173). Comensoli regards the 'two plots' as 'loosely connected by the influence of the supernatural' (p. 127), and Kathleen McLuskie regards the dog as the 'linking figure' (p. 66).

22 Edward Sackville-West, 'The Significance of *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Criterion* 17:66 (1937), 23–32 (p. 30).

23 Brodwin, 311.

of moral knowledge as the unifying element of the play.<sup>24</sup> Sackville-West may have a point – the invisible devil that spurs Frank Thorney on to murder seems very different from the tangible and frightening devil that Elizabeth Sawyer covenants with. But the objection fails to take into account the complex and changing understanding of the devil at the time the play was written and performed. The three different functions served by the devil in the three plots of *The Witch of Edmonton* correspond to different sets of beliefs and cultural traditions that coexisted, perhaps uneasily but certainly simultaneously, in seventeenth-century England.

Recent work by historians on the idea of the devil in early modern England has demonstrated that the concept was increasingly important to Protestants in interpreting their everyday experiences.<sup>25</sup> Protestant theologians developed a view of the devil which emphasised his role in tempting human beings into committing sinful acts. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, just before Cuddy Banks beats the devil out of Edmonton, he is told something about how evil spirits operate:

I'll thus much tell thee. Thou never art so distant  
 From an evil spirit, but that thy oaths,  
 Curses, and blasphemies pull him to thine elbow.  
 Thou never tell'st a lie, but that a devil  
 Is within hearing it; thy evil purposes  
 Are ever haunted. But when they come to act—  
 As thy tongue slandering, bearing false witness,  
 Thy hand stabbing, stealing, cozening, cheating,—  
 He's then within thee.  
 (v.1.137–44)

The devil presented in this passage is a decidedly Protestant one. He is ever-present, always within earshot of mundane, everyday human transgressions such as lies and curses. He is also – given the opportunity opened up by a sinful act – an internal devil, one who is 'within thee', using the sinners' own corrupted nature against them. While the Protestant devil was usually understood to be capable of physical manifestation (although Reginald Scot denied this capability), this was exceptional rather than the norm.

24 David Atkinson, 'Moral Knowledge and the Double Action in *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 25:2 (Spring, 1985), 419–37 (p. 420 and throughout).

25 Johnstone, pp. 1–2; Oldridge, pp. 58–60. Russell points to the great importance of the sermon in Protestant religious practice as one reason for the increased importance of the devil (p. 275).

The devil as a tempter is central to the story of Elizabeth Sawyer, and even more so to that of Frank Thorney. Frank presents a kind of Rake's Progress of early modern sin, in which each wrong act leads inexorably to a worse act. Nathan Johnstone identifies this process of 'cumulative sin' as characteristic of early modern Protestant ideas about evil and comments that it 'was not a seamless progression, but a series of watersheds, each confirming a further descent into sin until the mind was ready to entertain thoughts of unquestionably diabolic crimes such as murder and witchcraft'.<sup>26</sup> Frank's story presents just such a series of turning points. The significance of this feature of the play, from the perspective of the present study, is that the devil's presence in everyday life – which appears to have been widely accepted by early modern Protestants – is ultimately linked to witchcraft. 'Ordinary' sins are a kind of gateway drug, which can ultimately lead to the worst of crimes, as is demonstrated by the cases of Frank Thorney and Elizabeth Sawyer. Mother Sawyer's story is a cautionary tale – a dreadful warning about the ultimate consequences of what might seem to be trivial sins. But the depiction of cumulative sin also serves to make the end point – witchcraft – plausible, by connecting it in a chain of causal relationships to relatively uncontroversial ideas about the presence of the demonic in more mundane settings.

The frequent references to the devil in the Frank Thorney plot are indicative of this view of evil and its connection to the devil. Even before his first appearance on stage in the second act, even before the start of the play in fact, the devil has been at work on, and in, Frank Thorney. Frank's covert affair with Winnifride is what starts his descent into the evils of bigamy and murder. Wrongly believing himself to be responsible for Winnifride's pregnancy, Frank feels himself honour-bound to make amends by marrying her. Sir Arthur, who is in fact the father of the unborn child, hypocritically chides Frank:

If the nimble devil  
That wantoned in your blood rebelled against  
All rules of honest duty, you might, sir,  
Have found some more fitting place than here  
To have built a stew in.  
(1.1.78–82)

This may seem to be putting it figuratively, but the statement can also be taken literally. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* suggested,

---

26 Johnstone, pp. 159–60.

quoting the sixteenth-century Dutch physician Jason Pratensis and others, that ‘the devil, being a slender incomprehensible spirit, can easily insinuate and wind himself into human bodies’ and, once there, could affect both mind and body.<sup>27</sup> The *pneumata* that were believed to be responsible for sensory perception were spirits in the bloodstream, and humoral blood was associated with the sensuousness of the sanguine personality type.<sup>28</sup> In this passage, it would appear that these vital constituents of the blood have been manipulated by another type of spirit – the devil. Frank’s sinful relationship with Winnifride has indeed been inspired by a ‘nimble devil’, and it apparently exercises power over Frank at the physiological level.

From this initial sin follow further sins. Frank’s lies lead him into committing the sin of bigamy by fraudulently marrying Susan for her dowry. In II.2, the effects of his sins start to take their toll on his mind. He is so distracted by his troubles that he calls Susan ‘Winnifride’, confusing his two wives, and in an aside refers to his bigamous situation as if it were a demon: ‘the fiend [that] torments me’ (II.2.129). The ultimate result of Frank’s sins is the murder of Susan in Act III, and it is not until this point that the character of the devil actually appears on stage with Frank. The murder seems to be brought about by the dog’s touch, but Frank remains unaware that he has been touched. The dog is not visible to him throughout the scene, despite the fact that it may have provided him with a murder weapon – the knife.<sup>29</sup> Even more remarkably, the dog helps Frank to tie himself up afterwards in order to support his story of an attack by Warbeck and Somerton, without Frank being aware of this demonic aid. This could be seen as requiring the devil’s actual corporeal presence, as Nicol suggests;<sup>30</sup> but given that Frank remains unaware of the aid he has received (III.3.72–73), it may simply be a dramatic representation of the devil’s proverbial ability to look after his own.

The devil’s involvement in the Sawyer plot is, at first sight, quite different. Sawyer’s devil, Tom, is visible and tangible, embodied

---

27 Burton, I.2.1.2, p. 199.

28 Noga Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 10, 38–39. See also Chapter 6.

29 According to Corbin and Sedge, ‘[s]ince he [Frank] has given up his sword and states that he is unarmed (l. 22), it seems most likely that the Dog provides the knife’ (III.3.24n). Of course, there is nothing in the text that requires the scene to be staged in this way, but the suggestion does seem fitting.

30 Nicol, p. 432.

and apparently capable of violence. His appearance before Sawyer is a special case; witches provided one of the few occasions on which the devil was required to take on a physical form. As Johnstone argues, the invisible nature of witchcraft necessitated the manufacture of physical evidence of the devil's involvement – witches' marks, for example. Conversely, murder could be proved by normal physical evidence, so the involvement of the devil could simply be taken for granted.<sup>31</sup> That the devil bargains directly and in embodied form with Sawyer does not imply that he is a 'different' devil from the one who touches Frank. The play instead reveals the variety of means through which the devil works.

Like Frank, Sawyer is gradually pushed into her pact with the devil-dog. However, rather than actively sinning as Frank does, Sawyer is driven into sin by what others do to her, in accordance with the passivity that was widely asserted by male authors to be characteristic of women at the time. First, she complains of the way she is spoken of by her neighbours, next she is abused and beaten by Old Banks, before finally being shunned by Cuddy and a group of other villagers. This series of humiliations drives her into the arms of the devil in much the same way as Frank's sins do for him. Frank's sins, however, are represented as both actively chosen and, paradoxically, as an inescapable destiny.

The other character to make an explicit deal with the devil is Cuddy Banks. Following his rough treatment at the hands of the spirit disguised as Katherine, Cuddy and the dog discuss their agreement:

- DOG            I'll help thee to thy love.  
 CUDDY        Wilt thou? That promise shall cost me a brown loaf,  
                   though I steal it out of my father's cupboard. You'll  
                   eat stolen goods, Tom, will you not?  
 DOG            Oh, best of all. The sweetest bits, those.  
 CUDDY        You shall not starve, Ningle Tom, believe that. If you  
                   love fish, I'll help you to maids and soles. I'm acquainted  
                   with a fishmonger.  
 DOG            Maids and soles? Oh, sweet bits! Banqueting stuff, those.  
                   (III.1.138–47)

Cuddy's offer of a 'brown loaf' is reminiscent of Ralph's offer to 'feed thy devil with horse-bread as long as he lives' in exchange for

31 Johnstone, pp. 143–44.

the love of Nan Spit in the clown subplot of *Dr Faustus*.<sup>32</sup> In both plays, the deal is not carried out, for the same reason; Mephistophilis is merely irritated at having been summoned by ‘damned slaves’<sup>33</sup> while the dog, in the end, says of Cuddy, ‘I scorn to prey on such an atom soul’ (v.1.206). The suggestion that the devil might have any interest in brown bread is part of the comic aspect of this scene: the idea is presented as laughable, in accordance with Gifford’s view – although, as noted in Chapter 2, it may not have been laughable to some Elizabethan readers of witchcraft pamphlets.<sup>34</sup> The dog might be interested in Cuddy’s offer anyway because the bread will be acquired by sinful means – theft. But there is no sign in the play that Cuddy ever actually steals the bread.

Cuddy is, of course, the play’s clown, but there is something clownish about the dog in the Cuddy scenes as well. In the end, he is even beaten out of Edmonton by Cuddy. In these scenes audiences encountered the devil in his guise as a trickster, playing his silly practical joke on Cuddy, and also the physically vulnerable devil who becomes the butt of jokes himself when Cuddy chases him away. Such comic depictions of the devil date back as far as the twelfth century, although they continued to survive in popular culture throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods. Within the play, the various conceptions now seem to sit rather awkwardly together, but they also provide something for everyone in the audience: the godly and the more profanely inclined. Russell suggests that the devil needed to be funny precisely because he was terrifying, and this might explain the need for comic relief from the stories of Mother Sawyer and Frank Thorney.<sup>35</sup>

In any case, the bargain between Cuddy and the dog is never taken seriously by either party, and there is no exchange between them. While the dog makes good on his promise to see misfortune befall Cuddy’s rival Somerton, his wrongful arrest for Susan’s murder is quickly resolved, and Cuddy never actively seeks any harm to Somerton. As for Kate Carter, Cuddy never even comes into contact with her. Apart from dealing with the devil, Cuddy also makes a deal with the servant of the devil – Elizabeth Sawyer. Asking for

---

32 vi.26–31. Horse bread was low-quality bread, so called because it was usually fed to horses. Brown bread was also perceived to be inferior to white bread, which was labour-intensive and expensive to produce.

33 viii.40.

34 Gifford, *Discourse*, sig. G3<sup>v</sup>.

35 Russell, pp. 259–60.



her help in winning Kate Carter, he seems to offer her something more than bread: 'Do, and here's my hand, I am thine for three lives' (II.1.235–36). Virtually all witchcraft theorists condemned such dealings with witches, even if no harm was intended; Gifford and Perkins both regard 'white' witches or cunning folk as worse than workers of *maleficium*, on the grounds that by seeming to do good they draw people into the service of the devil.<sup>36</sup> But Cuddy never takes Mother Sawyer seriously, despite her insistence that he must.

Cuddy is ultimately immune to the threat of the devil, unlike the more serious character Frank Thorney, because Cuddy is a clown, and does not, or cannot, take either devil or witch seriously. This is a consistent feature of clowns in plays with supernatural elements – they never suffer serious harm, although they are generally put through some discomfort. Cuddy in *The Witch of Edmonton*, Robin in *Dr Faustus*, Trinculo and Stephano in *The Tempest*, Robert in *The Late Lancashire Witches* – all follow a similar pattern. They are tricked or made to look foolish, but left basically unharmed. The best way to neutralise the threat of the supernatural is to treat it as ridiculous – a point made by a number of contemplative theologians<sup>37</sup> – and in this respect Cuddy's strategy for dealing with the devil resembles Reginald Scot's strategy for dealing with witchcraft belief.

The play also explicitly provides another reason for Cuddy's immunity to the devil's temptations. The spirit who tricks him into falling into a pond says of Cuddy, '[w]e can meet his folly, / But from his virtues must be runaways' (III.1.85–86). Cuddy's virtue, the spirit claims, makes him immune to supernatural harm, while it is Sawyer's cursing and blasphemy that ensures her damnation. This claim is not entirely convincing; as Nicol points out, Cuddy is not completely blameless or innocent.<sup>38</sup> Late in the play, Cuddy says to the dog: 'I entertained you ever as a dog, not as a devil', and the dog seems to accept this to be true (v.1.116–18). Cuddy

---

36 Perkins, in his *Discourse*, states that 'howsoever both these be euill, yet of the two, the more horrible & detestable Monster is the good Witch'; p. 174. Gifford, *Discourse*, sigs H1<sup>r</sup>–H1<sup>v</sup>; *Dialogue*, sigs D4<sup>v</sup>–F3<sup>r</sup>. See also Gaule, pp. 30–31.

37 Russell, pp. 292–93.

38 Nicol goes so far as to claim that 'Cuddy is prepared to make deals with devils and see an innocent man hanged in order to satisfy his desire for Kate Carter' (pp. 438–39). This is hard on Cuddy, who has not solicited Somerton's death, and is not in a position to help his rival.

has been well aware all along that the dog is the devil; just a few lines earlier he shows that he knows Elizabeth Sawyer to be powerless without the dog's aid (v.1.105–8). But in these lines he suggests that by treating the devil as a dog and reducing the prince of this world to an object of comedy, Cuddy has avoided being trapped by his own sinful urges.

Cuddy cannot be represented as being entirely without sin for the simple reason that Cuddy is a human being, and therefore tainted by sin, as are all human beings. Unlike the two other main characters, however, Cuddy is only ever tempted to commit sinful acts; he never actually succumbs. The three main characters in the play – Cuddy, Frank, and Elizabeth Sawyer – represent three possible responses to the temptations of the devil. Cuddy, despite moments of evident temptation which the comic nature of the scenes does not entirely lighten, ultimately resists sin. This enables him to reject the devil and beat him out of Edmonton. Frank gives in to temptation and sins grievously, but repents before it is too late. Sawyer also sins, and is hardened by her sins to such an extent that she is unable to repent before her execution. While they respond differently, all three characters face challenges of a comparable nature and fit into the same moral schema.

Nathan Johnstone draws a contrast between the 'otherness' of witches and the ordinariness of murderers in the pamphlet literature of the time.<sup>39</sup> The ordinariness of murderers demanded that readers empathise with the criminal, in order to see how they came to commit such terrible crimes and so avoid the same fate themselves. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, this principle explains Frank Thorney's dying wish that 'my example / Might teach the world' (v.3.108–9). But, interestingly, Elizabeth Sawyer expresses a similar sentiment: 'All take heed / How they believe the devil; at last he'll cheat you' (v.3.46–47). It is not surprising that Frank Thorney, a murderer, is held up as an example to demonstrate the terrible end results of what had seemed to be trivial sins. But for Elizabeth Sawyer to be held up as an example to be avoided, rather than as an alien, incomprehensible 'other', is, according to Johnstone's conclusions, unusual. Some early modern evidence suggests exceptions to this rule, however: John Davenport's pamphlet on *The Witches of Huntingdon* suggests on its title page that '[t]he reader may make use hereof against Hypocrisie, anger, malice, swearing, Idolatry,

---

39 Johnstone, p. 154.

Lust, Covetousnesse, and other grievous sins, which occasioned this their downfall.<sup>40</sup> This appears to be a clear reference to everyday sins leading ultimately to witchcraft; and Goodcole's account of the Edmonton case also stresses that the devil was attracted to Sawyer by her habit of swearing.<sup>41</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, Thomas Cooper's witchcraft treatise also locates witches within the normal spectrum of human sinfulness, and suggests that other sins may be even more deplorable than witchcraft.

The humanising of Elizabeth Sawyer makes the audience empathise with the witch. But although this might be a bold move on the part of the playwrights, and although it is intuitively appealing to modern readers' feelings of sympathy with historical witches, it is also part of what makes witchcraft in this play less outlandish, less alien, and as a result much easier to believe. The play makes the orthodox conception of witchcraft 'real' in the same way that the influence of the devil over murderers seems to have been widely accepted as real. *The Witch of Edmonton* taps into a widely distributed discourse of human corruption and diabolic agency that was much less controversial than witchcraft belief in early modern England, especially to committed Protestants. Locating Mother Sawyer on the normal human spectrum of sin and repentance is part of what makes her uniquely plausible as a witch in the extant plays of the period. Another important ingredient in the humanising of witchcraft that the play carries out is the integration of Sawyer into the community of Edmonton and into human society in general.

### The social and the demonic

Many recent critics of *The Witch of Edmonton* have regarded the play as providing a sophisticated analysis of early modern society, and one which emphasises the social causes of witchcraft persecution. This type of interpretation is intuitively appealing, since a wide range of characters from the community of Edmonton feature in the play, and the differences in outlook between representatives of a range of different social classes are very much in evidence. However, much of this work has identified the play's apparent stress on the social causes of witchcraft persecution as implying an underlying opposition to, or scepticism towards, witchcraft. Viviana Comensoli, for example, argues that '*The Witch of Edmonton* is unusual in

---

40 John Davenport, *The Witches of Huntingdon* (London, 1646).

41 Goodcole, sigs C1<sup>r</sup>-C1<sup>v</sup>.

that the dramatists deliberately discredit supernatural causation by treating witchcraft as a complex social construction.<sup>42</sup> David Nicol instead sets out to distinguish between demonic and social causation, finding a place for both in the play. Nicol argues that the play ‘stages both social and demonic pressure in order to decide on the boundary *between* the two, and to decide where the blame for evil finally lies’.<sup>43</sup> But the play does not, in my view, distinguish between demonic and social causation. Rather, human society is represented throughout the play as being thoroughly infected by the demonic, in accordance with early modern Protestant ideas about the role of the devil in the human world. It is not merely that social causation does not invalidate a serious belief in demonic causation, as Nicol argues, but that the two things are not separate categories at all.

The most famous example of the play’s interest in social causation is Mother Sawyer’s frequently quoted speech about society’s other ‘witches’, which provides what looks like firmer ground for arguing that the play is sceptical about witchcraft. Interrogated by Sir Arthur and the Justice, Sawyer objects to being called a witch:

A witch! Who is not?

Hold not that universal name in scorn then.  
 What are your painted things in princes’ courts,  
 Upon whose eyelids lust sits, blowing fires  
 To burn men’s souls in sensual hot desires,  
 Upon whose naked paps a lecher’s thought  
 Acts sin in fouler shapes than can be wrought?  
 (iv.1.116–22)

This is the beginning of a long diatribe against various kinds of ‘witch’, but none of Sawyer’s examples of other ‘witches’ have any kind of supernatural or preternatural power; they are all social parasites. They are the ‘painted things in princes’ courts’, ‘city-witches’ who ruin their husbands by excessive spending, women who scold their husbands, cheating lawyers who feed on the hopes of their clients, and, finally, rich seducers like Sir Arthur. What all her examples of ‘witches’ have in common is that they are described as leading others astray, often by some kind of temptation, just as the dog has led Sawyer herself astray, and as Sawyer attempts to lead Cuddy astray. Like Elizabeth Sawyer, these ‘witches’ mimic the behaviour of the devil.

---

42 Comensoli, p. 121.

43 Nicol, 432.

It is possible for any present-day reader, and perhaps even for some members of contemporary audiences, to understand this extended speech as conveying scepticism about the existence of witchcraft. This is particularly true when Sawyer says ‘an old woman / Ill-favoured grown with years, if she be poor / Must be called bawd or witch’ (iv.1.135–37). However, even these very sceptical lines do not quite go so far as to deny the existence of witches. Throughout the speech, Elizabeth Sawyer never denies that she herself is a witch – in fact, she tacitly admits it in an exchange with the Justice.<sup>44</sup> Instead, she points out that society is full of a range of other evil characters, all of whom can be characterised as witches too, in the important sense that they serve the ends of the devil by drawing others into danger and temptation. If this speech can be said to have a ‘message’ for the audience, that message is something similar to Gifford’s; rather than scapegoating old women, Sawyer urges, people should closely examine their own sinful behaviour. But neither Gifford nor Sawyer’s speech denies the existence of literal witchcraft. Instead, Sawyer’s words normalise witchcraft by locating it within a broader context of human sin.

Less frequently remarked upon than Sawyer’s speech is one of Cuddy’s to his father, in which Cuddy supports the dog against accusations of involvement in Sawyer’s witchcraft. The substance of the speech is similar to Sawyer’s. Cuddy defends the dog by highlighting the ubiquity of sin in human society, in contrast to which ‘[t]he dog is no court-foisting hound, that fills his belly full by base wagging his tail; neither is it a citizen’s water-spaniel, enticing his master to go a-ducking twice or thrice a week, while his wife makes ducks and drakes at home’ (iv.1.244–47). This time the dog, rather than the witch, is favourably compared to the sins induced by a range of other ‘dogs’ within human society. These are not dogs in the literal sense; the ‘court-foisting hound’ could be understood as the kind of (human) flatterer widely associated with the court, but in rhetorically giving them the same shape as the devil, Cuddy reveals the demonic nature of human society. Similarly, Sawyer’s rage is inspired by someone she describes as a ‘black cur / That barks and bites, and sucks the very blood / Of me’ (ii.1.123–25) – Old Banks. The devil, as the ‘prince of this world’, has many

---

44 At I.123: ‘JUSTICE: But these work not as you do. / ELIZABETH SAWYER: No, but far worse.’ This constitutes an admission on Sawyer’s part of working by witchcraft, in the usual sense.

means at his disposal, and need not work all his mischief directly when he can more profitably use an intermediary. This is also true of God, who uses the devil as an intermediary.

Any attempt to distinguish between social and demonic pressures is impeded by the language of the play, which repeatedly and consistently equates social ills with the demonic. In Elizabeth Sawyer's speech to the Justice, the mundane London sinners leading others astray are described as witches. Sir Arthur, the villagers, and Old Banks are likened to the devil, as are more abstract threats such as the 'beggary and want' (I.1.18) that Frank Thorney fears, and his own situation as a bigamist (II.2.130). Even the spreading of rumour is ascribed to the actions of demons. When Frank realises his father knows about his marriage to Winnifride, he says in an aside that '[s]ome swift spirit / Has blown this news abroad' (I.2.169–70). It is possible that this speculation is literally true; the devil's ability to pass on information to witches was often ascribed by demonologists to his ability to travel quickly. The devil has an interest in ensuring that Old Thorney hears of the marriage, since this pushes Frank into the additional sin of equivocating to deceive his father. Whether or not the news has literally been spread by a devil, however, gossip and rumour certainly serve an infernal purpose, as the opening speeches of Elizabeth Sawyer have already made clear.

It is, of course, possible to see such linguistic features of the play as purely metaphorical. Discussing the use of demonic language in the play, Dennis Kezar writes that 'the authors of *The Witch of Edmonton* deploy strikingly similar metaphors in an apparent effort to divest witchcraft and demonism of literal power and to distribute guilt across the whole community'.<sup>45</sup> But while the second part of Kezar's claim is surely pertinent – guilt is distributed across the whole community, and indeed the whole of humanity – the play only works to 'divest witchcraft and demonism of literal power' if the reader is not prepared to consider the possibility that witchcraft and the involvement of the devil in daily life are, in fact, realities. A reader who is prepared to consider that possibility – or one who is already committed to it – is more likely to understand the language of the demonic to imply that the working of the devil is present throughout a human society which has been corrupt from the very beginning, as a result of the Fall.

---

45 Dennis Kezar, 'The Witch of Edmonton and the Guilt of Possession', in *Solon and Thespis: Law and Theater in the English Renaissance*, edited by Dennis Kezar (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), pp. 124–60 (p. 144).

Elizabeth Sawyer's descent into sin need not be caused directly by the devil in order to be understood as demonically inspired, and the same is true of Frank's own sinful career. Frank may not reach an explicit agreement with the devil, but he does make a deal with a character who might be considered a servant of the devil.<sup>46</sup> Sir Arthur's role in bringing about Frank's marriage with Winnifride in the first act of the play is vital. In his conversation with Frank, Sir Arthur offers to 'make the maid a portion', and Frank mentions in passing: 'So you promised me / Before, in case I married her' (1.1.96–98). Sir Arthur has been encouraging the marriage since before the beginning of the action of the play. His peculiar eagerness to see Winnifride married, and his triumph after Frank has left – 'Have I caught thee, young man? / One trouble then is freed' (1.1.153–54) – suggests that he, not Frank, is responsible for Winnifride's pregnancy. It also suggests that the temptations of the flesh have been central to Sir Arthur's entrapment of Frank; Sir Arthur has used the devil's favourite snare.

The agreement reached by Frank and Sir Arthur is that Sir Arthur will provide a dowry of £200. Like the devil in *Dr Faustus*, Sir Arthur begins to renege on his side of the bargain immediately after having made it; he claims not to be able to make a 'present payment' (in obvious contrast to Old Carter, who uses exactly the same phrase). Sir Arthur also agrees to write to Frank's father and assure him that Frank has not married. It is this letter that enables Frank to go through with the sin of bigamy. His father will not accept Frank's word alone, and it is only the word of the high-ranking, respected Sir Arthur which causes him to back down and allow the second marriage to go ahead (1.2.201–04). At Sir Arthur's suggestion, the letter is first written by Frank, and then signed by Sir Arthur. On stage, the sight of the characters drawing up and signing a document might provide a visual cue, for an audience anticipating the demonic activity that is to come, that what is taking place is a kind of devil's pact, similar to Faustus signing a deed of gift for Mephistophilis.

Sir Arthur's quasi-demonic role in drawing Frank into sin helps to explain the extreme disapproval reserved for him at the end of the play, which could otherwise seem puzzling. Sir Arthur has seduced

---

46 As Helen Vella Bonavita, 'Maids, Wives and Widows: Multiple Meaning and Marriage in *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Parergon* 23:2 (2006), 73–95, writes, '[t]he false bargains made by Sir Arthur with Frank Thorney have had their demonic aspect' (p. 95).

Winnifride and lied to and manipulated Frank, so he is not blameless. After this, however, his actions are for the most part commendable, assisting the Justice, standing surety for the falsely accused Warbeck and Somerton, and promising to make financial amends to Winnifride. Frank has committed bigamy and murdered Old Carter's daughter – acts which by any measure are surely far worse than Sir Arthur's, and certainly in the case of the murder one which Sir Arthur cannot reasonably be thought to have desired or foreseen. Nevertheless, Old Carter tells Sir Arthur he is 'worthier to be hanged of the two', and not only forgives Frank but actually weeps for him (v.2.7–8; v.3.143–45). Old Carter's attitude makes more sense if it is accepted that Sir Arthur can also be seen as an agent of the devil, with Frank, his victim, in the role of the deluded witch who takes the blame for all the harm that his master has caused.

Elizabeth Sawyer also sets out to do the devil's work, the difference in her case being that she is so lacking in power that she requires the devil's direct aid. Sawyer, as Cuddy says to the dog, will 'never thrive if thou leavest her' (v.1.106). When Cuddy Banks approaches her and asks for help in winning Katherine Carter's love, she asks him 'dost thou think that I can do't, and I alone?' (II.1.245–46). Here she mimics her master, the dog, who earlier said to her that in order to get her revenge she must 'put credit in my power, / And in mine only, make orisons to me, / And none but me' (II.1.176–78). Both devil and witch demand allegiance to themselves and themselves only, and ask for belief in their power as a prerequisite for its effectiveness. This mimicry of the devil's methods is typical of the agents of the devil.<sup>47</sup> But diabolical servitude need not involve the kind of explicit pact with the devil that Mother Sawyer makes. Other human beings also do the work of the devil, as the play makes clear.

The idea that all human relationships are corrupt, and corrupting, is so prevalent in the play that no character entirely escapes diabolical influence. Old Carter, who seems at first a benign character, is revealed in Act II to have broken his word to Warbeck, an uncomfortable shortcoming in a play as concerned with oaths and bargains

---

47 Johnstone, p. 157. It should also be noted that the devil mimics Christ, who is said in the gospels to have asked for belief in his power as a condition of its effectiveness: 'And when he was come into the house, the blind men came to him: and Jesus saith unto them, Believe ye that I am able to do this? They said unto him, Yea, Lord. Then touched he their eyes, saying, According to your faith be it unto you' (Matthew 9:28–29).



as *The Witch of Edmonton*. Even the apparently blameless Susan has been seen as culpable in some respects.<sup>48</sup> But one character does appear to stand somewhat outside of human society, a point which helps to explain his ability to resist the devil: Cuddy Banks. Cuddy is a member of the Edmonton community, with relationships to the other characters. He is Old Banks's son, and says that he is in love with Kate Carter. But he never appears on stage with Kate, whose real suitor is Somerton in the Frank Thorney strand of the plot, and has little to do with his father apart from exchanging some cross words in Act iv. He seems almost to inhabit a different Edmonton from the other characters. Cuddy generally only appears in company with the dog, Mother Sawyer, or unnamed minor characters such as the Morris dancers. A large number of his spoken lines are asides, and Cuddy seems frequently to speak as a chorus, detachedly commenting on the action rather than being involved in it: his curious passivity in relation to the dog's offers of demonic help has already been remarked upon. Cuddy's status as of Edmonton but somehow, subtly, outside it is another aspect of his character that enables him to reject the devil, as he is relatively untainted by the human relationships that are so corrupting to all the other characters. It also makes Cuddy appear to be, if anything, less grounded in reality than the witch Elizabeth Sawyer.

#### Evidence and authority in *The Witch of Edmonton*

It has been argued that the play employs scepticism in order to present a plausible picture of witchcraft, drawing a boundary between those things that can reasonably be believed about witchcraft and those which are the product of an excessive credulity that is itself witch-like in some respects. This means that the scepticism and credulity of the characters themselves, in relation to witchcraft, is an important issue in the play. The unrestrained credulity of the countrymen threatens to overwhelm both reason and order, as their increasingly wild claims almost lead to an illegal burning. It is left to the authority figures, the Justice and Sir Arthur, to restore order with a more measured degree of belief in witchcraft – one tempered by scepticism.

But in one scene, the play seems to extend its concern with scepticism and credulity to touch on broader issues. Frank's father

---

48 Comensoli, p. 129.

has discovered his secret marriage to Winnifride, and Frank is forced to dissemble:

FRANK           With your licence, 'tis not charitable,  
I am sure it is not fatherly, so much  
To be o'erswayed with credulous conceit  
Of mere impossibilities [...]

OLD THORNEY   Why, canst thou yet deny thou hast no wife?

FRANK           What do you take me for? An atheist?  
(1.2.172–78)

When shown the letter from Sir Arthur, Old Thorney apologises by saying: 'Forgive me, Frank. Credulity abused me' (1.2.202). This repetition of the significant word 'credulity' again raises the issue of scepticism and belief. Some of the terms used in the argument are strongly reminiscent of the language of the witchcraft debate, with its talk of credulity, impossibilities, and atheism.<sup>49</sup> The use of such language is incongruous in this context; there is nothing 'impossible' about Frank's secret marriage, nor does it seem especially 'credulous' of his father to believe what he has heard.

The kind of evidence of the marriage in which Old Thorney initially puts his trust is report: second- or third-hand stories that may have become distorted in transmission. These are the kinds of stories that were typically used to prove the existence of witchcraft. In dismissing such evidence as 'mere impossibilities', Frank places himself in the position of the Scotian sceptic. The sceptical position is compromised, of course, by the fact that Frank is lying. In the play, Frank eventually forms an implicit league with the devil, and this fits well with his expression of scepticism. Sceptics like Scot and Weyer were frequently accused either of being witches themselves, or of some form of atheism, a charge which, in the passage quoted, Frank implicitly (and seemingly superfluously) denies. In this scene, the evidence of report – witness testimony – is ultimately overruled by that of authority: the written evidence of Sir Arthur, whose name and social position count for more than rumours. But report, in the event, turns out to be more reliable.

While no character in the play expresses outright scepticism towards witchcraft, this scene touches on the idea of scepticism

---

49 Scot refers frequently to credulity and impossibilities, while according to the first sentence of John Gaule's book on witchcraft, '[h]ee that will needs perswade himself that there are no Witches ... will ere long believe that there is no God' (pp. 1–2).

more broadly, and on the question of evidence. The play evinces a sceptical attitude towards authority, and places trust instead in the 'empirical' evidence of testimony. The play also connects Frank's dismissive attitude towards the kind of evidence often presented as empirical proof of the reality of witchcraft with corruption and sin. Ultimately, it confirms the orthodox opinion that the supernatural and the demonic can offer an explanation of all that lies outside human understanding. But in the process, this exchange between father and son seems tacitly to acknowledge the existence of more sceptical views. With *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the expression of scepticism moves much further into the open.