

The Late Lancashire Witches

The pioneering journalist and poet Joseph Addison once commented on the subject of witchcraft. Directly addressing the question of belief and scepticism, Addison wrote:

In short, when I consider the Question, whether there are such Persons in the World as those we call Witches? my Mind is divided between the two opposite Opinions; or rather (to speak my Thoughts freely) I believe in general that there is, and has been such a thing as Witchcraft; but at the same time can give no Credit to any particular Instance of it.¹

Addison does not so much sit on the fence as attempt to plant a foot on both sides of it. While he does not contradict himself, it is difficult to see how scepticism towards every case of witchcraft that he has encountered can coexist with a professed belief in it 'in general'. Despite what Addison says about his beliefs, he gives the impression of not being prepared even to consider the possibility of witchcraft, or at least of 'any particular Instance of it'.

The ambivalence of Addison's view in this passage is grounded in the acute problems that witchcraft belief presented by 1711. Belief in witchcraft remained a kind of shibboleth for many orthodox Anglicans, but actual witchcraft prosecutions were by this time extremely rare, and there would be no more executions. The total and unquestioning belief demanded by earlier writers on witchcraft like Bodin had to be weighed against the reality that actual accusations of witchcraft were unlikely to be taken seriously by virtually any educated person. Addison's statement is the result of a difficult balancing act: on the one hand, he must say, in effect, 'I am not an atheist: of course I believe in witchcraft!' On the other hand, Addison must also say, 'I am not a fool: of course I don't believe in witchcraft!'

1 Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* 117 (14 July 1711).

In 1711, the tensions involved in witchcraft belief were particularly acute. But these tensions emerged in embryonic form much earlier, as a careful reading of Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches* makes apparent.

This chapter begins with a consideration of the evidence on witchcraft belief and witchcraft persecution in the 1630s, including a discussion of Heywood's own views on witchcraft, a subject which he discussed in his non-dramatic works. I go on to discuss the connections between the play and the case on which it was based before attempting to show how the play exemplifies a shift in attitudes towards witchcraft compared with previous dramatic treatments. I argue that the play is the product of a society in which belief in witchcraft was already starting to develop into the 'dual' attitude that is so evident in Addison's short article on the subject.

Witchcraft in the 1630s

The Late Lancashire Witches was first performed at a time when witchcraft persecution – at least in the Home Counties – had declined dramatically. Nor was witchcraft a major topic for debate among the educated, assuming that their interests can be inferred from the textual remains of the period. The publication of witchcraft-related books and pamphlets during the 1630s fell to almost nothing; the only extant publications from this decade are reissues of earlier works. One of the first historians to point to this dramatic decline in witchcraft literature was R. Trevor Davies, who argued that it was related to William Laud's appointment as Bishop of London in 1628. As Bishop of London, Davies believed, Laud withheld permission for the publication of witchcraft writings.² This argument is appealing in many respects. Certainly, the more orthodox wing of the Anglican Church had previously shown itself hostile to belief in the related phenomenon of demonic possession, while some Puritans – like John Darrel – had encouraged such belief among the godly.³

2 R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs* (London: Methuen, 1947), p. 90.

3 On the war of words between John Darrel and Samuel Harsnett see Marion Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print: Darrell, Harsnett, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Exorcism Controversy* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006).

However, there is no direct evidence for Laud's antipathy to witchcraft publications, let alone evidence for any action he might have taken to stamp them out. Davies endeavours to prove that Laud was a sceptic in relation to witchcraft, but the evidence he presents is thin at best.⁴ As Laud's most recent biographer, Charles Carlton, points out, Laud questioned all the clergy in his diocese about witchcraft, which hardly suggests a sceptical attitude.⁵ A further problem is the fact that while Laud did indeed attempt to strengthen print censorship, these efforts were not entirely successful; Carlton points out that Laud's restrictions 'failed to prevent the appearance of seditious works'.⁶ James Sharpe has argued that there are 'occasional shards' of evidence pointing to opposition to witchcraft prosecution on the part of the Caroline authorities, and this is perhaps the most that can safely be said.⁷ However, as Peter Elmer has recently pointed out, there is a difference between discouraging witchcraft prosecutions and discouraging belief in witchcraft.⁸ It

4 See Davies, pp. 90–92. James Sharpe, in *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), tactfully states that Davies's book 'overstates its case' in relation to Laud (p. 29); Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations, c.1650–c.1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) more bluntly describes Davies's general argument as 'eccentric, even monomaniac' (p. 6). Davies's main piece of evidence is a diary entry in which Laud refers to a conversation about witchcraft. The diary entry gives no indication of what was said in this conversation and therefore does not support Davies's argument. It is more telling that, in the seven volumes of Laud's *Works*, Davies found such a tiny volume of material relating to witchcraft. Laud's near-total silence on the issue of witchcraft seems to me much more significant than his supposed scepticism towards it, which is far from proven. See also Elmer, pp. 72–73.

5 Charles Carlton, *Archbishop William Laud* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 71. Davies acknowledges this (p. 91) but asserts that the questions were 'probably' copied from Laud's predecessor.

6 Carlton, p. 71. According to Carlton, Laud ordered the Stationers' Company to put his imprimatur into all published books in 1631. By 1640, 35 per cent of books appeared with the episcopal imprimatur – an increase compared with the situation previously, but still very far short of 'all' (Carlton, p. 118).

7 Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p. 30. Sharpe points to a 1636 case in the Somerset assizes in which a woman who had been accused of witchcraft was not only acquitted, but allowed to bring an action for malicious prosecution *in forma pauperis* (i.e. without paying costs, and with court-appointed legal representation) against her accuser.

8 Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England*, pp. 74–75.

seems likely, therefore, that the sudden decline in witchcraft publications was at least partly due to a decline in interest on the part of authors and the reading public.⁹ After all, if the authorities had been particularly concerned to discourage belief in witchcraft at this time, they might have encouraged the writing of sceptical texts like Scot's or Harsnett's.

Witchcraft was mentioned in some texts on other subjects written during the decade, and these texts throw an interesting light on attitudes at the time. One such text is James Hart's medical treatise *Klinike* (1633). Hart is mostly sceptical about claims of what he calls 'effascination' by sight or by voice. Interestingly, his arguments are entirely naturalistic; he considers the possibility of vapours produced from the mouth causing harm but, with some qualifications, dismisses it. Hart does accept, however, that God may suffer the devil to do harm at times, 'for causes best knowne to himselfe'. When he discusses witches, Hart remarks that

such persons as are by the vulgar suspected of performing such ill offices, are ignorant wicked people, filled with envie and malice, often wishing such harmes to their neighbours, which Satan by his power from above, putting presently in execution, these wicked malicious people are often beleaved to be the actors, and sometimes God in his justice suffereth such to be punished by the sword of the Magistrate, although free from any compact with Satan; God sometimes thus justly punishing their envie and malice, and other sins. And therefore it behooves those in authoritie to be carefull of the lives of such people, where there is no evident and apparent prooffe to convince them.¹⁰

Witches, according to Hart, are deserving of punishment but not guilty. The devil may be responsible for the harms they wished to bring about, but the witches themselves cannot be said to have caused this harm by wishing it to happen. All the elements of witchcraft are still present – hateful witches, the devil, supernaturally inflicted harm – but the causal link between witch and harm has been broken, and the pact between witch and devil is absent. Furthermore, while the punishment of these witches, for their 'envie

⁹ Gibson suggests that the decline in interest in witchcraft stemmed from the publication of more controversial possession pamphlets: see *Reading Witchcraft*, pp. 186–87.

¹⁰ James Hart, *Klinike, or the Diet of the Diseased* (London, 1633), p. 356. All other references to Hart's discussion of witchcraft are also to this page.

and malice', may be just, it is also to be avoided; 'those in authoritie' are advised to be careful in prosecuting witches.

Hart's logic, if that is what it is, is convoluted, and his position shifts abruptly and repeatedly within a single page. Immediately after the passage above, the envious and malicious witch is referred to as 'some poore melancholicke woman'. Hart uses the phrase 'poor woman' three times, and comments that she 'is presently accused for a witch; and if it lay in their power (so ignorant, envious and malicious are some of those people) ... they would hang this accused party'. The envy and malice that had been the defining feature of the accused witch are reassigned to her accusers. The confusion Hart evinces may explain why he declares himself, after this brief and baffling discussion, to be unwilling to dwell on the subject.

Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (published in 1643, but written and circulated in manuscript in the 1630s)¹¹ also briefly discusses witchcraft. Browne declares himself to be a believer:

It is a riddle to me ... how so many learned heads should so farre forget their Metaphysicks, and destroy the Ladder and scale of creatures, as to question the existence of Spirits: for my part, I have ever beleevd, and doe now know, that there are Witches; they that doubt of these, doe not onely deny them, but Spirits; and are obliquely and upon consequence a sort, not of Infidels, but Atheists.¹²

Browne establishes what is at stake in the witchcraft debate in this passage, which constitutes his first words on the subject. Browne ties the existence of spirits (and therefore God) to the existence of witches, and seems in no doubt about either.

Having made this declaration of belief, Browne goes on to undermine all of its practical implications without abandoning the belief itself. First, he establishes his openness to alternative explanations in individual cases, holding that 'the Devill doth really possesse some men, the spirit of melancholy others, the spirit of Delusion others'. Browne even allows for magic in the absence of witchcraft: 'I beleev that all that use sorceries, incantations, and spells, are not Witches'.¹³ This statement would seem to allow that the activities of

11 Kathryn Murphy, 'The Physician's Religion and *salus populi*: The Manuscript Circulation and Print Publication of *Religio Medici*', *Studies in Philology* 111:4 (2014), 845–74 (p. 850).

12 Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (London, 1643), p. 67.

13 Browne, p. 69.

some magic users – perhaps Browne has wise men and women in mind – are excusable, or at least less blameworthy than witchcraft. But he proceeds to go even further than this. Having established that not all witches are witches, he argues that not all magic is magic:

I conceive there is a traditionall Magicke, not learned immediately from the Devill, but at second hand from his Schollers; who having once the secret betrayed, are able, and doe emperically practice without his advice, they both proceeding upon the principles of nature ... Thus I thinke at first a great part of Philosophy was Witchcraft, which being afterward derived to one another, proved but Philosophy, and was indeed no more but the honest effects of Nature: What invented by us is Philosophy, learned from him is Magicke.¹⁴

This statement credits witches with increasing the sum of human knowledge – ‘Philosophy’ – by learning the secrets of nature from the devil. The knowledge gained by witches, passed on to others, becomes harmless and even beneficial. Witches’ magic is not supernatural, according to Browne, but appears to be identical with what writers such as Scot described as natural magic.

Browne’s position is in one sense orthodox. As James I also argued, the devil is not capable of performing true miracles (that is, things which are outside the laws of nature): only God can do this. The devil’s wonders are not supernatural but merely preternatural – achieved through hidden means but in accordance with natural laws.¹⁵ What is unusual about Browne’s discussion of this topic is that he does not draw a sharp distinction between the natural and the preternatural. While the devil’s wonders may not break the laws of nature, it is commonly stressed that it is not possible for humans to perform them. James I, for instance, discusses in depth the devil’s ability to travel at speeds impossible for humans.¹⁶ This is possible by virtue of his nature as a spirit; and while he may also teach his followers ‘manie juglarie trickes at Cardes, dice, & such like’,¹⁷ the devil’s potential as a source of knowledge useful to humanity is not stressed. Rather, his wonders – which only he can perform – are the important point. Although strictly speaking not supernatural,

14 Browne, pp. 69–70. Browne is using an argument previously associated with ritual magicians, and condemned by Thomas Aquinas (Hutton, p. 113).

15 James I, pp. 22–23, argues further that the devil’s ‘miracles’ are illusory, while God’s miracles take place in reality. See also Holland, sig. E1r.

16 James I, pp. 21–22.

17 James I, p. 22.

these wonders are also not 'natural' in the usual sense, neither is it possible for humans to perform them without the devil's aid.

Browne's discussion of 'Witchcraft' and its transformation into 'Philosophy' is as far as it can be from James's demonological view while maintaining the same underlying principles. Things that were once thought to be magical, according to Browne, are eventually revealed as merely natural, simply by virtue of becoming more widely known. The knowledge derived from the devil is not even forbidden knowledge, except in so far as it comes from the devil: learned from some other source, such knowledge can be described as 'honest'. While the avoidance of atheism makes it important for Browne to believe in witches as a guarantee of the existence of spirits, by the end of his discussion these witches have been divested of any real significance, and their magical powers have been transformed into 'Philosophy' – knowledge of the workings of the natural world – for our benefit. There is no sense, in Browne's admittedly brief remarks on the subject, of any real threat posed by witches. In accordance with this absence of threat is the fact that Browne offers no opinion on the legal punishment of witches, still less an exhortation to judges to punish them severely.

Nonetheless, it ought to be stressed that Browne was by no means a sceptic. In fact, it has frequently been asserted that he gave evidence favouring the prosecution in a witchcraft trial that took place in Bury St Edmunds in 1662, apparently on the basis of a pamphlet account of the trial.¹⁸ This pamphlet names the witness as 'Dr. *Brown of Norwich*, a Person of great knowledge',¹⁹ but does not identify him as the author of *Religio Medici*. The pamphlet is of questionable reliability in any case, as it was published nearly twenty years after the event and gets the date of the trial wrong on the cover. It seems likely that Browne was called to give evidence by the witches' accusers, but the pamphlet does not confirm this, stating only that he was present and was asked his opinion.

What is interesting in Browne's evidence, however, is his concern to eliminate the supernatural as an explanation. It is difficult to see how a natural disease could result in the victims vomiting pins, as the witches' accusers said had happened; nonetheless this is what Browne claims. The symptoms described in the pamphlet would have been easily recognisable at the time as the classic symptoms

18 See, for example, Kittredge, p. 334; Davies, p. 109; Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p. 122.

19 Anon., *A Tryal of Witches*, p. 41.

of demonic possession, but the word 'possession' is avoided throughout the pamphlet – instead, the witches' victims are said to be bewitched. Browne's evidence goes even further, presenting the victims as suffering from an entirely natural disease, despite the fact that he also argued that they were indeed bewitched. According to the pamphlet, Browne 'conceived, that these swooning Fits were Natural, and nothing else but that they call the Mother, but only heightened to a great excess by the subtilty of the Devil, co-operating with the Malice of these which we term Witches, at whose Instance he doth these Villanies'.²⁰ This could indeed be the author of *Religio Medici* speaking, as the reality of witchcraft is simultaneously confirmed and stripped of its supernatural qualities.

Browne's view and Hart's are very different in presentation and, to some extent, in content. Nonetheless, they do share some assumptions. Both authors emphasise the conformity of witchcraft to the normal laws of nature, and they both assume that the actual mechanics of witchcraft can, in principle, be understood. Both place little emphasis on, or in Hart's case actually discourage, the prosecution of people accused of witchcraft. In addition, both continue to maintain the power of the devil and his potential for intervening in human affairs. The two authors were educated people, and the similarities between their texts provide some evidence of what might be termed an 'elite' view of witchcraft during the 1630s. From this perspective, the belief in witchcraft was necessary for reasons of religious orthodoxy. It was supported by important authorities and well established, but many of the details of this belief were rather lurid and may have become embarrassing. The topic was not one to dwell on at length; there was no longer any need to write full-length monographs about it. Furthermore, the theoretical belief in witchcraft had to be maintained without allowing too many practical consequences to follow on from it. Witchcraft prosecutions during the 1630s, as Sharpe points out, 'almost invariably led to an acquittal'.²¹ The disruptive impact of high-profile witchcraft cases was not welcome to the authorities.

20 *A Tryal of Witches*, p. 42.

21 Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p. 30. The situation outside the Home Counties is much more uncertain owing to the patchier survival of assize records; Janet A. Thompson argues in *Wives, Widows, Witches and Bitches: Women in Seventeenth Century Devon* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) that persecution in that county peaked in the second half of the 1600s (see pp. 101–02). Sharpe makes a similar suggestion about the Western, Oxford, and Northern circuits, although more cautiously, in *Instruments of Darkness*, p. 124.

Thomas Heywood and witchcraft

Another of the few authors to touch on the subject of witchcraft in the 1630s is also a co-author of *The Late Lancashire Witches*. Thomas Heywood, an especially significant figure in the study of witchcraft drama, was also the author of partly demonological works. In *Gynaikeion* (1624), a collection of stories and mythology about women, Heywood devotes about twenty pages to a discussion of witchcraft, in the course of which he relies heavily on Jean Bodin, whose work he had probably read in Latin translation.²² *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels* (1635) is perhaps even more interesting, as it was published so soon after the play. This book is an eclectic mixture of mythology, angelology, theology, and demonology, mostly written in rhyming couplets, with frequent digressions on all manner of topics. It is primarily on the strength of these two works that Heywood has been described as a ‘famous witch-lorist’,²³ and one who, according to Katharine Briggs, ‘believed the witch stories’.²⁴ But this reputation repays closer examination, because Heywood’s beliefs are not quite as straightforward as these writers suggest.

Unlike most previous authors on witchcraft, Heywood took a great many examples from classical myth. He cites, among others, Plutarch, Herodotus, and Pliny, and discusses Circe, Medea, Vitia, Mycale, Locusta, Eriphila, and many other mythological characters.²⁵ This is perhaps not surprising given his previous interest in mythology, as the author of plays on the *Golden, Silver, Brazen and Iron Ages*. The attitude of Renaissance authors towards classical myth is often difficult to gauge, but some readers would have understood these stories to be fictional.²⁶ Heywood does not say that the myths he repeats are invented, but he does acknowledge their implausibility, describing the stories told by ‘the antient Poets’ as ‘most strange things, as miraculous to relate as difficult to beleue’.²⁷

22 Heywood was probably unable to read much French: see Hirsch, ‘Werewolves and Severed Hands’, p. 94.

23 Arthur M. Clark, *Thomas Heywood* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1931), p. 121.

24 Briggs, p. 100.

25 Thomas Heywood, *Gynaikeion* (London, 1624), pp. 403–06. Other authors on witchcraft also refer to ancient poets, but much less extensively than Heywood. Gareth Roberts, ‘The Descendants of Circe’, discusses a number of examples; see pp. 187–92.

26 See the discussion of classical myth in Chapter 1.

27 Heywood, *Gynaikeion*, p. 403.

Heywood professes to believe in witchcraft, but there are several occasions on which his attitude to the material he presents is confused or defensive. He is reluctant to take any position on what he regards as controversial theoretical issues presented by witchcraft. When referring to such points, he does so in order to avoid them: 'The difference betwixt Witches, or to define what *Maga* are and what *Lamia*, were but time misspent, the rather because it hath beene an argument so much handled in our mother tongue.'²⁸ Heywood refuses to take any position on the possibility of witches transforming their shapes, stating that

[w]hether this be possible in Nature, or no ... hath beene a Question as well amongst the Theologists, as the Philosophers: It is no businesse of mine at this present to reconcile their Controuersies, my promise is onely to acquaint you with such things as I haue eyther read, or heard related: which if they erre in any thing from truth, blame not me, but the Authors.²⁹

Heywood here disowns any responsibility for the stories he is repeating, and it is difficult to see why he would feel the need to do so if he were convinced of their accuracy. Heywood's apparent lack of confidence on this subject is emphasised by his total dependence on authority. Unlike many earlier writers on witchcraft, Heywood appeals solely to authority – other people's stories – and makes almost no reference to the evidence of daily experience. The closest he comes to a personal anecdote is a story he tells about a witch who will stop at nothing in order to be reunited with her kettle, attributing this tale to a 'woman of good credit and reputation, whom I have knowne about these foure and twentie yeares'.³⁰ But even this story takes place far away, on a ship that was sailing to England. (The witch terrifies the crew by creating a storm and appearing on the mainmast to demand the return of her kettle, which had been given as security for a loan that she failed to repay. The witch is only placated when the kettle is thrown over the side of the ship, and she promptly sails away in it.) Many of the other stories that Heywood repeats are distanced from Heywood's England in time and place; many are classical, others concern 'the Witches in Lap-land, Fin-land, and these miserable and wretched cold countries'.³¹ One exception is the Warboys case, mentioned in passing

28 Heywood, *Gynaikeion*, p. 406.

29 Heywood, *Gynaikeion*, pp. 409–10.

30 Heywood, *Gynaikeion*, p. 414.

31 Heywood, *Gynaikeion*, p. 417.

in *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels*. Heywood's only source of information about this case seems to be the pamphlet account published in 1593, but he nonetheless presents it rather proudly, as a story which buttresses the credibility of the other stories he has already told:

To giue the histories past the more credit, as also those which follow, concerning Witches, Magitions, Circulators, juglers, &c. if we shall but cast our eyes backe upon our selves, and seeke no further than the late times, and in them but examine our owne Nation, we shall vndoubtedly finde accidents as prodigious, horrid, and euery way wonderfull, as in the other. Concerning which whosoever shall desire to be more fully satisfied, I refer them to a Discourse published in English, Anno 1593. containing sundry remarkable pieces of Witchcraft.³²

This story, belonging to the not-so-recent past from Heywood's perspective, is told specifically in order to back up the others. In stating this to be the case, he tacitly admits them to be unconvincing. Furthermore, while this story is described as more credible than the others – perhaps partly because it happened in the more familiar territory of England – Heywood declines to share any of the details with the reader. The really convincing evidence is the evidence he chooses *not* to present.

Jostling with Heywood's belief in witchcraft is his scepticism towards it. Heywood's attitude to the kind of magic users that he might have been encountered in daily life – wise men and women – is revealed in an earlier section of *Gynaikeion* on prophetesses, in which he tells a story revealing the 'imposturous lies' of a cunning woman, and dismisses the claims of all 'Fortune-tellers, Gypsies, Wisewomen, and such as pretend to tell of things lost'.³³ This is very similar to the attitude articulated in one of Heywood's earlier dramatic writings, *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* (1604?). The everyday witchcraft that members of the audience might actually encounter in their daily lives – the magical services sold by wise folk – are scornfully dismissed in both Heywood's dramatic and non-dramatic writings. His attitude to witchcraft seems to be built on an implicit distinction between the 'real', threatening witchcraft, which always seems to be happening somewhere else, and the familiar, basically harmless fake 'witchcraft' practised by tricksters like the

32 Thomas Heywood, *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels* (London, 1635), pp. 597–98.

33 Heywood, *Gynaikeion*, p. 103.

wise woman. A similar divide exists in the representation of witchcraft in *The Late Lancashire Witches*.

Heywood, while conceding the difficulty of believing in witchcraft, is nonetheless determined to do so, assuming that the statements in *Gynaikeion* and the *Hierarchie* can be taken as an accurate representation of his views. Interestingly, the tone of his discussion in *Gynaikeion* is rather darker than that in *Hierarchie*; in his discussion of impotence magic in the earlier text, for example, he seems almost angry, making oblique reference to everyday experience when he describes this practice as ‘commonly in use now adayes’.³⁴ By the time of *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels*, however, while maleficent witchcraft certainly happens, it has become something that almost always happens somewhere else – not here in London. Another issue on which Heywood takes no stand – in fact, he hardly ever even refers to it – is the legal punishment of witches. Again, this is in contrast to earlier writers on witchcraft like James I, Perkins, and Bodin, who all demand that tougher action be taken against witches.³⁵ Heywood does not feel the need to make any demand for greater severity, despite the fact that, by the time of the *Hierarchie*, very few convictions were taking place. The stories about witches are recounted simply as stories, not as evidence that action needs to be taken. However genuine Heywood’s belief in witchcraft may be, it is a belief devoid of practical consequences, as with his contemporaries, Browne and Hart.

The play and the case

In *The Witch of Edmonton* many popular beliefs about witches are ridiculed or shown to be false. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, by contrast, everything is true. The powers the eponymous witches are able to command are varied and spectacular: they are able to transform themselves into large cats, summon spirits to impersonate real people, magically steal food from a wedding feast, cause impotence, and make milk pails walk by themselves (this last effect was apparently reproduced on stage in performances). The chief witch, Mistress Generous, is in possession of a magic bridle which transforms the wearer into a horse when a rhyming charm is recited.

³⁴ Heywood, *Gynaikeion*, p. 402.

³⁵ Perkins, for example, argues that witches should always be put to death, even in the absence of *maleficium* (pp. 181–84), while James I equates leniency towards witches with witchcraft itself (p. 78).

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, such spoken charms are represented as both serious – in that they are blasphemous – and ineffective, whereas *The Late Lancashire Witches* treats magic spells as comical, but at the same time genuinely efficacious, as did Middleton's *The Witch*. The comic nature of the play was recognised by an auditor of the play's third performance, Nathaniel Tomkyns, whose letter to a friend provides a detailed description and can reasonably be described as the earliest extant theatre review.³⁶

As a number of scholars have pointed out,³⁷ much of this material closely resembles the deposition statements made by people involved in the case. Edmund Robinson, a 10-year-old boy, was the main witness against the witches, and his deposition provides many of the play's plot elements. His deposition described a woman and a boy turning into greyhounds, a gathering of witches where he was given 'Flesh and Bread upon a Trencher and Drink in a Glass', and a fight with a devil-boy whose identity is betrayed by his having a 'cloven foot'.³⁸ All of these events are also found in the play. Other parts of the play seem to have come from the depositions of the accused. Margaret Johnson testified that 'there appeared unto her a spirit or devill in the similitude and proportion of a man, apparrelled in a suite of blacke, tied about with silke pointes'.³⁹ There are close resemblances between this statement and the confession delivered by Peg at the end of the play, which even refers to 'blacke points'.⁴⁰

The play's repetition and apparent endorsement of all these allegations is a point of contrast with *The Witch of Edmonton*.

36 All critics of the play are indebted to Herbert Berry, who discovered this manuscript. See Berry, *Shakespeare's Playhouses* (New York: AMS, 1987), pp. 123–24.

37 Berry, pp. 129–31; Harris, p. 176; Briggs, p. 102; Heather Hirschfeld, *Joint Enterprises: Collaborative Drama and the Institutionalization of the English Renaissance Theatre* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), p. 364.

38 Popular belief had it that the devil could take on human form, but would be given away by having one cloven hoof instead of a foot (Oldridge, p. 82). Various versions of the deposition survive (see note 47); I have used the text as reproduced in John Webster's *Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (London, 1677), pp. 347–49.

39 Margaret Johnson's deposition is reproduced in Thomas Wright (ed.), *Narratives of Sorcery and Magic*, vol. 2 (London, 1851), pp. 114–17.

40 Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, *The Late Lancashire Witches*, Quarto Text, edited by Helen Ostovich, Richard Brome online (www.hrionline.ac.uk/brome, 17 January 2010), l. 2646. Subsequent line references, given in parentheses, are to this edition.

This is partly the result of the differences between the main sources for the plays. Goodcole's pamphlet on Elizabeth Sawyer is relatively sober, whereas Edmund Robinson's deposition is fantastic, even by the standards of witchcraft accusations. However, as Goodcole's pamphlet makes clear, there was no shortage of wild stories in circulation about Elizabeth Sawyer, and the playwrights in general did not make use of these; with a few exceptions, *The Witch of Edmonton* follows Goodcole's rejection of the less plausible stories that circulated about Elizabeth Sawyer. Had Dekker, Ford, and Rowley wanted to write a much more comic play, they might have found some way to include scenes involving 'a Ferret and an Owle dayly sporting'⁴¹ for Elizabeth Sawyer's entertainment – this might have been difficult to stage, but such considerations did not prevent the King's Men from presenting a walking pail of milk in *The Late Lancashire Witches*. In fact, *The Late Lancashire Witches* not only represents many of Edmund Robinson's stories about witchcraft in detail, it goes on to add several unlikely stories of its own.

The plot elements that do not come from depositions are drawn from a variety of sources. During the wedding feast, the musicians are first enchanted into playing 'Musicke. Every one a severall tune' (1337SD), then they are prevented from playing at all (1342), and finally the musicians are magically compelled to smash their instruments (1378). This part of the plot was probably inspired by the failed Morris dance in *The Witch of Edmonton*. Following the wedding, in Act iv, Lawrence is the victim of witchcraft-induced impotence, a topic discussed by Heywood in earlier writings.⁴² The 'parade of fathers', in which Whetstone purports to reveal the true parentage of Arthur, Bantam, and Shakestone, is borrowed from the John Teutonicus story which Heywood told soon afterwards in *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels*, as Alison Findlay points out.⁴³ Finally, the episode in which Mistress Generous is identified as a witch by her severed hand, cut off by the soldier-miller when she attacks him in the shape of a large cat, is taken from the *Malleus Maleficarum*, possibly in combination with other sources.⁴⁴

41 Goodcole, epistle to the readers.

42 *Gynaikeion*, p. 402.

43 Alison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 61. The John Teutonicus story is told on pp. 512–14 of *Hierarchie*.

44 See Institoris and Sprenger, II.123C–124B (pp. 339–40). A very similar story is retold in *Gynaikeion*, where Heywood explicitly attributes it to the *Malleus* (see *Gynaikeion*, p. 410), suggesting that this was his source for the play's version

The apparent credulity of the play has led some scholars to claim that it is a piece of witchmongering propaganda. Davies claims that ‘the supreme object’ of the play ‘must have been to intensify public feeling against witches’,⁴⁵ while Berry writes that

Heywood and Brome knew that many of the accused persons stoutly denied being witches ... Yet they managed to keep any hint of the denials out of the play, or of the case for the accused otherwise. The play represents the case for the prosecution alone ... all the rational people who have had doubts about the existence or seriousness of witchcraft are convinced that they have been wrong.⁴⁶

The case for the prosecution would have been the only one heard in court as well, since defendants in criminal trials were not entitled to legal representation at the time. Berry makes this claim in the course of an elaborate and highly speculative argument, which links the play to an attempt by the Puritan faction within the Privy Council to push for punishment of the witches. There is no direct evidence for this alleged disagreement; Berry’s view is based on his assumption that the playwrights’ access to depositions indicates that they had inside information from the Privy Council. But given the relatively large number of texts in which the depositions have survived, it seems unlikely that these documents were a well-kept secret.⁴⁷ In arguing for his view, Berry relies primarily on the interpretation of the play outlined here, which is not, in my view, a persuasive one. To begin with, it is not strictly true that the denials of the witches are kept out of the play: ‘confession you get none from us’, says Mall (2616). Berry argues that the play ‘represents

of the story as well. Brett D. Hirsch argues that the episode was inspired by a French text, Henri Boguet’s *Discours des Sorciers* (1590), which features the specific detail of a wedding ring on a severed hand (‘Werewolves and Severed Hands’, p. 92). However, this version of the story deals with a werewolf rather than a witch who transforms herself into a cat, so it is probably not the only source, especially in view of Heywood’s own reference to the *Malleus*. Kittredge comments that these kinds of stories – in which injuries inflicted on a magician or witch in changed form are used to identify him or her – were very common and date back at least as far as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (p. 41).

45 Davies, p. 114.

46 Berry, p. 131.

47 The depositions survive in ‘several manuscript sources, more or less corrupt’, according to Ewen, p. 244, footnote 3, and are also reprinted in Webster’s *Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft*. Berry himself acknowledges that the depositions ‘sooner or later ... circulated widely’ (p. 134).

the case for the prosecution', but this case had been proven in a court of law. By the time the play was first performed, the accused had already been convicted by a jury in Lancashire. This means that the deposition given by Edmund Robinson had been accepted by both a grand jury and a petty jury as substantially true; as far as the legal record was concerned, the guilt of the witches was established fact. One of the witches – Margaret Johnson – had even confessed, as the play shows in lines 2627–46. In view of the confession and the guilty verdict, the play could hardly do otherwise than represent the witches as guilty. As an editor of the play points out, 'it would be most inappropriate (as well as politically dangerous) for the players to tell "Justice" what to do'.⁴⁸ In addition, there are dramatic and commercial reasons for presenting the witches as unambiguously guilty. A witch play that represented the witches as innocent would be anti-climactic to say the least, and such a play would have been unlikely to draw the large crowds that went to see *The Late Lancashire Witches*.

That the witches really are witches is to be expected; much more significant than the play's demonstration of the witches' guilt is the effort that goes into depicting them as amusing and, for the most part, harmless. Once again, this is in contrast to Elizabeth Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton*, who is shown to be responsible for the death of Agnes Ratcliffe. As Kathleen McLuskie points out, the historical Lancashire witches were accused of murder – accusations which disappear in the play.⁴⁹ The witches in the play may scratch the miller, but no one is killed; for the most part, their activities result in situations aimed at making the audience laugh. In fact, the play even makes the witch hunter Doughty explicitly state that the witches have *not* killed anyone: 'I have sought about these two dayes, and heard of a hundred such mischievous tricks, *though none mortall*' (2143–45; emphasis added). This is despite the fact that seventeen of the witches in the case in Lancashire had been found guilty of charges including murder by witchcraft.⁵⁰ Even more

48 Laird Barber, introduction to *The Late Lancashire Witches*, by Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome (New York: Garland, 1979), p. 71.

49 Kathleen McLuskie, 'Politics and Aesthetic Pleasure in 1630s Theater', in *Localizing Caroline Drama: Politics and Economics of the Early Modern English Stage, 1625–1642*, edited by Adam Zucker and Alan B. Farmer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 43–68 (pp. 62–63).

50 See Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism*, p. 249. The charges are summarised on pp. 246–47.

striking than the omissions of the plot is the way the witches themselves stress their harmlessness; 'Tis all for mirth, we mean no hurt', says Mistress Generous (2000).

The epilogue to the play has also been the subject of much discussion, since it refers explicitly to the fate of the witches, which had yet to be decided at the time of the play's performance:

Now while the Witches must expect their due
By lawfull Iustice, we appeale to you
For favourable censure; what their crime
May bring upon 'em, ripenes yet of time
Has not reveal'd. Perhaps great Mercy may
After just condemnation give them day
Of longer life.
(2685-91)

Made in the context of a recent guilty verdict by the jury in Lancashire ('just condemnation'), this speech is highly suggestive in intimating that mercy may be granted to the witches. It is also striking that, as Hirschfeld points out, the witches and the playwrights are associated in the lines above, and throughout the play – perhaps most obviously when they arrange a show for Arthur and his friends, the parade of fathers.⁵¹ In the epilogue, like the witches awaiting the decision of the King and his council, the playwrights and actors anxiously await the judgement of the audience.

That any doubt at all is expressed about the punishment the witches will suffer would be highly presumptuous if their execution were not already in doubt. Even the bishop sent by the King to examine the witches hesitated to push his own doubts about the verdict too far, commenting that 'such evidence being, as lawyers speak, against the King, I thought it not meet without further authority to examine'.⁵² Lowly playwrights would have had even greater reason to be cautious than a bishop, and hinting that the witches may receive mercy would not have been a very wise thing for the playwrights to do if they did not already believe this outcome to be likely. It may be that the playwrights did have some inside knowledge of what was going to happen, as Berry suggests. Alternatively, it may have been obvious to everyone that the authorities did not

51 Hirschfeld, p. 142.

52 Quoted in Barber, p. 60. Barber adds that 'legally speaking, the King was on the side of the prosecution and the Bishop hesitates to undermine the King's case'.

want to see large numbers of people convicted of witchcraft on the fantastical evidence of 10-year-old boys. As the prologue suggests, the case was ‘unto many here well knowne’ (l. 7); and given the rarity of successful witchcraft prosecutions at this time, the likely attitude of the authorities was probably no mystery to anyone. Had the Privy Council been willing to allow the execution of the witches, there would have been no need to have them brought to London, so the motives for the intervention were hardly mysterious.

The guilt of the witches is maintained in the play and, as I have suggested, there are two important reasons for this: the simple commercial and dramatic reason that ‘real’ witches are much more entertaining than wrongly accused women, and the fact that it would be presumptuous for a play openly to question the verdict of an assize court. Nonetheless, coexisting with the guilt of the witches is their innocence, in that they do no real harm. Far from presenting the case for the prosecution, the play goes as far as it can to undermine that case without actually contradicting it. In simultaneously maintaining the reality of witchcraft and its insignificance, the perspective of the play resembles the position of Browne, and even the later view of Addison. Witchcraft is shown to exist, but very little follows from this; it cannot and must not be taken seriously, and it presents no real threat.

Debating witchcraft in *The Late Lancashire Witches*

The play opens with an argument about the existence of witchcraft, as Hirschfeld points out,⁵³ but it is also an argument about scepticism in a broader sense. The discussion concerns the interpretation of empirical evidence. Three young gentlemen – Arthur, Bantam, and Shakestone – have been hunting, and the hare they were chasing has disappeared without a trace. Their argument is about whether the hare disappeared by witchcraft, or whether there is some as yet unknown natural explanation. Arthur’s companions make the case for the latter:

- BANT. She might find some Muse as then not visible to us,
And escape that way.
SHAK. Perhaps some Foxe had earth’d there,
And though it be not common, for I seldome
Have knowne or heard the like, there squat her selfe,

53 Hirschfeld, pp. 135–36.

And so her scape appeare but Naturall,
Which you proclaime a Wonder.
(36–42)

While most modern readers will probably find this line of thought to be reasonable, the terms in which Bantam and Shakestone state their case put their argument in the worst possible light. In arguing for a natural explanation of the hare's disappearance, the two sceptics are unable to come up with a wholly convincing account. They can only suggest airy possibilities, in contrast to the strong and satisfyingly complete explanation of witchcraft which Arthur puts forward. Even as he argues against his friend's interpretation of events, Shakestone concedes that his case is weak and unlikely. Since they are unable to give a definite account of how the hare disappeared 'naturally', the case for a supernatural explanation is strengthened.

If this last statement does not seem self-evident, it is worth remembering that seventeenth-century views of what might be considered 'natural' often differed from the typical view in the present. In the well-known case of Mary Glover, a young woman supposedly suffering from demonic possession, it was argued by the doctor Edward Jorden that Glover was in fact suffering from a natural disease: hysteria. In the trial of the witch accused of being responsible for Glover's possession, one observer recorded the following exchange between Jorden and the judge, who was the Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, Edmund Anderson:

The Lord Anderson, hearing Doctor Jordaine to often insinuat, some feigning or dissembling fashions in the maide and withal, so much to beat upon these words; *for these causes, I thinck it may be naturall; and these accidents and Symptoms for ought I see bee naturall*: pressed him to answer directly, whether it were naturall or supernaturall. He said, that in his conscience he thought it was altogether naturall. What do you call it quoth the Judge? *Passio Hysterica* said the Doctor. Can you cure it? I cannot tell: I will not undertake it, but I thinck fit tryall should be made thereof. *Lord Anderson*, Doe you thinke she Counterfetteth? *D. Jordeyn* No, in my Conscience I thinke she doth not counterfett: *Lord Anderson*, Then in my conscience, it is not naturall: for if you tell me neither a Naturall cause, of it, nor a naturall remedy, I will tell you, that it is not naturall.⁵⁴

54 Quoted in Michael McDonald (ed.), *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London: Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover Case* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 28. See also Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, pp. 215–16.

Jorden claims that the disease is the result of natural causes, but is unable to identify exactly what those causes are or how to treat the disease. To a typical modern reader this may seem reasonable. But a typical modern reader will probably demand any illness to have natural causes; this is the only type of explanation likely to be accepted. If the natural causes of a disease are not currently known, then they can, in principle, be discovered. Anderson's view is different: he appears to regard human knowledge as subject to unvarying limitations. Whatever lies outside the scope of human knowledge is necessarily not natural.⁵⁵ In the play, Shakestone and Bantam fail to provide a clear, plausible, and complete explanation of the hare's disappearance, in the same way that Edward Jorden failed to provide such an explanation for Mary Glover's illness. In consequence, the strength of the sceptical case is significantly weakened.

Arthur, the closest character the play has to a hero, argues against Shakestone and Bantam, making the case for a common-sense, empirical approach to the evidence:

Well well Gentlemen, be you of your own faith, but what I see
 And is to me apparent, being in sence,
 My wits about me, no way tost nor troubled,
 To that will I give credit.
 (43–46)

What is strange about this speech, at least to a modern reader, is that Arthur is arguing *in favour* of the witchcraft explanation for the hare's disappearance. Arthur believes that he has clear, empirical evidence of witchcraft, and he tellingly refers to his companions' contrary belief as 'faith'. Arthur, in other words, is making the obvious inference, the judgement based on the solid ground of sensory experience rather than preconceived ideas about what is and is not possible. The reasons for the hare's disappearance cannot be convincingly explained by reference to known natural causes, therefore they are not natural. His friends are simply clinging to their 'faith' in spite of clear and conclusive evidence. Arthur also feels the need to stress that his wits are 'no way tost nor troubled', and this part of his speech connects the young gentlemen's debate

55 The Spanish theologian Pedro Ciruelo likewise argued that, in the absence of a known natural cause, supernatural or spiritual causation must be inferred; see Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 183–84.

not only to scepticism about witchcraft but to philosophical scepticism more generally.

Arthur's statement aligns him with a common response to sceptical arguments against the idea that certain knowledge is attainable through the evidence of the senses. While sceptics stressed the unreliability of the senses, pointing out that sensory perception could be distorted and misleading under certain conditions, one major strand of the anti-sceptical response was to reaffirm the ability of a healthy person with senses operating under normal conditions to reach accurate conclusions about the world, in accordance with established Aristotelian principles.⁵⁶ One of the earliest writers against Pyrrhonism was Pierre Le Loyer, who wished to defend his belief in supernatural apparitions by arguing for the reliability of sensory data.⁵⁷ Of course, this intuitively appealing but logically inadequate idea did not go without a response from sceptical thinkers. Montaigne, in his *Apologie of Raymond Sebond*, wrote that

since the accidents of sicknesse, of madnesse, or of sleepe, make things appeare other unto us, then they seeme unto the healthie, unto the wise, and to the waking: Is it not likely, that our right seate and naturall humors, have also wherewith to give a being unto things ... and our health as capable to give them his visage, as sicknesse? Why hath not the temperate man some forme of the objects relative unto himselfe as the intemperate: and shall not he likewise imprint his Character in them?⁵⁸

We have no more reason to trust the senses of the healthy than we do those of the diseased, according to Montaigne; the important point is that the senses can vary, and this demonstrates that human perceptions of reality are mediated and therefore distorted by our sensory apparatus. But this powerful sceptical argument is not represented in the play, which gives Arthur's common-sense view the last word. While Arthur's view is associated with empirical evidence and distinguished from that of blind faith, his opinion is not sceptical in the philosophical sense; on the contrary, he expresses an anti-sceptical empiricist position.

As well as taking a position in relation to philosophical scepticism, Arthur's view seems to anticipate a common objection of sceptics to witchcraft specifically. Reginald Scot tended to focus on the

56 For a general discussion of this debate see Popkin, pp. 105–11.

57 Popkin, p. 78. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Bodin and John Cotta both took the trouble to reject philosophical scepticism in their works on witchcraft.

58 Montaigne, II.12, p. 317.

delusions of witches themselves, claiming that witches believed themselves to have magical powers because they were misled by melancholy which ‘depraved’ their senses, but he also accused one writer on witchcraft, Richard Gallis, of being ‘a mad man’.⁵⁹ Later in the seventeenth century, John Webster claimed that those who are not ‘perfect in the organs of their sense’ or who are ‘of a vitiated or distempered Phantasie’ are unreliable as witnesses, since they will ‘take a bush to be a Boggard, and a black sheep to be a Demon’.⁶⁰ It is therefore important for Arthur, in the play, to make clear that no such reservations can be applied to him.

This pattern, stressing the blind faith of sceptics and the common-sense empiricism of believers, is repeated later in the play. Generous, a character who is represented and described by others as admirable, has one flaw: he does not believe in witches. Presented with evidence of witchcraft in the form of the disturbances in the Seely household, he refuses even to consider what Arthur describes as the general opinion, saying: ‘They that thinke so dreame, / For my beliefe is, no such thing can be’ (286–87). This is not the only reason Generous has to believe in witchcraft – he is at this stage already aware that his tenant, the miller, is being tormented by nocturnal visits from ‘Rats, Cats, Wezells, Witches Or Dogges, or Divels’ (792–93). Later in the play, his scepticism about witchcraft is explicitly linked to his religious beliefs. Confronted by the claim of his servant, Robin, to have ridden to London and back in a night, Generous again refuses to believe: ‘I would have sworne ... it had been the same Wine, but it can never fall within the Christians beleefe, that thou cou’dst ride above three hundred miles in 8. houres’ (1163–67). The evidence of sensory experience – the taste of the wine – competes with Generous’s faith – ‘the Christians beleefe’ – and faith beats sensory experience.

The sentiments that Generous expresses associate religious faith with scepticism about witchcraft, rather than with belief in it, inverting the views of a large majority of early modern witchcraft theorists. While most writers on witchcraft claim that empirical evidence demonstrates the existence of witches, they also tend to make a clear connection between atheism and scepticism. Robert H. West regards Generous as one of the characters representing ‘Scotian rationalism’ in the play.⁶¹ Generous does resemble Scot in

⁵⁹ Scot, I.8, III.9 (pp. 17, 52).

⁶⁰ Webster, p. 60.

⁶¹ West, *The Invisible World*, p. 154.

so far as he holds witchcraft beliefs to be impious, but he is *not* the voice of reason in the play – still less that of empiricism. The voice of empiricism and common sense is Arthur, and, in more complicated fashion, Doughty: characters who judge, apparently without preconceptions and on the evidence of their senses, that witches really do exist. Generous, by contrast, is presented with seemingly incontestable proof of his servant's visit to London – a piece of paper delivered by Robin from the drawer at the Mitre in Fleet Street, where he has bought Generous's favourite wine. The obvious conclusion, suggested by the evidence of the wine and the note, is the correct one: Robin really has travelled to London and back impossibly quickly.

Instead of reaching this conclusion, however, Generous stretches his ingenuity to find an alternative explanation, one which fits his preconceived ideas about the impossibility of witchcraft: 'but why may not this bee a tricke? this Knaue may finde it when I lost it, and conceale it till now to come over me withall. I will not trouble my thoughts with it further at this time' (1209–12). Generous will believe anything sooner than believe in witchcraft. Rather than questioning his cherished beliefs, he prefers to stop thinking altogether, dismissing the question from his mind. Generous's thought process resembles that of Jean Bodin, who seems uneasily aware of the implausibility of witchcraft but is determined to believe in it nonetheless. Generous ought to be aware of the reality of the witchcraft that pervades the play, but he refuses to accept it.

At other points in the action, however, the play depicts Generous not as a man blinded by faith but as a hard-headed empiricist sceptic who will trust nothing but the evidence of his senses. 'Ile not perswade you to any thing, you will beleeeve nothing but what you see' (1613–14), says Robin to Generous. Robin indicates that the sight of Mistress Generous returning to her normal shape once the magic bridle is removed from her will persuade Generous, but he also implies that Generous is a stubborn sceptic who will take nothing on faith – as he should. This is at odds both with Generous's earlier characterisation as someone blinded by faith and with the favourable characterisation of Arthur as a rational empiricist, simply believing the evidence of his senses: the same quality is rhetorically depicted as admirable in Arthur and deplorable in Generous.

Generous is, in the end, punished for his incredulity rather than his faith. His wife's continued activities as a witch are revealed to him in a gruesome manner when he is presented with her severed hand, complete with wedding ring. Not only does the play punish

Generous, it also makes him acknowledge the reasons for, and the justice of, his punishment:

Amazement upon wonder, can this be;
 I needs must know't by most infallible markes.
 Is this the hand once plighted holy vowes,
 And this the ring that bound them? doth this last age
 Afford what former never durst beleeve?
 O how have I offended those high powers?
 That my great incredulity should merit
 A punishment so grievous, and to happen
 Vnder mine owne roofe, mine own bed, my bosome.
 (2341–49)

One peculiar aspect of this speech is that this is the second time Generous has had his wife's witchcraft proved to him; at this point in the play he has already witnessed her transformation from horse to woman, and her confession has persuaded him of the existence of witchcraft. Nonetheless, his amazement is repeated in the speech above; he is just as surprised by his wife's witchcraft as he was the first time.

Equally striking is that Generous's 'great incredulity' has been transformed. From having been a key component of his religious beliefs, it suddenly (and incongruously) becomes the sin of intellectual pride which renders him deserving of his punishment. His scepticism has previously been represented as blind faith, but in the passage above he is revealed to have lacked faith. This second, and seemingly contradictory, characteristic of Generous the sceptic – his excessive confidence in his own capacity for understanding, grounded in a lack of faith in God – is a more traditional way of attacking scepticism about witchcraft. The play represents scepticism as both irrational and unchristian; it is grounded in both blind faith *and* a deplorable lack of faith.

Generous's conversion to belief in witchcraft performs the function of rhetorical scepticism within the play. As in supposedly factual texts on witchcraft, scepticism is defeated by incontestable evidence of the reality of witchcraft. But in contrast to *The Witch of Edmonton*, where no character denies the existence of witchcraft, Generous expresses scepticism as to the very possibility of witchcraft, rather than mere doubts about specific aspects of witchcraft belief. Moreover, while Generous's scepticism is a kind of tragic flaw, it does not render him unworthy of the audience's esteem. The other characters in the play offer him almost nothing but praise – the one exception is his wife. Indeed, the majority of the sensible voices within the

play – Bantam, Shakestone, Generous, and, at least some of the time, Doughty – are sceptical voices. Arthur believes in witches, but for much of the play the only character who seems to agree with him is the buffoonish Whetstone – hardly promising company. Irrespective of the opinions of the playwrights or the perspective from which the play itself was written, *The Late Lancashire Witches* is the product of a society that had become considerably more sceptical in a period of little more than ten years since *The Witch of Edmonton* was first performed.

There are other traces of this scepticism within the play. The character of Doughty, in the early part of the play, provides another example of rhetorical scepticism as he is gradually convinced that the chaos in the Seely household can only be the result of witchcraft. Later in the play, however, his beliefs change again; Heather Hirschfeld argues that Doughty's shifts from belief to scepticism 'compromise either stance'.⁶² Doughty was deluded when he disbelieved in the reality of witches, but it is not entirely clear that he is any less deluded afterwards. His belief in the story told by the miller's boy is a case in point. The audience has seen the encounter between the miller's boy and a witch, but the details of this encounter do not match what the miller's boy tells Doughty in Act v. This is, on the one hand, an example of dramatic economy; the audience does not need to be given the same information twice. At the same time, however, the fact that the audience has not seen the events related by the boy to Doughty raises the possibility that the story is being embellished after the event. This possibility is made more prominent by the way the story is told:

DOUGHTY Thou art a brave Boy, the honour of thy Country; thy Statue shall be set up in brasse upon the Market Crosse in Lancaster, I blesse the time that I answered at the Font for thee: 'Zookes did I ever thinke that a Godson of mine should have fought hand to fist with the Divell!

MIL. He was ever an unhappy Boy Sir, and like enough to grow acquainted with him; and friends may fall out sometimes.

DOUGHT. Thou art a dogged Sire, and doest not know the vertue of my Godsonne, my sonne now; he shall be thy sonne no longer: he and I will worry all the Witches in Lancashire.

MIL. You were best take heed though.

DOUGH. I care not, though we leave not above three untainted women in the Parish, we'll doe it.
(2102–16)

62 Hirschfeld, p. 137.

Doughty's praise of the boy – whose supposed fight with the devil has not been witnessed by the audience – is wildly excessive, and the boy's father is distinctly sceptical about his son's character and perhaps also his story, at least in this early part of the scene. Doughty ignores the miller's attempt to urge caution, and even goes so far as to imply he will make the boy his heir – a prospect he has previously tantalised Arthur with. Even this faint suggestion that the boy could have a financial interest in making accusations of witchcraft could be significant. In the historical case, according to the sceptic John Webster, 'the boy, his Father, and some others besides did make a practice to go from Church to Church that the Boy might reveal and discover Witches ... and by that means they got a good living'.⁶³ This 'practice' seems to be more or less what Doughty is proposing, and the chaos it could lead to is suggested by Doughty's reckless boast at the end of the passage.⁶⁴

In this scene, then, considerable doubt is cast on the source of the evidence against the accused witches in the historical case – the miller's boy, who is obviously a dramatic representation of the historical Edmund Robinson. This doubt is first expressed by the boy's own father. Later, Doughty brings the reliability of both father and son into question again, as the miller relates a story of what sounds like demonic possession:

MIL. Till I wondring at his stay, went out and found him in the Trance; since which time, he has beene haunted and frighted with Goblins, 40. times; and never durst tell any thing (as I sayd) because the Hags had so threatned him till in his sicknes he revealed it to his mother.

DOUGH. And she told no body but folkes on't. Well Gossip Gretty, as thou art a Miller, and a close thiefe, now let us keepe it

63 Webster, p. 277. Berry points out that there were suspicions at the time that 'the elder Robinson might have profited from his son's accusations by taking money to exclude people' (p. 128).

64 That widespread fear of witchcraft could cause social disruption is suggested by Samuel Harsnett's *Discovery of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrel* (London, 1599) in which he writes that: 'The pulpets ... rang of nothing but Diuels, and witches: wherewith men, women, and children were so afrighted, as many of them durst not stir in the night ... Fewe grew to be sicke or euil at ease, but straight way they were deemed to bee possessed ... such were the stirres in Nottingham about this matter, as it was feared the people would grow ... to further quarrels and mutinies, or to some greater inconuenience' (p. 8).

as close as we may till we take 'hem, and see them handsomly
 hanged o' the way.
 (2184–92)

Demonic possession, as has often been pointed out, was typically regarded with much greater scepticism by the authorities than the existence of witchcraft in general. In fact, action was taken to prevent ministers from attempting to exorcise spirits after the Darrell controversy.⁶⁵ Doughty does not express any scepticism, but what he says nevertheless casts significant doubt on the miller's character and reliability. The appellation 'Gretty' – gritty – implies that the miller adulterates his flour, which is what makes him a 'close thiefe'.⁶⁶ Doughty's statement that the boy's mother told 'no body but folkes' about the witches is intriguing. One editor of the play glosses the word 'folks' as 'relatives', but while this reading works in context, this sense of the word 'folk' is not recorded by the *OED* until 1715.⁶⁷ An alternative, and much older, sense of the word is 'people in general'.⁶⁸ It seems likely that Doughty is speaking ironically, and that news of the witches' antics has spread quickly – as it did in the historical case. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Doughty characterises the miller as a 'gossip'. This could simply mean 'friend', but the more usual modern sense of 'one who delights in idle talk' was also present well before the 1630s.⁶⁹ The exchanges between Doughty, the miller, and his son are another sign of submerged scepticism about the specific accusations of witchcraft which inspired the plot of the play.

Given the evidence of scepticism towards the specific accusations against the Lancashire witches and the play's acknowledgement of scepticism about witchcraft in general, it is striking that *The Late Lancashire Witches* seems in some respects to be so credulous, especially when compared to the relatively sober account of witchcraft given in *The Witch of Edmonton*.⁷⁰ The change in the representation

65 Thomas, p. 579.

66 Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, *The Witches of Lancashire*, edited by Gabriel Egan (London: Nick Hern, 2002), p. 148, note to l.100.

67 See Heywood and Brome, *The Witches of Lancashire*, p. 148, note to l.99 and *OED*, 'folk', def. 4a.

68 *OED*, 'folk', def. 3a.

69 *OED*, 'gossip', defs 2a, 3.

70 Harris, for example, argues that '[p]atently incredible accusations made at the trial are incorporated into the drama, with no apparent attempt to expose their absurdity' (p. 176).

of witchcraft in the two plays is analogous to the changes in the kinds of evidence presented in witchcraft pamphlets during the period. Changes relating to the evidence required for a conviction in criminal courts⁷¹ meant that unambiguous testimony was required in later cases of witchcraft. In the later seventeenth century, the kind of evidence presented in court was often more 'persuasive' than was the case in sixteenth-century trials, in the sense that the only possible explanation for the alleged occurrences was a supernatural one. However, in consequence, the evidence also became less plausible, as it was often plainly impossible.

The classic pattern of witchcraft stories in most Elizabethan pamphlets is a simple one: the witch is offended by her victim in some way (often because she is refused charity), swears revenge, and the victim later suffers illness or misfortune, which is then attributed to the witch.⁷² All of these events are entirely plausible, to modern as well as early modern readers; the only thing missing from the narrative is direct evidence of supernatural causation. In Elizabethan and early Jacobean witchcraft cases, many courts were content to assume such causation, resulting in a high rate of convictions. Later, however, a more cautious attitude towards evidence made it necessary to rule out the possibility of merely coincidental harm.⁷³ A pamphlet of 1682 records witness testimony that left nothing to chance in seeking to demonstrate that a non-natural explanation was the only one possible:

[S]ome others of the house, went out to see if they could see any thing; and being out, there were stones thrown at them from every side, and they could not see from whence they came; so that they were forced to retire into the house; and having shut the door, the stones were thrown as fast in at the window, and yet not one Quarrel of Glass broken. Her master swore, that she being in the middle of the Room, she suddenly screamed out, saying, Something is got into my back, when going to her, he pulled out a great piece of Clay from about the middle of her back, stuck as full of pins as ever it could hold.⁷⁴

71 Brian P. Levack, 'The Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions', in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, edited by Brian P. Levack (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2013), pp. 429–46 (pp. 438–39).

72 This pattern is described by Keith Thomas, pp. 659–663; cf. Gibson, 'Understanding Witchcraft?', p. 47.

73 Thomas, p. 688; see also Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, pp. 213–34.

74 Anon., *An Account of the Tryal and Examination of Joan Butts* (London, 1682), n.p. Despite the 'strength' of the testimony, Butts was acquitted, a

The witnesses in this case offer a story that would be very difficult to explain in terms of natural causation; other parts of the tale explicitly refer to the accused woman, Joan Butts, to ensure that there can be no doubt about who is responsible for what can only be magic. Edmund Robinson's testimony in the 1634 case also left little to the imagination.

Witchcraft was sometimes described as a secret, invisible crime, but the witches in *The Late Lancashire Witches* do their best to provide their persecutors with as much evidence as possible. Walter Stephens points out that many early witchcraft theorists place a great deal of emphasis on the witch's testimony, requiring her to prove her own guilt.⁷⁵ The witches in the play are likewise complicit in their own conviction. Mall is responsible for the ligatory magic that causes Laurence's impotence, and this is known to everyone because she *publicly* gives him the enchanted point which he attaches to his codpiece. Doughty later recalls this: 'Now do I thinke upon the codpeece point the young jade gave him at the wedding: shee is a witch, and that was a charme, if there be any in the World' (1832–34). If further proof were needed, it is provided by the enchanted point's reaction when it is thrown into the fire, described by Parnell:

Marry we take the point, and we casten the point into the fire, and the point spitter'd and spatter'd in the fire, like an it were (love blesse us) a laive thing in the faire; and it hopet and skippet, and riggled, and frisket in the faire, and crept about laike a worme in the faire, that it were warke enough for us both with all the Chimney tooles to keepe it into the faire, and it stinket in the faire, worsen than ony brimstone in the faire. (2474–80)

Parnell's description of the point's reaction to being burned is a relatively common feature of English witchcraft pamphlets, although more typically the thing burned is a witch's familiar or the transmogrified witch herself, often in the form of a toad.⁷⁶

When the witches are planning to trick more hunters into chasing after phantom hares, they make it clear that they want the hunters

circumstance tactfully but unconvincingly ascribed by the pamphlet's author to 'the great difficulty in proving a Witch'.

⁷⁵ See Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, p. 94.

⁷⁶ See, for example, *A Detection of Damnable Driftes*, sig. A6^v, and *A Tryal of Witches*, pp. 6–8. In this pamphlet, the witch, having been burned in the form of a toad, is discovered the following day because she is suffering from burns – a story similar to that of Mistress Generous.

not merely to fail, but to be aware that their failure is caused by supernatural trickery:

- GILL. Then will we lead their Dogs a course,
 And every man and every horse;
 Untill they breake their necks, and say—
 ALL. The Divell on Dun is rid this way. Ha, ha, ha, ha.
 (575–78)

The witches intend to keep at it until the hunters are left with no choice but to blame the supernatural. In the end, they are even able to persuade Generous of the existence of witchcraft. It takes a lot to persuade him: Generous first sees his wife transformed from horse to woman, then he is presented with her severed hand, complete with wedding ring, proving her to be the ‘cat’ whose paw was cut off by the soldier-miller. As Generous himself puts it, ‘I needs must know’t by most infallible marks’ (2342). The evidence put to Generous for the existence of witchcraft is completely conclusive, and, at the same time, completely implausible. The greater credulity of the play is, in part, a consequence of increasing scepticism in both the world outside the theatre and the characters within the play.

Two types of witchcraft

It has been argued that the play is sceptical towards the particular instance of witchcraft represented by the Lancashire case which inspired it, but also that it seeks to overcome the general scepticism towards witchcraft that it cannot help but acknowledge. The play resolves this tension by presenting two distinct and very different types of witchcraft, one that the audience is intended to take seriously, and one that is intended to entertain. The serious type of witchcraft is represented in the dialogue between Generous and his wife. Interestingly, however, when Generous first begins to harbour suspicions about his wife, they are not initially concerned with witchcraft:

- I see what Man is loath to entertaine,
 Offers it selfe to him most frequently,
 And that which we most covet to embrace,
 Doth seldome court us, and proves most averse;
 (1538–41)

Generous is discussing his thoughts and fears, and it is significant that he chooses to express himself in the language of courtship. Once again, these lines express something about his attitude to the

evidence with which he is confronted. He does not like what his experiences are pointing to, and wishes to ignore it if he can. The grounds of his concern – Mistress Generous’s absence – are made clear a few lines later:

Entring her Chamber to bestow on her
A custom’d Visite; finde the Pillow swell’d,
Vnbruist with any weight, the sheets unruffled,
The Curtaines neither drawne, nor bed layd down;
Which shoves, she slept not in my house to night.
Should there be any contract betwixt her
And this my Groome, to abuse my honest trust;
I should not take it well, but for all this
Yet cannot I be jealous.
(1556–64)

Generous, once again, seems determined to resist the conclusion to which the evidence is pointing, but this time witchcraft is not the issue. It is the possibility of adultery that Generous fears and tries to repress. It is not entirely clear whether Generous suspects his servant, Robin, of helping his mistress to meet a lover or of actually being her lover, but the latter possibility is suggested indirectly by a recurring motif within the play: women of a high social class conducting illicit affairs with their servants. Immediately before Generous expresses his suspicions, the play has invited bawdy laughter at the circumstance that Mistress Generous has ‘ridden’ Robin by making him wear the magic bridle, and Robin later turns the tables on her and ‘rides’ Mistress Generous. Later, the theme of illicit servant–mistress relationships recurs in the ‘parade of fathers’ arranged for Arthur and his friends.

Of course, Mistress Generous is, as far as the audience knows, innocent of actual adultery. The play does not place great stress on the idea of witches having sexual relationships with demons – the only reference to this comes at the end of the play in lines which are derived from the deposition of Margaret Johnson. But Mistress Generous’s witchcraft is only ever treated seriously in the two scenes in which she is confronted by her husband. These scenes, referred to by Tomkyns as ‘the onely tragicall part of the story’,⁷⁷ gain whatever gravitas they may have by representing a husband betrayed by his wife, not by representing a witch. In so far as they do touch on witchcraft, it is a witchcraft far removed from what has been

77 Quoted in Berry, p. 123.

represented on stage. Instead of high-jinks with a walking bucket and disappearing hares, there is a demonic pact:

GEN. Hast thou made any contract with that Fiend
The Enemy of Mankind?
MRS. O I have.
GEN. What? and how farre?
MRS. I have promis'd him my soule.
GEN. Ten thousand times better thy Body had
Bin promis'd to the Stake, I and mine too,
To have suffer'd with thee in a hedge of flames:
Then such a compact ever had bin made.
(1694–1702)

As Catherine Shaw comments, in this scene '[a] very serious kind of reality is thrust upon the audience when they have not been prepared for it, and it is in no way parallel or sequential to the other actions'.⁷⁸ Mistress Generous has not mentioned the devil; it is her husband who brings up the subject of the demonic. In this exchange, the audience is presented with information that has not only been absent from the rest of the play's depiction of witchcraft, but is completely at odds with it in terms of tone. Familiar spirits have been present on stage, but they are rather negligible presences without any spoken lines, entirely obedient to the witches and far removed from the complex character of the dog in *The Witch of Edmonton*. No diabolic pact is represented on stage, in contrast to both *The Witch of Edmonton* and *Dr Faustus*. As Tomkyns suggests, witchcraft is lifted from farce to tragedy in this part of the play, but it is an entirely different kind of witchcraft, and it remains offstage not only before this exchange but afterwards as well. The only other references to demonic pacts come in the second exchange between Generous and his wife, and in the lines closely resembling Margaret Johnson's confession at the end of the play.

It is clear that the Generouses' marriage is far from perfect in terms of the ideals of early modern English society. The couple have no children – by the end of the play Generous names Arthur his heir – and Generous refers to the fact that the couple sleep in separate rooms. A demonic pact constitutes a betrayal of God by breaking the covenant with him. This betrayal of God bears some resemblance

78 Catherine Shaw, *Richard Brome* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), p. 116. Kathleen McLuskie also points to the 'serious dislocation' between the comic and tragic elements of the play (*Professional Dramatists*, p. 152), as does Matthew Steggle, *Richard Brome: Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 58.

to a wife's betrayal of her husband: as God is king in heaven, so, within the household, should a husband be king over his wife and family. The close proximity of Generous's fears about his wife's possible adultery and the revelation of her pact with the devil does not seem to be coincidental; there is an analogy between the two types of betrayal.

The exchange between Generous and his wife goes on to touch on the issue of whether souls can be sold or not:

MRS. What interest in this Soule, my selfe coo'd claime
I freely gave him, but his part that made it
I still reserve, not being mine to give.

GEN. O cunning Divell, foolish woman know
Where he can clayme but the least little part,
He will usurpe the whole; th'art a lost woman.
(1707–12)

The interesting feature of this conversation is that Generous moves immediately from not believing in witchcraft at all to having a complete, and demonologically sophisticated, understanding of it. Generous immediately understands, in lines 1694–95, that his wife may have made a pact with the devil. In the exchange quoted above, he seems to understand better than she does what the implications of this pact are. His understanding is not based on, or even connected to, the evidence with which he has been presented. That evidence is indisputable proof of the existence of witchcraft, if witchcraft is understood to be the magical achievement of impossible things (specifically, turning human beings into horses by means of a magic bridle). But it is a considerable leap from accepting the existence of the magic bridle to accepting that such an item necessitates a pact between its owner and the devil. Contrary to appearances, Generous's belief in witchcraft – just like his scepticism – is primarily based on preconceived ideas, rather than empirical evidence.

After her confession and false repentance, Mistress Generous returns to witchcraft, but there is still no sign of the devil: instead, she returns to the harmless type of witchcraft with which the audience has already been entertained. The next piece of trickery she practises will be the 'parade of fathers' for Arthur and his friends, and she describes her purpose to Mall. Asked, 'Of this, the meaning?' Mistress Generous replies:

Marry Lasse
To bring a new conceit to passe.
Thy Spirit I must borrow more,
To fill the number three or foure;

Whom we will use to no great harm,
 Only assist me with thy charme.
 This night wee'l celebrate to sport:
 'Tis all for mirth, we mean no hurt.
 (1993–2000)

Mistress Generous refers to 'spirits' rather than 'devils', as she did in confessing to her husband. Whether there is any difference in meaning between the two terms as used in 1634 is open to question, but there is a difference in tone. Equally marked is the shift from her elegant, simple words to her husband and the garbled doggerel she speaks to Mall. But perhaps most remarkable is the representation of the witches' motivation. The exchange above is between two witches: no one else is present, so there can be no reason for Mistress Generous to downplay the villainy of her plan. Nevertheless, she stresses, twice, that she does not intend to cause any 'harm' or 'hurt'. The speech is hardly put in the kind of language that would tend to justify burning anyone at the stake, as her husband has suggested. There is almost no connection between Generous's conception of witchcraft and the witchcraft that is actually carried out by his wife and her friends.

The play presents witchcraft in the sense of magic as both harmless and ridiculous. But the demonological conception of witchcraft – witchcraft as a pact between a human being and the devil – is taken quite seriously. This is the kind of witchcraft that it was necessary for the 'fine folke' in the audience to believe in, but it is tellingly left unrepresented. The audience is told about this serious witchcraft but not shown it, just as Heywood, in his *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels*, told his readers about the really convincing evidence that they could find in another text, but did not present in his own. In this respect, the play provides a literary representation of the view that would later be expressed by Addison. Witchcraft in the abstract is to be believed in but is somehow absent; specific instances of witchcraft are not to be taken seriously.

Intriguingly, Nathaniel Tomkyns' letter describing the play seems to acknowledge this, albeit very briefly. Tomkyns writes of the play that 'there be not in it (to my vnderstanding) any poetically Genius, or art, or language, or iudgement to state or tenet of witches'.⁷⁹ The final phrase – 'iudgement to state or tenet of witches' – is somewhat ambiguous. Herbert Berry interprets the phrase as meaning

79 Quoted in Berry, p. 124.

that the play – according to Tomkyns – makes no judgement as to ‘the state or the “tenet of witches”, about, that is, national politics or a matter equally contentious, the current doctrine about witchcraft’.⁸⁰ But reading the word ‘state’ as ‘national politics’ is to my mind an unlikely interpretation. A more likely reading of Tomkyns’ claim is that the play does not make any judgement as to the state, or the tenet, of witches. Tomkyns, seemingly unconsciously, separates the question of the existence of witches, and their precise nature (‘state’), from what ought to be believed about them (‘tenet’). The unstated assumption which his choice of words expresses implies a distinction between what should be believed and what is actually the case. This attitude is very close to the kind of doublethink that was later expressed by Addison.

The place of witchcraft in English society had changed radically by the 1630s compared to the situation at the height of the persecution in the 1580s and 1590s. The changes in belief can be discerned in the contrast between *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches* as well as in the strictly historical evidence; one play takes witchcraft seriously, while the other treats it as material for low comedy. But while the later play is radical in highlighting the existence of outright witchcraft denial for the first time on the English stage, it also devotes considerable ingenuity to defeating it. Within the world of the play, witchcraft is trivial rather than threatening, but it remains a Christian duty to believe in it. At this pivotal moment, the eventual abolition of witchcraft as a criminal offence was by no means a foregone conclusion, and in just another ten years things would change, drastically, again.⁸¹ The outbreak of civil war and the resulting collapse of judicial authority enabled the series of prosecutions instigated by Matthew Hopkins and John Sterne in 1645–46. This episode could be regarded as the only genuine witch-hunt – in the sense of a large-scale, active search for witches – in English history. Witchcraft in 1634 had become a comical matter for many people, but the potential for tragedy remained.

80 Berry, p. 135.

81 James Sharpe writes that ‘it is tempting to argue that, but for the disruption of the Civil Wars and their aftermath, which led to a renewal of prosecutions in the 1640s and 1650s, witchcraft prosecutions on the Home Circuit might well have petered out around the middle of the seventeenth century’ (*Instruments of Darkness*, p. 110).