

**WITCHCRAFT AND SCIENCE IN THE RENAISSANCE**  
**The Witch of Edmonton, The Late Lancashire Witches,**  
**and Renaissance attitudes toward science**

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**Abstract**

*Though foundational theories of modern science emerged during the Renaissance, the arguably nonscientific beliefs in witchcraft and the consequent persecution of witches coexisted with these incipient, rationalistic scientific theories. This coexistence centered around the notion of control, as patriarchal members of ruling classes asserted their authority, simultaneously persecuting "witches" and focusing on the mechanism of science. Two seventeenth-century plays, *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches*, reflect this dichotomy, suggesting an unwavering belief in witches but subtly hinting that their persecution has perhaps gone too far. The plays ultimately reflect a transition between animism and mechanical control, community and individuality, showcasing societal change during the emergence of "new" science.<sup>1</sup>*

Since the demise of witch persecution in the eighteenth century, Renaissance witchcraft scholars have been unendingly intrigued by the notion that two inherently distinct epistemologies —demonolo-

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gy and rational science— could coexist in one period of time. Regardless of the new scientific advances, people continued to believe in the existence of witches, their verbal pacts with the devil, and their consequent desire to adversely affect human health and relationships. The decades at the beginning of the seventeenth century were an especially rich period for predominance of this dichotomy: Galileo was active at this time, defending the theories of Copernicus; in 1628, Harvey published his treatise on the circulation of the blood; yet in 1634, twenty women were convicted in the county of Lancashire, England, for apparent witchcraft, and even when their accuser “confessed his hoax”, the government kept the “witches” in jail for fear of public uprising (Barber, 1979). How could the new science, with its stress on rational observation, definite truth, and precise calculation, continue to accept the persecution of witches, whose guilt was based predominantly on hearsay and social class?

Many scholars have attempted to answer this question, with definite diversity in opinion as the result (e.g., Clark, 1991; Darst, 1989; Easlea, 1980; Webster, 1982). Such scholars, however, concentrate on the scientific connection to witchcraft without analyzing what I consider to be a relevant and illuminating topic in understanding this connection—literature, and, more particularly, drama—. Much Renaissance drama included characterization of witches that paralleled social attitudes not only toward witchcraft in general but toward incipient scientific beliefs. Two early seventeenth-century plays, *The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The Witch of Edmonton*, contain fascinating portrayals of witches that simultaneously suggest an unwavering belief in the reality of witches and the subtle hints that the persecution of witches has perhaps gone too far. This dichotomy within the two plays juxtaposes with the dichotomy of witchcraft and science, thus revealing the connection between the less negative characterization of witches and the increasing skepticism about the unquestionable belief in their existence. Slowly, as the seventeenth century progressed, the epistemology that encompassed witchcraft began

to wane in favor of scientific advance. Both *The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The Witch of Edmonton* reveal the dual epistemologies of the seventeenth century that will eventually transform into one.

## 1. Brief History of Witch Persecution

The most recent scholarship claims that witch hunting began in the fifteenth century rather than the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as had previously been theorized (Henningesen & Ankarloo, 1990). Thus, as Henningesen & Ankarloo claim, we must «redefine it [witch persecution] as a Renaissance problem» rather than as a medieval problem (p. 2). Perhaps the real beginning of Renaissance witch hunting began with Kramer and Sprenger's publication of *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 1486 treatise that discussed the methods by which individuals could discover and persecute witches. Throughout the Renaissance, most people did not deny the existence of witches; skeptics Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot were despised and shunned in favor of writers such as Judge Nicholas Remy and King James I, who in 1595 and 1600, respectively, published works outlining the undeniable existence of witches, their Satanic misdeeds, and the necessity of punishing them (Easlea).

How did Renaissance writers and other members of the general populace rationally conclude that witches not only existed but were a blight upon humanity that needed to be erased? The Bible was the text most often cited as a justification for the existence of witches. Almost every Renaissance writer dealing with the phenomenon of witchcraft mentions particular biblical chapters that deal with spirits, demons, and witches (e.g., A. Briggs, 1574; Danaeus, 1575; Gifford, 1593; Holland, 1590; King James I, 1597). The sudden social upheaval that occurred during the Renaissance, too, exacerbated the predominant fear of witchcraft. As the minister George Gifford writes in 1593, «It falleth out in many places even of a suddaine, as it seemeth to me, and no doubt by the heavy judgement of God, that the Divels as it were let loose,

doe more prevail than ever I have heard of» (p. A3). Modern scholar Brian Easlea examines this idea in more detail; according to Renaissance beliefs, disease and other «afflictions were caused by evil women using powers given them by Satan in return for their souls on death» (p. 3). This tremendous social chaos of the time, including wars, peasant rebellions, poverty, famine, and religious dissidence, had to be caused by *something*; that something, for Renaissance individuals, was witchcraft. Other views suggest not disaster or disease but the threat of status quo reduction and even religious adversity as stimuli for witch persecution (e.g., Scarre, 1987). Regardless of the definitive cause of the witch hunting phenomenon, it became so predominant during the Renaissance that over 100,000 witches were executed throughout Europe during the relatively brief time period.

## 2. Witchcraft and the New Science

Several modern scholars have analyzed the coexistence of witchcraft and science as a transition between two world views. Thus, paradoxically, «we would do better to associate demonology with the advancement of science than with its stagnation or decay» (Clark, p. 226). Demonology and witchcraft were inseparable in the Renaissance, and Clark traces the predominance of witchcraft to the popular beliefs in superstition, an attitude deplorable to both science and religion, and to the natural “inefficacy” of witches that eventually culminated in a new, rationalistic, world view that had no room for demons. David Darst posits a similar view in his analysis of the Renaissance division between natural magicians and the Church. This division evolved into the intrusion of witches; when natural magic became suspect, says Darst, the linking of magic with the devil and consequently witchcraft became predominant. The hunting of witches became the “trigger”, as Darst calls it, for «the demise of astrology and magic in the late Renaissance and for the astoundingly rapid acceptance of a mechanized worldview» (p. 60). That acceptance did not occur

until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as Brian Easlea explains, and it came about as a result of an «anti-demonological natural philosophy» (p. 201), a philosophy whose source was «an almost overwhelming confidence displayed by male members of ruling classes in their potential ability to control events and an almost obsessive desire to impose such control» (p. 220).

Before this notion of a human-controlled universe —buttressed by God but eliminated from the powers of the Devil— gained precedence in the later years of the Renaissance, the scientific community still had to deal with prevailing notions about the existence of witches. As Charles Webster explains, although witch persecutions were declining and new science was simultaneously rising, the scientific community, specifically the Royal Society of England, could not dismiss witchcraft as false. According to Webster, «the ethos of the new science was best preserved by taking up a conservative stance on the question of witchcraft and sorcery» (p. 99). If new scientists, then, still believed in the existence of witches, why did witchcraft persecution decline? Webster says that even though a basic belief in demonology still prevailed, the fear of witches' ability to control nature lessened considerably with the rise of science.

Thus, control became the key term in Renaissance attitudes toward both witchcraft and its eventual but rapid demise. Control occurred *within* the period of witch persecution as elite, ruling classes attempted to restore order to a chaotic universe; as Robert Muchembled (1990) pointedly asks, «Is not witch-hunting, despite its spectacular appearance, simply one episode in the conquest of the West European countryside by the forces of law and order?» (p. 139). Control also occurred as a major factor in *the demise of* witch persecution, as Easlea suggests. As scientists and consequently other male members of ruling classes began to believe that they could control the universe through their own inventions (although still requiring the almighty power of God), they were caught between a still necessary belief in the existence of witches

and a total rejection of demonology. It is in this context that *The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The Witch of Edmonton* appeared on the London stage.

### 3. Witchcraft and Science in the Two Plays

*The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The Witch of Edmonton* are the only two surviving Renaissance plays to be termed «witch plays», or plays «in which the presence and activities of witches inform a major part of the action» (Barber, 1979, 27). Critics also compare them on the basis of their social and historical context: both were speedily written journalistic pieces that capitalized on events of contemporary witch trials; both reveal English witchcraft in its most well-known manifestations; and both were domestic dramas that incorporated tragedy and comedy (e.g., Barber, 1979; Dawson, 1989; Harris, 1980; Onat, 1980). *The Witch of Edmonton*, a play based on the actual trial of Elizabeth Sawyer, was recorded and published by Henry Goodcole in 1621. Though the play was not published until 1658, it was first performed in 1621 after the conclusion of the trial, which resulted in Elizabeth Sawyer's execution. The trial of the sixty accused Lancashire witches had not even concluded when Heywood and Brome wrote *The Late Lancashire Witches*; according to Barber, it was probably presented shortly after July 20, 1634, although the fate of the twenty convicted witches was not determined until late July or August.

*The Late Lancashire Witches* contains a number of fast-moving, active, and energetic plots. However, these plots are not very cohesive, the structure of the entire play is convoluted and occasionally verging on chaotic, and characterization is weak. Most critics agree that the play lacks the qualities of an extraordinary piece of literature<sup>2</sup>. Yet the play generated popularity as an on-

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<sup>2</sup> I failed to find any full-length, modern articles on *The Late Lancashire Witches*; most scholars mention it only briefly, and usually with reference to *The Witch of Edmonton*. The author of the critical edition of Dekker and

stage production for both royalty and general audiences; Barber attributes this popularity to its visual qualities «the play was meant to be seen and not to be read» (p. 87). Also, apparently, summer audiences of the English theatre craved fast-moving action, and the numerous subplots of this play certainly provide it.

In contrast to the chaotic action of *The Late Lancashire Witches*, *The Witch of Edmonton* reveals a broader range of emotions and greater depth of characterization that render it a far more successful play. It contains only three subplots that occasionally intertwine: the bigamy plot, which culminates in two deaths; the witch plot, which reveals the plight of a stereotypical English Renaissance hag; and the comic plot, which involves Cuddy Bank's unsuccessful endeavors to woo Katherine with the help of Sawyer's dog familiar.

The actual characterization of the witches in both plays reveals the authors' knowledge of popular attitudes toward witchcraft. As examined by Anthony Harris, in the post-Jacobean theatre, witchcraft «became increasingly a source of humor»; this resulted primarily from «the declining fear of witchcraft» (p. 176). Thus, the humor apparent in Heywood and Brome's play not only delighted theatregoers but may have reflected the rising skepticism of the *maleficium* (bad deeds) that witches could produce. If one could laugh at the essentially harmless antics of witches, then one could certainly question whether or not witches perform acts of horror and tragedy. Although most, and eventually all, of Heywood and Brome's characters believe in the existence of witches, the fact that comedy plays a central role reveals a potential skepticism in the Devil-like qualities of witches propounded by so many Renaissance thinkers. This potential skepticism, in turn, relates to the slowly changing worldview —explored by Darst, Clark, and

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Brome's play, L. Barber, provides an extensive critical introduction to the text; other authors who include brief summaries and analyses of the play are Onat, Dawson, Harris, and K.M. Briggs (1962).

Easlea— which included and incorporated the advancement of science.

Our first glimpse of the Lancashire witches reveals their playful rather than harmful antics; Meg, one of the witches, asks, «What new device, what dainty/straine/More for our myrth now then our/gaine,/Shall we in practice put» (II.I). The witches proceed to dance, laugh, and plan their “devices”: they agree to “bring on the sport” at Lawrence and Parnell’s wedding and later cause the hunters’ greyhounds to run amuck. Their antics at the wedding are funny when read and must have been uproarious when seen: a Spirit breaks the wedding cake over Parnell’s head, causing crumbs to fall in her hair; a leg of Mutton becomes cold and then grows horns; Birds fly out of the pie; the meat transforms into «Snakes, Batts, Frogs, Beetles, Hornets, and Humble-bees». This is not the only comic scene in the play, by all means; another over-the-top scene of humor, though crude and explicit, involves the impotence of Lawrence as a result of the witches’ antics (III.I). Comedy as it relates to the witches is the only redeeming quality of this play; when the play turns serious, it fails to elicit the intended reactions. Thus, when Mr. Generous discovers that his wife is a witch, we feel no sympathy for either of them because of the half-hearted nature of their speech. As soon as Mr. Generous discovers that his wife’s initial confession is false, he immediately condemns her without remorse or guilt; Mrs. Generous feels little pain or torment upon her final capture and marches to her fate without agitation. The comic witches prove much more successful than the tragic subplot, causing the potential skepticism of the *maleficium* of witches to predominate, though the male characters still maintain an essence of control by eventually capturing the witches.

In contrast with the comic witches of Heywood and Brome’s play, *Mother Sawyer*, the title character of *The Witch of Edmonton*, is a tragic figure who exemplifies the typical accused and convicted witch of the Renaissance: old, poor, friendless, taunted, and marginalized by the community. This initial characterization elicits



sympathy from the audience; we feel even greater sympathy for Sawyer when we read how she "becomes" a witch. She can no longer take the incessant abuse from the townspeople, and she makes a pact with the devil as a consequence:

Still vex'd? still tortur'd? That Curmudgeon *Banks*,  
Is ground of all my scandal. I am shunn'd  
And hated like a sickness: made a scorn  
To all degrees and Sexes . . .  
I'm now ignorant: would some power good or bad  
Instruct me which way I might be reveng'd  
Upon this Church, I'd go out of my self. (II.I.94-104)

When Sawyer actually becomes a witch, we are torn between compassion for her alienation and repulsion for her misdeeds. This compassion is new to the Renaissance stage; as Harris explains, *The Witch of Edmonton* «is the first play to contain a full-scale portrayal of a witch where the protagonist is treated with any measure of sympathy or understanding» (p. 90). Yet the revulsion is what keeps the play grounded in popular attitudes toward witchcraft; no matter how much sympathy we feel for this marginalized, ridiculed, scorned woman, she causes several acts of *maleficium* within the play, including the madness of Anne Ratcliff, and she *may* be the cause of Frank Thorney's fatal stabbing of one of his two wives through the presence of her dog-familiar.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to *The Late Lancashire Witches*, skepticism is also prevalent through the character of the Judge. He reflects the rational beliefs of Reginald Scot, who consistently questioned witch accusations based on flimsy evidence and hearsay. The Judge converses at length with Old Banks about the folly of accusing

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<sup>3</sup> Critical analyses vary concerning the role of Mother Sawyer in the death of Susan. Dawson claims that the dog makes Frank commit the murder; Harris believes that the dog may have prompted Frank because of Frank's sinful thoughts, but the dog himself does not commit the crime; Comensoli (1989) also attributes Frank's murderous impulse to a viciousness "within", though she agrees that the scene suggests ambiguity rather than clarity.

Mother Sawyer of witchcraft; the judge asks, «Come, come; firing her Thatch? ridiculous: take heed Sirs that you do: unless your proofs come better arm'd, instead of turning her into a Witch, you'll prove your selves starke Fools» (IV.i.40-42). Upon Mother Sawyer's confession of witchery, the Justice of course renounces his skepticism and condemns her to death. Yet the extensive passages of his skeptical attitudes combined with our sympathy for Sawyer's plight suggest an overall skeptical attitude toward rabid Renaissance witch persecution.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the potential skepticism that reflects a gradually rising belief in the excesses of witch hunting, the two plays reflect a growing consciousness of societal change that is, in part, a reflection of new scientific attitudes. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, we see a tremendous amount of disorder caused by witches. The major example of this disorder concerns the family rearrangement subplot. Until about halfway through the play, the witches have forced a hierarchical upheaval in the family structure; the mother and father now obey the commands of the son and daughter, while the son and daughter obey the commands of the servants. The social hierarchy realigns itself when the witches move on to another playful game, which reassures all community members and allows Lawrence and Parnell to marry properly. Interestingly, this theme of social chaos juxtaposes with both traditional and new scientific conceptions of control. The capture of the female

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<sup>4</sup> This sympathy is a device originated by the authors of the play, further justifying the attitude of skepticism that parallels the changing epistemologies. In his pamphlet, Henry Goodcole (1621) writes a cold and straightforward denunciation of Elizabeth Sawyer without even providing us with a context for her supposed witchery. Although Goodcole claims that «It is none of my intent here to discuss the dispute of Witches and Witchcraft» (p. 381), we immediately recognize his true attitudes when he questions her about her activities. His questions are based on the assumption that she is undoubtedly a witch, without any hint of skepticism. Goodcole's editorial comments during the reporting of the trial also prove his true feelings; he claims that «God did wonderfully overtake her in her own wickedness» (p. 384), and later that she «behaved herself must sluttishly and loathsomely» (p. 387). The play thus veers tremendously from the reported trial and question/answer session, revealing the playwrights' compassion, sympathy, and almost scientific questioning of supposed "authority".

witches by male authority figures restores the traditional order of family arrangement, yet at the same time it reflects the notions of Darst and Easlea that the rise of the new science occurs when men—patriarchs—are allowed to control the universe through mechanical methods without unnecessary reliance on either supernatural or preternatural forces. Like members of the Royal Society and practically all of the English populace, Heywood and Brome could not deny the existence of witches; at the same time, the playwrights exhibit the notion of harmlessness associated with witches and the dual facets of control evident during this era.

*The Witch of Edmonton* also centralizes a disturbance in social order, but this disturbance is more subtle and complex. The conflict between community, as represented by the accusing, and individuality, as represented by the accused, parallels scientific advancement. New scientists were forced into the unexplored realm of individuality, performing experiments for the supposed betterment of humanity, while still retaining the essence of community and communal order that remained necessary for traditional stability and hierarchical dominance. The authors of *The Witch of Edmonton* do feel threatened by the loss of community, since Mother Sawyer eventually does face the executioner, yet at the same time, they believe that individuality deserves recognition and respect—a new attitude conceived in the Renaissance and aligned with scientific notions of individual discovery. The tightly-knit community of Edmonton is thrown into confusion not only by the presence of Mother Sawyer, an alienated individual who does not jell with their conception of community, but by economic changes that force Frank to marry Susan, though he has already married Winnifred. These economic changes associate with individualistic values rather than those of the community, as property becomes a commodity that individuals need in order to assure their reputations. Although the ending of the play reveals a return to community, with the hanging of Mother Sawyer and the communal forgiveness of Frank for murder, it remains ambivalent because of the previous notions of individuality that

the authors have explored. We still feel sympathy for Mother Sawyer, and we understand the importance of money for Frank Thorney; Dekker, Rowley, and Ford display the new values of individualism through both Mother Sawyer and Frank, but to accord with popular conceptions of witchcraft they must return to traditional beliefs.

Similar to *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the idea of control also asserts itself throughout the play. The patriarchs of the community, particularly Old Banks and Old Thorney, reclaim their authority with the capture of Mother Sawyer. Although no glaring inversions of hierarchy occur in *The Witch of Edmonton*, the male members of the community need to eliminate the force that threatens their control. Eliminating a witch relates to both the traditional communal order and the authority that new scientists will eventually feel in their unlimited mechanical power.

In this transitional period, however, witches and scientists in essence *shared* powers of authority through their simultaneous dominance over the mindsets of community members. Thus, when scientists or their male community representatives were confronted with a witch, they needed to eliminate its powers to multiply their own. Eventually, when mechanical control became the more acceptable and accepted alternative to demonology, power was relegated exclusively to scientists. But during this complicated transition between witchcraft and mechanics, the sharing of powers essentially became a struggle for control, and as scientists began to assert their authoritative control, they ceased to believe in the damning control of witches.

Perhaps, then, *The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The Witch of Edmonton* are caught between two epistemologies—community, demonology, and tradition on the one hand and individuality, science, and natural efficacy on the other. We can see through *The Late Lancashire Witches* that the former system is maintained, but not without some hints of change in the humor, skepticism, and lessened fear of witches. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, we see overt skepticism in the character of the Judge and feel compassionate

sympathy for Mother Sawyer. Although the traditional system is maintained here, also, we recognize the inherent deficiencies of that system. Both plays concentrate on the theme of control within the era of witch persecution but also as a precursor to its eventual demise. As Kors and Peters (1972) claim in their study of witchcraft, «from the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the witch beliefs and persecutions appeared to be reaching new heights, their foundations had already begun to crumble» (p. 14). Those foundations were crumbling, I believe, because of a new worldview that included individualism, skepticism, and the rise of science. Although as Charles Webster rightly maintains, the explosion of science did not directly cause the decline of witch hunting, a new mechanical philosophy that grew out of scientific advancements eventually resulted in the lessened fear of witches and belief in a "demon-free" universe.

I believe that both plays, though very different in style and intention, reflect a transitional stage between Aristotelian animism and mechanical control. Other plays of the period could also reflect this intermediary function; however, *The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The Witch of Edmonton* portray the transition with relation to witchcraft and reveal the disparate notions of witchcraft as they relate to changing conceptions of community, society, and science.

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