This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal
Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature

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The Witches of Lancashire (1634) in the Undergraduate Classroom"
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Reviewed Work(s):
Source: *This Rough Magic,* Vol. 6, No. 1, (June, 2015), pp. 1-29.
Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org
Stable URL: http://www.thisroughmagic.org/grinnell%20article.html

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"'All in Such Rare Disorder':

The Witches of Lancashire (1634) in the Undergraduate Classroom"

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The argument that follows suggests some ways to teach Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome's *The Witches of Lancashire* (1634). At heart my argument is a close reading of the play informed by the historical work done by other scholars, and my goal is always to get students involved in the interpretation and evaluation of the play. Throughout I assume a discussion oriented class—a survey of early modern drama, a seminar on Caroline drama, or a more general English Renaissance Literature course—in which students generate understanding through question, answer, and discussion, but the following argument should also be useful if your pedagogy suggests a different sort of delivery. I have found that in our post-Harry Potter world *The Witches of Lancashire* can leverage our students' interest in witchcraft into an interest in the early modern period and early modern drama itself. *The Witches of Lancashire* provides an interesting tension between theatre and history, as it is based on actual events that led to the arrest in 1633 of twenty-one women in Lancashire for witchcraft. The play negotiates the tension between those real events and the expectations of the London theatre audience, all the while laying the groundwork for a cultural shift to a more skeptical approach to witchcraft. As it does this, *The Witches of Lancashire* provides a marvelous catalogue of English witchcraft beliefs, while engaging with issues of social

order, class and gender. *The Witches of Lancashire* can be a rich and useful play in an early modern literature course.

Heywood and Brome base their play on the following current events story. In 1633, twenty-one women were brought to trial and tried in Lancaster as witches. They were accused by Edmund Robinson, an eleven-year-old boy who claimed to have been kidnapped by one of the witches and taken to a feast at which were sixty or more other women. Robinson escaped, and supported by his father, began to identify for the magistrates the women he could remember seeing at the witches' feast. Those women were arrested and the trial was held at the Lancaster assizes. Twenty of the twenty-one accused were convicted by a Lancaster jury, but the judges, unsatisfied with the trial, refused to pronounce sentence. Instead, they took the case to London where it was brought before the king. Charles I became interested in the case and the principle witches were sent to London to be examined by him and his privy council. The King's physician, Sir William Harvey, led the examination of the witches and declared them not guilty. Under examination, the boy, Edmund Robinson, admitted that he had fabricated his witchcraft accusations to get back at one of the women. The witches were sent back to Lancaster with a royal pardon, where they were imprisoned in Lancaster castle. Some died in prison. The documents don't tell us what happened to the others.

This historical information—the story that the playwrights Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome work with—can be made available to students in extracts from Herbert Berry's "The Globe Bewitched and *El Hombre Fiel*" (127-28) and Alison Findlay's "Sexual and Spiritual Politics in the Events of 1633-34" (146-49). Both do a good job of summarizing the available history, and drawing conclusions from that summary. For even more context, you may consult an informative collection of essays edited by Robert Poole called *Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*. With that background students will be primed to approach the play both as a dramatic text, with its own concerns, and as another historical document, another attempt to make sense of the Lancashire witchcraft. One of their roles will be to read the play in the context of this history.

Heywood and Brome write *The Witches of Lancashire* (first published in quarto as *The Late Lancashire Witches*;some editions of the play still adopt that title) in the same year that the witches were brought to London for their evaluation by the king's privy council. The play is very immediate, and the witchcraft with which it deals current. A good way to begin to discuss the play is to have students generate a list of all the things the witches do—the witches' various interests and powers. This can be done as homework, or as a class discussion with someone taking notes on the board. This exercise not only reemphasizes the plots of the play, but more importantly helps to fill out a clearer sense of what actually constitutes early modern English witchcraft.

Historicizing the witchcraft is important because students often come to our courses thinking that they know what witchcraft is, but base their knowledge on twenty-first century popular culture. When they actually get into describing the witchcraft in *The Witches of Lancashire*, they will find the range of witchcraft beliefs impressive and interesting.

Much of the witchcraft in the play comes directly from court documents and therefore, from specific accusations, including 1) witches turning themselves into greyhounds; 2) a young man transformed into a horse; 3) a young boy's kidnapping to a witches' feast and his escape; 4) the boy's subsequent position as chief witch-finder in the community; 5) a witches' feast, where sixty hags pull straps to obtain food from the sky; 6) and the boy's hand-to-hand combat with a demon boy with cloven hooves. But Heywood and Brome do not limit themselves to the trial records. They also make use of material culled from general popular and theatrical culture, such as: 1) witches' familiars; 2) telekinesis; 3) impotency charms; 4) attacks on butter and beer making; 5) the disruption of a wedding feast through the transformation of the food and the music; 6) explicit attacks on family and social hierarchies; 7) additional transformations of men into horses, and the witches into dogs, hares, and cats; 8) the invocation of spirits, and 9) witches dancing, pranking, and speaking in rhyme. In short, an effective catalogue of witchcraft superstition makes its way into *The Witches of Lancashire*.

The play opens with three men hunting. They are gentlemen, hunting for sport, and the rabbit they have been following has suddenly escaped them. Arthur immediately suspects foul play.

Arthur: Was ever sport of expectation
Thus cross'd in th' height?
Shakestone: Tush these are accidents
All game is subject to.
Arthur: So you may call them
Chances, or crosses, or what else you please,
But for my part, I'll hold them prodigies,
As things transcending Nature.
Bantam: Oh you speak this,
Because a hare hath cross'd you.
Arthur: A Hare?
A witch, or rather a devil, I think!
For tell me, gentlemen, was't possible
In such a fair course and no covert near,
We in pursuit and she in constant view,
Our eyes not wandering but all bent that way,
The dogs in chase, she ready to be ceas'd,
And at the instant, when I durst have laid
My life to gage my dog had pinch'd her, then
To vanish into nothing? (1.1.1-16)[1]

This opening scene provides a number of interesting elements, and as a first scene, it is a good one for students to get their interpretive fingers into. The exposition establishes a number of important elements for the play as a whole that students can tease out in discussion. For example the exposition: 1) places the action in the countryside and establishes a rural setting for the play (setting up the tension between Lancashire and London, between a rural setting and characters, and an urban

audience). 2) It sets up an action that is increasingly gendered: male concerns will frame the play and will provide a controlling point-of-view even when the action is primarily female. 3) It introduces a dynamic in which the hare is opposed to the hunters, generally subordinate but suddenly and surprisingly slipping out of control. This foreshadows the women and servants who, as the play unfolds, will also slip out of the men's control. 4) It posits a supernatural, unnatural, power to explain that slippage, all the while trivializing that power as being primarily concerned with pranks and frustrations. 5) It suggests that the result of this slippage will be contention and chaos among the men, and that witchcraft belief and skepticism will help to frame the action.

The play quickly moves from the destabilization of this opening scene to a profound disruption of the communal hierarchy. Arthur describes the disruption of his uncle Seely's family to Mr. Generous, and prefaces his description by emphasizing that Seely has always been known as "a man respected / For his discretion and known gravity, / As a master of a govern'd family" (1.1.246-48). As the historian Susan Dwyer Amussen notes in *An Ordered Society*, the family is the fundamental economic and social unit of society in early modern England, and its patriarchal, paternal organizing principles represent in miniature the organization of society itself (1). The disruption of the hierarchy of Seely's family, then, implicates the entire society and does so in a way that is typical of English witchcraft belief in this period. As the anthropologist Christina Larner has noted in *Enemies of God*, her study of Scottish witchcraft, it is an

"anthropological truism that witch-beliefs represent a direct inversion of the values of the society in which they are held" (134). Most writers about early modern witchcraft argue some version of this claim. As Arthur describes it in the play:

> The good man,
> In all obedience kneels unto his son;
> He with an austere brow commands his father.
> The wife presumes not in the daughter's sight
> Without a prepar'd curtsy. The girl she
> Expects it as a duty, chides her mother,
> Who quakes and trembles at each word she speaks.
> And, what's as strange, the Maid she domineers
> O'er her young mistress, who is aw'd by her.
> The son to whom the Father creeps and bends,
> Stands in as much fear of the groom his man.
> All in such rare disorder, that in some
> As it breeds pity, and in others wonder,
> So in the most part laughter. (1.1.254-67)

Arthur's description enables students to work through a variety of assumptions about early modern England itself. For example, in addition to the assumptions about who *should* be in charge, Arthur makes clear that the proper order of the family is an essential element of a normal community. The Seelys' disruption confounds both paternal and class power, scandalizing the community, and prompting Seely's neighbor, Doughty, to intervene. Doughty chastises the son for usurping the father's role and attempts to explain to both the son and the servant the roles they should be playing. Lawrence, the servant now in charge, defends his behavior by invoking the code of neighborliness: "A fine world when a man cannot be quiet at home for busy-

brained neighbours," he says (1.2.136-38). But of course, the neighbors always have a vested interest in the order of the community and Doughty cannot allow Lawrence to be quiet at home when such subversion is occurring. Neighborliness is another ready-made subject for student discussion. What does it mean to be a neighbor in this play? What seems to be the nature of community? What are the rules that govern both?

Doughty seems to see with the community's eyes, and through him we see the community grappling with the Seelys' disorder. At one point Doughty tells us, "this is quite upside down: the son controls the father, and the man overcrows his master's coxcomb, sure they are all bewitched" (1.2.120-22), offering us, for the first time, the possibility that witchcraft might be involved. At another he has come to the conclusion that "they are all natural fools man, I find it now. Art thou mad to dream of Witchcraft?" (3.3.91-92), and then again, "Witches, live witches! The house is full of witches!" (3.1.118). This confusion in Doughty's attempts to make sense of the Seelys' plight is part of the comedy, appealing to the London audience. As Arthur says: "in some / As it breeds pity, and in others wonder, / So in the most part laughter" (1.1.266-67). Laughter is, in this play, the primary consequence of witchcraft.

The disorder bred in the disruption of the Seely family hierarchy implicates more than just the structure of family and society, however. It threatens gender identity as well. As students evaluate and comment on the social disruptions taking place in the

play, they will likely note this connection between hierarchy and gender. For example, when Doughty witnesses Seely's son Gregory brow-beating his father, he tells Gregory:

> Come I must tell you, you forget yourself,
> And in this foul unnatural strife wherein
> You trample on your father. You are fall'n
> Below humanity. You're so beneath
> The title of a son you cannot claim
> To be a man. (1.2.36-41)

To disrupt the paternal order is to disrupt the social system of which gender is a part. Gregory ceases to be a son, and consequently a man.

Students can further pursue the breakdown of gender roles and expectations throughout this play (I have had good luck doing so in discussion, in quick low-stakes in-class writing, and as a question they prepare before coming in to class). Posing this breakdown as a theme of witchcraft, students can identify a series of witch-caused emasculations and violations of expected gender roles and identities. For example, Gregory's servant Lawrence, now at the top of the inverted hierarchy, finds himself impotent in his marriage bed (as a result of a charm by his old girlfriend, the witch Moll Spencer). As Doughty notes above, though Lawrence is now in the seat of patriarchal power, because he is unnaturally in that seat he is not really a man, either. Witchcraft emasculates the men, and in them, the society itself.[2]Students can note that this emasculation sweeps through the community, eroding the orderly world of male control.

Another example of this erosion comes in Mr. Generous' stables. When Mr. Generous, the witchcraft skeptic, discovers that whenever he is out of town his wife takes his horse and goes riding without telling him, he immediately sees it as slippage in his control over her. His first move is to order Robert, his groom, to prohibit her from taking the horse the next time she requests it. It is not that he suspects his wife of anything untoward. In fact, he credits his wife with quality, and himself with patience and a lack of jealousy. As he says when he first hears of her independent riding:

> I know her a good woman and well bred,
> Of an unquestion'd carriage, well reputed
> Amongst her neighbours, reckon'd with the best
> And o'er me most indulgent, though in many
> Such things might breed a doubt and jealousy,
> Yet I hatch no such frenzy. (2.2.102-07)

But he nonetheless moves immediately to regain control of his wife's coming and going. That the tug-of-war between men and women, between witchcraft and patriarchal power, takes place at the level of possessions, and who controls them, becomes clear when Mrs. Generous comes to take the horse again and Robert bars her from it.

Robert: Truly, mistress, pray pardon me, I must be plain with you: I dare not deliver him [the horse] you. My master has ta'en notice of the ill case you have brought him home in diverse times.

Mrs. Generous: Oh, is it so? And must he be made acquainted with my actions by you,

and must I then be controlled by him, and now by you? You are a saucy groom! (3.2.92-99)

Mrs. Generous sees immediately that her power is threatened by the prerogative that allows Mr. Generous to own and control everything in his house (the horse and his wife included). She refuses to be controlled. Denied the horse, she bridles Robert instead, transforms him into a horse, and rides him to her destination.

The erosion of masculine power is further made manifest in a scene where Whetstone gets revenge on the young gentlemen Arthur, Bantam, and Shakestone for calling him a bastard. Whetstone *is* a bastard and a fool, but he is also the nephew of Mrs. Generous. He has the young gentlemen over for dinner at his uncle Generous' house while Generous is away, and for their evening's entertainment, through sorcery, shows them dumb-shows of their true fathers. In Whetstone's narrative, all the young men are illegitimately sired. Bantam's true father is a pedant in his father's house, Shakestone's is a tailor who served his father, and Arthur's is Robert, the groom who once worked for his father and is now employed by Mr. and Mrs. Generous. These shows are accomplished with the help of "*Mistress Generous, Moll* [a young witch] *and spirits*." Interestingly, neither the young gentlemen nor we know what to make of this sudden new paternity. We don't know if this is simply a show designed to insult them as Whetstone had been insulted earlier, or whether through witchcraft we are seeing

their true fathers (though insulted by the term "bastard" Whetstone acknowledges that he is one. It is possible that these other alternative paternities are true as well). Either way, this scene destabilizes the connection between father and son, again calling the social order into question. In a very practical, genetic way the servants and women are in charge here. The men first lose control of their women, of their goods, of their paternal power, and then of their patrilineal heritage.

The communal glue that holds this society together is further eroded at the wedding feast for Lawrence and Parnell, the two servants of the Seelys. What should be a life and order affirming celebration is inverted and reduced to chaos. First the food begins to disappear. The wedding cake that Joan Seely breaks over the bride's head turns suddenly into a handful of bran, the mutton turns to horn, the sirloin and the capon in white sauce disappear, and the covered pie, when opened, is full of live birds. When the guests give up on food, they go in to dance, only to find the fiddlers as befuddled as the meal. Asked to play, the minstrels are unable to remain in time, and drift immediately into "every one a several tune" (3.3.110). The next time they try to play, no one can hear them—their sound is bewitched away—and so, in frustration, the musicians themselves break their instruments. The wedding feast then, instead of being a ritual wherein the community affirms itself, is yet another scene of chaos. It is also quite funny.

If, as I suggested earlier, we can use Mr. Doughty as a barometer of the community's feelings, the wedding feast is clearly a chaotic and watershed moment. Doughty begins in warmth and cheer, is terrified by the transformation of the sirloin he is carrying, is ready to bolt out of the house, is convinced to stay, and in the course of drink and food, rejects the whole notion of witchcraft. Only at the end, after the failure of the fiddles, and the disappearance of Moll Spencer, to whom he has become attached, does he once more claim witchcraft and set the stage for himself to become the primary witch-hunter. Doughty's confusion over how to read the signs of the wedding feast mark the confusion now inherent in the community as patriarchal organization breaks down.

Two things happen which enable the men to retake the communal playing field. One is the boy (unnamed in the play), who escapes from having been kidnapped to the witches' feast (where all of the wedding fare has gone) and, with Doughty begins to go through the community identifying the witches he has seen at the feast. The other is a soldier, passing through, who despite warnings from the old miller that the mill is haunted, takes over Mr. Generous' mill. The boy's actions follow the Lancashire trial records. He is Heywood and Brome's nod to verisimilitude. The soldier is Heywood and Brome's creation, and occupies a more symbolic position in rehabilitating the masculine power of the community.

> Sir trust me with the Mill that he [the previous miller] forsakes.
> Here is a blade that hangs upon this belt
> That spite of all these rats, cats, weasels, witches
> Or dogs, or devils, shall so conjure them
> I'll quiet my possession. (2.2.218-22)

The soldier's primary qualification is his sword, which he presents to Generous as his resume.

One night, as the soldier sleeps in the mill, the witches and their attendant spirits visit him to scare him. He wakes to dreadful noise, and responds by beating them off with his sword:

> Am I in Hell, then have amongst you devils!
> This side, and that side! What, behind? Before?
> I'll keep my face unscratch'd despite you all.
> What, do you pinch in private? Claws I feel,
> But can see nothing, nothing. Pinch me thus?
> Have at you then, ay, and have at you still!
> And still have at you. (5.2.24-30)

The soldier drives them out of the mill and injures one of them in the process. As he promised, his sword is the difference between him and the feminine powers that assail him. As it turns out he has cut off one of the cats' paws which, when found, becomes Mrs. Generous' left hand. Mr. Generous recognizes the hand, and the wedding ring on it, triggering the rounding up of the women and the resolution of the play.

In my experience, students are adept at reading the hyper-masculinity of the soldier (including his phallic sword) and the symbolism inherent in Mrs. Generous' wedding

ring (particularly if they know something about the subordinate legal position of women in early modern marriage). In discussion, students may also note that in recovering his wife's wedding ring Mr. Generous takes control of his marriage and his wife and symbolically re-establishes conventional early-modern patriarchal gender roles.

We noted earlier that most of the men have been emasculated, and the soldier brings his sword to this castrated world. He comes from outside of the infected area of Lancaster and brings masculine power, represented by soldiering and war, into a world that has been taken over by feminine forces. The extent of those forces is hinted at by Mr. Doughty as he allies himself with the boy and becomes a witch hunter. Doughty says to the original miller:

> He and I will worry all the witches in Lancashire.
> ***Miller***: You were best take heed though.
> **Doughty*:*** I care not, though we leave not above three untainted women in the parish, we'll do it. (5.1.14-16)

We know from our own reading of the play that most of the women *are* witches. We've been let in on their deliberations over the course of the play. The implication at the end of the play is that *all* women are part of a conspiracy of witchcraft, and, if you look carefully enough, all are witches.

As the play finally identifies the source of its disorder, and Doughty helps the magistrates take all the witches into custody, Heywood and Brome enable us briefly to assume that the world has returned to its "natural" condition. The Seely family once more acts the barometer for the society as a whole, returning, as they suddenly do, to paternal order. As Gregory, the son, addressing his father, so abjectly puts it:

> Sir, if a contrite heart struck through with sense
> Of its sharp errors, bleeding with remorse,
> The black polluted stain it had conceived
> Of foul unnatural disobedience,
> May yet by your fair mercy find remission,
> You shall upraise a son out o' the gulf
> Of horror and despair unto a bliss
> That shall forever crown your goodness, and
> Instructive in my after life to serve you
> In all the duties that befit a son. (5.4.70-79)

In words that equate his father to God, and he to a suffering saint, Gregory repents and submits to a proper familial order. Doughty arrives from his witch-hunting to take credit for having returned his world to order. As he says to Seely and the men gathered around:

Is all so well with you already? Go to, will you know a reason for't gentlemen? I have catched a whole kennel of witches! It seems their witch is one of 'em, and so they are discharmed; they are all in officers' hands." (5.5.116-20)

Doughty reminds us that witches, once in the hands of the magistrate, lose their power. This, then, marks the end of the disruption, the end of what Seely calls "some violent infection, / Quite contrary to nature" (5.5.83-84). The witches are taken and their power and influence disappears.

On the surface, then, *The Witches of Lancashire* seems to ask the question, should we believe in witchcraft, or should we not? The central plot-line is that of Mr. Generous, the witchcraft skeptic, who must discover and come to terms with the fact that his wife is a witch. He begins as a skeptic and he ends a true believer. In his Globe Quarto edition of the play, Gabriel Egan argues that witchcraft credulity is the central issue for the play. "Brome and Heywood's play effectively takes the prosecution's side in the case, showing the women to be guilty of witchcraft and showing those who doubt this or worse, doubt the existence of witchcraft altogether, to be naïve" (xi). Herbert Berry has made much the same argument. "That much of the play is the case for the prosecution written and performed while the defendants were unsentenced, in effect still before the courts, is not just our view as we assess ancient documents. It was also Heywood's and Brome's view" (131).

At this point the play seems certain about what is true, and what is not. The skeptics are punished, witchcraft is real and pervasive, and a vigilance against witches and powerful women is ratified and rewarded. Ideologically this play seems to join

other plays of the period that suffer a disruption, but are returned, ultimately, to order. It seems to be a play for the prosecution.

If you stop here, students will likely have successfully explained the gender and class implications of early modern witchcraft and will have seen how Heywood and Brome use them to introduce and then control the chaos in their play. But don't stop here, because an even more interesting question remains unanswered. How do we read the play's tone? There is little terror in this play and even the anxiety demonstrated by the male characters is minor and played for laughs. Heywood and Brome downplay the cultural fear of witchcraft in favor of a more theatrically familiar comedy. If asked to evaluate the tone, students will note that the endless pranks of the witches result in a carnival-like atmosphere, heightened by the fact that when the witches are together they speak gleefully in rhyming couplets. The witches' pursuits are entirely devoted to entertainment rather than *maleficium*. As Meg says when she and her fellow witches meet at the beginning of Act II (our first glimpse of them): "what new device, what dainty strain, / More for our mirth now than our gain, / Shall we in practice put?" (2.1.2-4). Similarly, Mrs. Generous, late in the play, sets up the next prank by assuring her fellow witches: "Only assist me with thy charm. / This night we'll celebrate to sport: / 'Tis all for mirth, we mean no hurt" (4.4.60-62). This emphasis on mirth rather than malevolence makes the play a comedy, and is a nod to the urbane and generally skeptical London audience.

Understanding the London audience is important to our final reading of the play, and Heywood and Brome's prologue makes clear the audience they expect.

> Corrantoes failing, and no foot post late
> Possessing us with news of foreign state,
> No accidents abroad worthy relation
> Arriving here, we are forc'd from our own nation
> To ground the scene that's now in agitation.
> The project unto many here well known;
> Those witches the fat jailer brought to town,
> An argument so thin, persons so low,
> Can neither yield much matter, nor great show.
> Expect no more than can from such be rais'd,
> So may the scene pass pardon'd, though not prais'd.
> (Prologue 1-11)

The prologue assumes a sophisticated London audience interested in world events (were there any to report), an audience inclined to see the "fat Jailor" as a comic figure, and to identify witches and rustics as "argument so thin, persons so low." This construction widens the distance between a knowledgeable, urban London audience and the characters and action of the play.

The early seventeenth century theatre abounded in witches, and the London audience was experienced at reading them. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), John Marston's *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606), Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1609), Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* (1609), William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) are just a few of the plays that brought witches to the stage (and any of these plays makes an interesting comparison with the *Witches of*

Lancashire if you have space on your reading list). The witches of the theatre are potent symbols (associated as they are with gender and class inversion, disorder, treason, heresy, and the *maleficium* of village witchcraft), but they are also increasingly useful as spectacles of otherness, of everything that the London audience is not. As Kathleen McLuskie notes, discussing the 1621 tragicomedy *The Witch of Edmonton*, the play "constructs its audience as skeptical, upholders of the law, sympathetic to the victims, both women and men, while at the same time entertaining them with images of country life, [and] picturesque and exotic low-life characters" (73). Diane Purkiss makes a similar argument when discussing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

> Pandering shamelessly to the novelty-hungry news culture of Jacobean London, and to a court and intellectual elite increasingly eager for narratives of folklore which would demonstrate their separation from a credulous peasantry, the witch-scenes brazenly refuse any serious engagement with witchcraft in favour of a forthright rendering of witches as a stage spectacular. (214)

In *The Witches of Lancashire*, Lancashire is what an urban Londoner would imagine rural Lancashire to be: distant, superstitious, and unsophisticated. As Laird Barber notes in the introduction to his 1979 edition of the play, "because of the county's remoteness and the ignorance of its inhabitants, it is hardly surprising that Lancashire abounded in witches" (38).

This theatrical context helps students better understand the complicated relationship between witchcraft and the theatre. Rather than being representations of real witches, the witches of the theatre become ciphers for other forces of interest to play-writers and theatre-goers. Theater audiences come to expect spectacle and symbol rather than historical verisimilitude. This puts a play like *The Witches of Lancashire* into a peculiar representational position. Ostensibly about real witches, *The Witches of Lancashire* is equally about skeptical spectacle, and though focusing on the dangerous practices of witches in remote areas of England, the play is also a comedy about women exercising power along the lines of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* or *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

In *The Witches of Lancashire* the chaos caused by the witches is festive and comic and allied more closely to holiday than to treason or heresy; fear is drained out. The mirth, however, also functions thematically. The witches are in charge of the action. They consciously cause spectacle "more for our mirth now than our gain" (2.1.3), they drive the action, and are ultimately the writers and directors of this play. As Heather Hirschfeld has argued, the witches' "revelry is explicitly termed *sport*, and as sport it occupies a metadramatic register: it resembles the activity of playgoing" (365). The audience cannot help but sympathize with the witches in this celebration of joyous chaos. An important point to make to students is that as committed as the original audience might have been to organizing the world patriarchally and to order in general,

they were equally well trained at engaging in festival inversion. As C. L. Barber famously argued, "the holiday occasion and the comedy are parallel manifestations of the same pattern of culture, of a way that men can cope with their life" (6). The witches bring celebration, they bring comedy, and that makes it difficult for the patriarchal ideology to control them at the end of the play. The audience, and the reader, recognizes the celebratory festival as an element of both the theatre and of life. This is important to us as students of early modern theatre because it affirms that the theatre serves as a place where Lancashire belief can be transformed into London skepticism, and where assumptions about the right patriarchal ordering of the world can be challenged, albeit indirectly and subtly.

It is not only the tone, though, that encourages us as students to question the reconstitution of patriarchal power. At the end of the play, in what should be its moment of certainty, Heywood and Brome insert a last ambiguity that makes difficult any easy reading of the reconstitution of the patriarchal community. It begins with Moll Spencer, Robert's sweetheart, and the youngest of the witches. Doughty has been threatening the witches with fire and with hanging, and as the officers begin to lead the witches away, Robert addresses Moll:

> **Robert*:*** Moll, adieu sweet Moll! Ride your next journey with the company you have there.
> **Moll**: Well, rogue, I may live to ride in a coach before I come to the gallows yet. (5.5.239-42)

Instead of the traditional scaffold confession and request for absolution, Moll remains unrepentant and confident. She implies that the justices, and patriarchal society itself, are ultimately incapable of controlling her. We would have little reason to take this as a significant moment in the play, were it not that Heywood and Brome reach in with their epilogue to say almost the same thing.

> Now while the witches must expect their due
> By lawful justice, we appeal to you
> For favourable censure. What their crime
> May bring upon 'em, ripeness yet of time
> Has not reveal'd. Perhaps great mercy may
> After just condemnation give them day
> Of longer life. We represent as much
> As they have done, before law's hand did touch
> Upon their guilt, but dare not hold it fit
> That we for justices and judges sit,
> And personate their grave wisdoms on the stage
> Whom we are bound to honour. No, the age
> Allows it not. Therefore unto the Laws
> We can but bring the witches and their cause,
> And there we leave 'em, as their devils did.
> Should we go further with 'em? Wit forbid!
> What of their story further shall ensue,
> We must refer to Time, ourselves to you. (Epilogue 1-8)

Heywood and Brome leave the witches' fates undecided. It is true that they know that the actual fate of the witches depends upon the finding of the King's Privy Council. But the epilogue acknowledges none of the legal action already completed, nor does it extrapolate appropriate punishment for what has been acknowledged in the play as actual witchcraft.

It is worth having students suggest explanations for this ending and the play's generally light-hearted portrayal of witchcraft. They will tend to come up with at least three valid interpretations for the play's inability to control the witches, and each works as a part of the play's resolution. 1) The uncertain fate of the witches enables women to hold on to representational power granted by the play. Women drive the action of the play. They are in charge and easily make fools of the men, and the men's foolishness, their trials and struggles are what make up the comedy. Early modern comedy has traditionally given women opportunities that tragedy has not. This play does as well. In spite of the fact that all of the women are witches, the play allows them a status that lingers beyond the end of the play. Like Shakespeare's Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, or Rosalind in *As You Like It*, the women who have dominated the action maintain a level of authority even when they are ostensibly returned to their rightful roles as wives. The witches are controlled by the magistrates, but not by the play itself. This suggests to students that the power relationship between early modern men and women is more complicated than is often assumed, and deepens their understanding of the tensions that make up the history of this period.[3] 2) Witches are the reason people come to see this play, and their actions are the privileged actions. Witches provide the comedy, and their escape from control at the end enables, symbolically, the fun to go on. The genre demands continued "mirth" in the conclusion of the play. 3) Without belaboring the point, this is again a nod to the London audience, which is more likely to see witches as

stage devices than as actual witches. The ending acknowledges the limitations of the Lancashire interpretation of events and cleverly reestablishes the superiority of the London audience's reading of the play's action. If the King's privy council has already passed judgment on the witches in London (and we do not know that they have, by the time the play is first performed), then this ending acknowledges, with a kind of feigned prophetic innocence, what Sir William Harvey and the King's privy council will determine officially: that the witches are not guilty of witchcraft and should go free.

These interpretations operate together, tugging and pulling at the play's resolution and at the audience's sensibility. They suggest the complexity of witchcraft as a theatrical sign, and illuminate elements of the pre-civil war collective psyche that informs the play. "We can but bring the Witches and their cause" to the stage, Heywood and Brome declare. The cause, it seems, is carnival and mirth, and in a nod to their entire audience, Heywood and Brome leave judgment, credulity or skepticism, containment or revolution, to the individual theatre-goer.

The Witches of Lancashire, then, serves as a general pattern for the use of witchcraft in the mid-seventeenth century theatre. The play marks out the complexity of the cultural response to witchcraft while showing clearly the underlying skepticism of the London theatrical community. Though real witches are still persecuted in Lancashire and other rural locations, and real women languish in real prisons as a result, the

witches in this play have little to do with them. For the theatre, and for *The Witches of Lancashire* in particular, witchcraft is a stand-in for questions of gender and class, but even more profoundly, it is an opportunity for comedy. Nathaniel Tomkyns notes this in his letter to Sir Robert Phelips after seeing the play in August of 1634.

> The subject was of the slights and passages done or supposed to be done by these witches sent from thence hither….And though there be not in it, to my understanding, any poetical genius, or art, or language, or judgment to state or tenet of witches (which I expected)…it passeth for a merry and excellent new play. (Egan 163-64).

Tompkyns positions himself as a skeptic, expecting to be lectured on the tenets of witchcraft. Instead, what he gets is comedy. Though there is more than comedy in *The Witches of Lancashire*, what a reading of the play and our class discussions suggest, is that in London by 1634 witchcraft's most identifiable association is with mirth. Though witchcraft would remain a crime in England until 1736, fewer individuals were prosecuted after 1634 (with the exception of one outbreak in the 1650s, driven by the ardent witch-hunter Matthew Hopkins). The argument over how to interpret witchcraft is ostensibly the subject of this play, but the play itself has already weighed in on the skeptic's side. *The Witches of Lancashire* helps to lay real witchcraft to rest for the London theatre audience.

The Witches of Lancashire plays well in the classroom. It provides easy class discussions about the nature of witchcraft in the early seventeenth century in England,

about the gender and class rules that underlie early modern English society, and about the power of the theatre to mark, and transform popular opinion. It also provides an interesting alternative to better known seventeenth century comedies. Many students have a general fascination with witchcraft, and witchcraft was an important cultural phenomenon in the early modern period in England. The *Witches of Lancashire* can access all of that for our students, while giving them experience with this "merry and excellent new play."

Endnotes

[1] All references to *The Witches of Lancashire* are from the Globe Quarto edition edited by Gabriel Egan.

[2] Attacks on fertility, particularly in the form of castration, have always been one of the reputed powers of witches. For early modern concerns about witches and castration, see, for example, Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft,* 82, or Sprenger and Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum*, 54-61.

[3] Many witchcraft commentators have made the point that witchcraft provides poor and generally powerless women with an important authority and representational

status within their communities. Stephanie Irene Spoto sums up the argument clearly in her "Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power."

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