



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



"Which Witch?: Teaching Brome and Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches*"

Author(s): Tony Lilly, Sweet Briar College

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (June, 2015), pp. 41-53.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/lilly%20article.html>

**"Which Witch?:
Teaching Brome and Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches*"**

by Dr. Tony Lilly, Sweet Briar College

From *The Wizard of Oz* to the Lifetime series *The Witches of East End*, witches have become a central part of our collective unconscious. Witches in popular culture still represent otherness and an untamed feminine will, as they have done historically, but in a way seemingly removed from the terrors of Salem and the infamous witch hunts of Mathew Hopkins in Caroline England. Even as witchcraft has secured a unique place in today's popular imagination, the history and literature of witchcraft has become an increasingly important subspecialty in the academy, perhaps dating from Sir Keith Thomas's landmark 1971 volume *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. I suggest that texts exploring witchcraft are worth including in mainstream Renaissance literature courses, and I argue for the specific inclusion of a relatively unknown play, Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634).

In my advanced undergraduate course on literature by and about women in early modern England, I include a unit on witches as an imaginative way to introduce a number of important issues. For example, witch texts help us understand that cultural attitudes in early modern England were not monolithic. Using these texts, we can

compare an emerging urban skepticism with a more provincial attitude towards magic and traditional folklore. This in turn helps students understand the period's increasing cosmopolitanism, the role of religion (and the varying degrees of its centralization), and the emerging role of science. Also, in many or all of the witch texts we read, it becomes difficult to talk about "womanhood" without also talking about social structures such as class, sexuality, nationality, and religion. This intersectionality helps show the ways in which identities are culturally and linguistically constructed, and the ways in which social analyses based on those identities are always provisional. I also use witch texts to teach students the differences (and similarities) between "literary" and "historical" texts—a division that is not always clear, particularly in the Renaissance. I extend that discussion to include a consideration of how literary and historical disciplinary methodologies differ when investigating a topic like Renaissance women. My students have revealed surprisingly strong feelings about the proper relationship between history and literature; for advanced students, this debate can provide a good opportunity to compare literary theories such as Paul de Man's "return to philology," new historicism, and presentism.

In different iterations of this course, I have used a number of standard "witch" texts to accomplish these goals, including Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; Thomas Dekker, William Rowley, and John Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton*; broadsides excerpted from Henderson and McManus's volume *Half-Humankind*; excerpts from sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century witch-hunting guides and critiques such as Matthew Hopkins's *The Discovery of Witches* and Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*; and period woodcuts depicting witches. Three years ago, an honors student encountered *The Late Lancashire Witches*, a contemporaneous dramatization of the 1633-34 witch scare in Lancashire, near Pendle Hill. The student couldn't stop talking about how funny and brilliant the play was, so on his recommendation, I introduced the play in my course as a companion piece to *The Witch of Edmonton*. In addition to the plays, I also assigned Henry Goodcole's "The Wonderfull Discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer," an account of the interrogation on which *Edmonton* is based; excerpts from Thomas Potts's *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches*, an account of an earlier 1612 witch scare in Lancashire; and two scholarly essays from *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories* (edited by Robert Poole) that explore the historical and literary contexts of Brome and Heywood's play.

That unit that included this new addition was a great success. *The Late Lancashire Witches* is, as my student noted, remarkably bright and lighthearted. It is fast-moving and full of verbal and visual effects, such as music, dances, a skimmington parade, on-stage transformations of animals and props, stories of self-motivating brooms and pails, and a magical de-tumescing codpiece point. Delightful in its own right, the play's humor and stage magic also provide a striking contrast to the deadly seriousness with which witchcraft accusations were treated in the period. In fact, at the exact time

crowds of “fine folk” were crowding the Globe to see the play (as Nathaniel Tomkyns puts it in his 1634 diary, [qtd. Ostovich, par. 1]), five Lancashire women convicted of witchcraft were being held in London pending examination, by order of the Privy Council (Findlay 146, 148). These were the very women on whom the play was based. At least three other women would die before the accused witches were exonerated, and evidence suggests that even after their exoneration, the accused were imprisoned for years in Lancashire Castle at “His Majesty’s pleasure” (Findlay 146, 151, Sharpe 5).

It seems scandalous that the play could treat such a deadly topic so lightly, especially when we see that accusations of witchcraft can be taken very seriously in literature, as they are in the grimmer and more serious-minded *The Witch of Edmonton*. Yet, the sense of cognitive dissonance evoked by *The Late Lancashire Witches* is a valuable pedagogical tool which, perhaps, reflects the lack of consensus about the nature of witchcraft in early modern England. For example, Alison Findlay, building on work by Herbert Berry, hypothesizes that the play was commissioned by Lord Pembroke or other Puritan sympathizers on the Privy Council as a way to stir up public sentiment against the Pendle witches (Findlay 159-160), in opposition to the Laudian faction, for whom witchcraft was a “dead issue,” as James Sharpe argues it was throughout England at this time (Sharpe 4). In the literary register, the play is also ambivalent. It evokes sympathy for the witches by making them the source of both awe and amusement, but the conclusion leaves them, unrepentant, in the hands of the

constabulary, with the hope that the “law” will “take his course”

(5.1.speech1073).[1] The play’s epilogue seems implicitly to accept the guilt of the (real) Pendle witches even while ostensibly keeping some distance:

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. (Epilogue, speech1084)

The play’s attitude of indecision towards witchcraft is shared by the characters. One character describes unusual happenings during a hunt as “accidents / All game is subject to,” while another character maintains that he will “hold them prodigies, / As things transcending nature” and that he was crossed by “A witch, or rather a devil, I think” (1.1,speech3-4, 6). Another character, Master Generous, also denies the existence of witchcraft, saying that believers in witchcraft only “dream, / For my belief is no such thing can be: / A madness, you may call it” (1.1,speech95), only to later change his mind when his wife is implicated in *maleficium*, evil magic.

The play therefore walks a line between taking the witches seriously and ridiculing those who believe in magic. This bifurcated attitude can be read in contrast to *The Witch of Edmonton*, in which witchcraft is examined in a more sober manner, both as a supernatural evil itself and as a metaphor for deeper social and economic ills. *Late Lancaster’s* more complex approach, taken in conjunction with its historical context, leaves students in an awkward situation (reminiscent perhaps of what 1634 audience

members might have felt) as they balance their own enjoyment of the play with the dark reality the play exploits for entertainment.

While students can, from their first reading, appreciate the play's quick pacing as well as the complex emotions evoked by the play's humor, the play's representation of witchcraft also raises more serious and complex questions, particularly with regard to family structures and female sexuality. For example, one of the play's plots involves the Seely family, whose traditional lines of authority have been subverted. A neighbor describes this upheaval:

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 prepared courtesy. The girl, she
Expects it as a duty; chides her mother,
Who quakes and trembles at each word she speaks [...]
As it breeds pity, and in others wonder,
So in the most part laughter. (1.1,speech92)

This inversion of the "natural" order is even more pronounced since the servants, Lawrence and Parnell, who command all the family, speak with thick Northern accents, marking them as both lower class and as ethnic outsiders. The reversal of authority is the result of a local coven of witches, who engineer the confusion to create "wonder and sorrow 'mongst our foes, / Whilst we make laughter of their woes" (2.1.speech201). On the other hand, as one of the witches comments, "that's no wonder, through the wide / World 'tis common" (2.1.speech205). The Seely family's upheaval, alongside the

witches' commentary, provides a platform from which I was able to initiate discussions of Renaissance family and social structures, gender and power, class differences, and to introduce (and to critique) the "great chain of being."

A second plot exploring family structure involves Master Generous, a wealthy and kind-hearted citizen, and his wife Mistress Generous, who is a witch. When Master Generous is given proof of his wife's supernatural powers after his servant cleverly ensnares her with her own magic, the play seems to suggest a moral framework for conjugal happiness in the face of difficulties. In a surprisingly emotional scene, Generous elicits his wife's confession and penitent tears, then forgives her:

Mistress Generous: Pardon, sir! [...]
I hope I never bargained for that fire
Further than penitent tears have power to quench.
Master Generous: I would see some of them.
Mistress Generous: [Weeping] You behold them now [...]
Sir, I am sorry; when I look towards heaven,
I beg a gracious pardon [...]
Master Generous: Rise, and as I do, so heaven pardon me;
We all offend, but from such falling off,
Defend us. Well, I do remember, wife,
When I first took thee, 'twas for good and bad;
Oh, change thy bad to good, that I may keep thee,
As then we passed our faiths till death us sever. (4.2.speech666,
683-84, 691)

Master Generous offers his wife forgiveness, citing their marriage oaths and her change of heart. Soon, though, we see Mistress Generous back with her coven, explaining that

she escaped “without danger” since

Some passionate words mixed with forced tears
Did so enchant his eyes and ears,
I made my peace, with promise never
To do the like; but once and ever
A witch, thou know’st. (4.4.speech800)

With this emotional betrayal, the play situates Mistress Generous not as a cartoonish caricature of a harmless witch (nor as a victim of circumstance, as in *Edmonton*), but as a duplicitous and hypocritical human being, whose too-trusting husband deserves pity and sympathy. This affecting passage, even more than the outlandish Seely plot, situates witchcraft as an evil (or at least as a metaphor for evil) that infects families and social order. And if the evil can be overcome, the method is unclear: stratagems to ensnare evildoers, love and affection, Christian charity, and husbandly authority all seem ineffectual, as does the play’s halfhearted hope that the law will intervene to judge these women.

Indeed, the play points out that patriarchal family structure is unstable in its own right, and not only owing to witchcraft. In a third plot, Mistress Generous’s dull-witted nephew Whetstone enlists the help of his aunt to take revenge on a group of associates who mercilessly tease him. With his aunt’s help, he conjures images of lower-class men (a tutor, a tailor, a groomsman) who he claims are his friends’ real fathers owing to cuckoldry. The verity of his claims remains unknown in the play. Whetstone’s scheme illustrates the instability of patrilineal societies when only maternity can be verified.

This echoes, of course, a theme in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Tempest*, and other more commonly-read Renaissance plays.

The question of parentage also evokes the nature of women's gender and sexuality, an issue which is particularly pertinent in witch plays. Witchcraft was (and is) still thought of as a "women's crime"; more specifically, "witches were archetypally [...] women who were old, or widowed," (Mendelson and Crawford 45, 71) that is, past their sexual prime (ibid., 184). We see this assumption in *The Witch of Edmonton*, and Whetstone echoes this stereotype in the first act of *Late Lancashire*, saying that witches "for the most part are ugly old beldams" (1.1.speech38).

At the same time, witches were associated with sexual appetite, erotic deviancy, and plain lustfulness, as is the case with *Macbeth*'s weird sisters, Hecate in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*, and Erictho in John Marston's *The Wonder of Women*.[2] Whetsone's friends come to the teasing conclusion that some witches must be "young" and "wanton" since Whetstone's mother "by her beauty and fair looks bewitched [his] father" (1.1.speech38). This equation of female sexual appetite and witchcraft is illustrated many times in the play. Mall Spencer, a young and attractive witch, is linked romantically to four of the male characters in the play, and her carnal appetite is depicted quite graphically: "Three hundred miles a night upon a rawboned devil [i.e., a bewitched horse]," says her lover, "and then a wench [Mall] that shared more o'my back then the said devil did o' my bum! This is rank riding, my masters!"

(3.2.speech458). A second witch, Meg, describes her sexual relations with her familiar with relish: "Twice a week he never failed me. [...] He pleased me well, sir, like a proper man" (5.4.speech1063, 1067). The voyeuristic interest of Meg's male questioners challenges their own erotic propriety, too: "Sweet coupling!" rhapsodizes one of her auditors as Meg describes her sexual activities (5.4.speech1068).

Two more mature witches also exhibit sexual desire and erotic power, combining the tropes of the old witch and the lustful witch, thereby highlighting the constructedness of the nonsexual/hypersexual dichotomy. After a boy rejects the advances of witch Goody Dickieson, she transforms him into a horse to ride upon, extending the metaphor of sex and equestrianism (2.3.speech330-334). Later, Mistress Generous tries secretly to borrow her husband's horse to travel to a meeting of her coven. Robin, the groom, tries to stop her:

Robin: Truly, mistress, pray pardon me, I must be plain with you. I dare not deliver him [the horse] you; my master has t'en a notice of the ill case you have brought him home in divers times.

Mistress 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.

Robin: You may say your pleasure. *He turns from her.*

Mistress Generous: No, sir, I'll do my pleasure. *She bridles him.*

Robin: Aw!

Mistress Generous: Horse, horse, see thou be,
And where I point thee, carry me. (3.2.speech464-69)

Not satisfied with mere speech, Mistress Generous explicitly takes bodily control of Robin (and symbolically, therefore, control of her husband, echoing the Seely family

plot). She then rides him—literally and metaphorically—again reinforcing the play's equation of sex with horse riding. Furthermore, with the deployment of the Renaissance terms “case” and “do”—referring colloquially to a woman’s pudenda and to sex, respectively—Mistress Generous’s sexual “pleasure” is linked to her authority and control.

Finally, the format in which *The Late Lancashire Witches* is available presents both challenges and opportunities. It is not currently in print. Fortunately, a top-quality, scholarly, online edition is available for free. The edition is one of many plays in the [Richard Brome Online](#) collection, edited by Helen Ostovich and co-sponsored by Royal Holloway, University of London and the University of Sheffield’s Humanities Research Institute. The online edition has excellent hyperlinked scholarly footnotes, a side-by-side presentation of original spelling and modern spelling versions of the play, and over two dozen video clips of key scenes. A benefit of this textual medium is that it allowed me to introduce my students to elements of digital humanities. Rather than using this online edition as transparent vehicle for textual transmission, I asked students to assess their own use of an electronic text as opposed to a traditional paper text, and I asked them to present one of their own projects as a webpage rather than a traditional written essay. Most students were, frankly, disoriented and uncomfortable using a digital text, even though many found the embedded links and video clips very helpful. Their own electronic work varied in quality: some projects were rudimentary,

but some made creative use of the digital medium. I believe, though, that students ended the semester better equipped to make good use of electronic resources with less discomfort and anxiety than before. Instructors who wish to expand their incorporation of the digital humanities into a unit on early modern witches might also consult [Cornell University's Digital Witchcraft Collection](#) and the ever-useful [Early English Books Online](#).

The Late Lancashire Witches was, for me, a smart, fun, and pedagogically useful addition to my course on early modern women—one that I will retain. Its close engagement with historical context, the striking contrast it presents with other witch literature, its exploration of family structure and feminine sexuality, and its electronic textual medium all present unparalleled opportunities for undergraduate study.

Endnotes

[1] Citations of *The Late Lancaster Witches* refer to the *Richard Brome Online* edition with modernized spelling. Editor Helen Ostovich numbers speech passages rather than lines, and my citations follow her example.

[2] See also Julia M. Garrett's recent "Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England."

Works Cited

Chadwyck-Healey. *Early English Books Online*, 2014. Web. 24 June 2014

Cornell University Library. *Digital Witchcraft Collection*, 2014. Web. 24 June 2014.

Findlay, Alison. "Sexual and Spiritual Politics in the Events of 1633–34 and *The Late Lancashire Witches*" *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*. Ed. Robert Poole. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 146-65. EBSCOHost eBook Collection. Web. 23 June 2014.

Garrett, Julia M. "Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 13.1 (2013): 32-72. Project Muse. Web. 23 June 2014.

Henderson, Katherine Usher and Barbara F. McManus. *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy About Women in England 1540-1640*. Chicago:U Illinois P, 1985.

Heywood, Thomas and Richard Brome. *The Late Lancashire Witches*. Modern text. Ed. Helen Ostovich. *Richard Brome Online*. Royal Holloway, University of London and Humanities Research Institute, University of Sheffield. n.d. Web. 23 June 2014.

Mendelson, Sara and Patricia Crawford. *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Ostovich, Helen. Introduction. *The Late Lancashire Witches*. By Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome. Ed. Helen Ostovich. *Richard Brome Online*. Royal Holloway, University of London and Humanities Research Institute, University of Sheffield. n.d. n.pag. Web. 23 June 2014.

Royal Holloway, University of London and Humanities Research Institute, University of Sheffield. *Richard Brome Online*, 2010. Web. 24 June 2014.

Sharpe, James. "Introduction: The Lancashire Witches in Historical Context." *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*. Ed. Robert Poole. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 1-18. EBSCOHost eBook Collection. Web. 23 June 2014.

Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. New York: Scribner, 1971.