WITCHCRAFT IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

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WITCHCRAFT IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

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The major purpose of this paper is to present a study of the effect of witchcraft superstitions upon the dramas produced during that fruitful period of English literature known as the Elizabethan Age. As a prelude to such an analysis, I found it necessary to acquaint myself in some detail with the mass of witch-lore that was an integral part of the credo of most sixteenth century Englishmen. I confined myself largely in this research to a perusal of the compendiums of witch-lore published during, or shortly prior to, this period. Thus I attempted to insure myself against tracing certain witch scenes in the plays to sources whose availability to the playwrights was questionable. Most of the information concerning the powers, activities, and recreational pursuits of the beldames, as well as the numerous appurtenances of witchcraft, I garnered from three volumes. By far the most valuable of these three was Reginald Scot's Discoverie of Witchcraft, in which the author enumerated exhaustively the common and rare beliefs concerning witches in order to ridicule these superstitions. Second in importance was the book containing the two efforts in this field from the pen of King James I, Demonologie in the Forme of a Dialogue and Newes from Scotland. A few pertinent bits of
witch-lore were to be found in the third volume, A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes by the mild skeptic, George Gifford.

The only modern publications I found it necessary to consult were those which recorded some of the testimony given at certain well-known witch trials that might have been used as dramatic material by the playwrights. For a discussion of this phase of my subject I have quoted somewhat sparingly from The Geography of Witchcraft by Montague Summers and the journals of Elizabethan happenings by George B. Harrison.

My paper concerns itself largely with the witch scenes in twelve dramas and the probable sources of the material presented in those scenes. In some of these plays witches have an important part in plot development. In others the beldames are merely used to add a sinister quality to the atmosphere. No witches actually appear upon the stage in The Merry Wives of Windsor and The Tempest, but since the activities of witches are mentioned several times in the dialogue, I included those two dramas in my list. The amount of space devoted to each play is allotted according to the degree of importance of its utilization of witchcraft rather than according to its degree of literary quality.

Five of the twelve plays studied are by William Shakespeare: Macbeth; Henry VI, Part I; Henry VI, Part II; The Merry Wives of Windsor; and The Tempest. Only Macbeth, however, makes sufficient use of witchcraft to warrant any
detailed discussion. Two of Thomas Heywood's efforts fall into the category of witch plays: The Wise-woman of Hogsdon and The Late Lancashire Witches. In the latter drama Heywood has combined his talents with those of Richard Brome. Ben Jonson is also represented twice in this field. Both The Sad Shepherd and The Masque of Queens are heavily permeated with witch-lore. I have given considerable attention to Thomas Middleton's The Witch, largely because in that play the author has done little more than clothe with flesh most of the popular superstitions of his day. John Lyly's Mother Bombie is worthy of inclusion in this group of dramas because it deals with one of the gentler phases of witchcraft, that of the wise-woman's activities. The Witch of Edmonton, a collaborative effort of William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, I have treated in some detail, because it presents what is probably the most authentic dramatic portrait of the true Elizabethan witch.

Briefly, then, this paper resolves itself into a study of the impression left by the superstitions concerning witchcraft upon the Elizabethan drama. This analysis would naturally entail a discussion of roles delegated to the witch in the dramas in which she appeared. It would also include an effort to trace to their probable sources the habits of the witch as depicted or alluded to by the authors of the plays that make use of these superstitions as dramatic
material. I have tried to make my study as comprehensive as the limited amount of material in this field would permit.
CHAPTER I

WITCHCRAFT IN THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

If there was a baser metal in that glittering chain of golden decades termed by historians and English scholars the Elizabethan age, it was the almost universal belief in witchcraft. The bitter hatreds and persecutions and cold terror inspired by this belief left its obscene mark upon much of the literature of that age. It must be evident, however, that, in spite of the fear she aroused and notwithstanding the alarms raised upon her discovery, the witch was created by man to fill a need. For man has always sought, fearfully but persistently, for some connection, however vague, with the powers that be in the other world. Through the witch that connection was apparently established. It supplied him with an outlet for his hatreds, enabling him to wreak several degrees of vengeance upon those who he fancied had wronged him. On the other hand, he could put to good use the witch's powers for the material advancement of his family or friends or to assure his own success in love or business. It gave him a feeling of security to have influence with creatures endowed with supernatural powers, even if it was acquired through evil channels. The chief explanation for the existence of the belief in witchcraft, however, has been overlooked, I believe, by most of those who have done research
work in this field. The fundamental reason for man's creation of the witch was the universal need of a scapegoat. The average human being finds it impossible to confess even to himself that his failures and frustrations are due in large measure to his own weakness and lack of ability. By every standard we use, a man may be a nonentity to the world at large, but in his own estimation he is a talented individual who through the machinations of some external force has been denied the opportunities he deserves. If he was an ancient Greek or Roman, his misfortune was due to the ill favor of the fickle gods. If he is a modern American, it is due to the blunders of the Administration. If he was an Englishman in the days of Queen Elizabeth, his poverty, illness, or unhappiness could be traced with a minimum of effort to a witch's curse. Thus he evaded the painful necessity of altering his flattering conception of his own adequacy. There had to be witches.

And witches there were... enough, and of sufficient variety to satisfy everyone's requirements. There were white witches and grey witches and black witches, some of them wondrous fair, the most as hideous as death. There were witches who healed and those who destroyed. Some apparently possessed all the evil powers of Satan, himself, while others limited their fields of endeavor and were as highly specialized in their abilities as modern surgeons.

It appears evident, then, that generalizations concerning
witches are difficult to make. A fair description, however, of a witch of that period may be garnered from a work by Samuel Harsnett published in 1603:

Of such is shaped the true Idea of a witch, an old weather beaten crone having her chin and her knees meeting for age, hollow-eyed, untoothed, going mumbling in the streets, one that hath forgotten her paternoster, yet hath a shrewd tongue in her head to call "a drab, a drab." If she have learned of an old wife in a chimney's end "pax, max, fax" for a spell, or can say Sir John or Grantham's curse for the miller's eels that were stolen, why then beware, look about you, my neighbors, if any of you have a knavish boy of the school, or an idle girl of the wheel, or a young drab of the sullens; and she have a little help of the mother, epilepsy or cramp, to teach her roll her eyes, wry her mouth, gnash her teeth, startle with her body, hold her arms and hands stiff, make antic faces, grin, mow, and mop like an ape, and can mutter out two or three words of gibride as "olus, bolus"; and then withal Old Mother Nobs hath by a chance called her idle young housewife or bid the Devil scratch her; then no doubt Mother Nobs is a witch and the young girl star-blasted and possessed.¹

The sarcasm in this excerpt is hardly veiled at all, for Harsnett may be classed with that numerically insignificant group that dared to question the credulity of the masses concerning witchcraft. Nevertheless, it gives a good idea of the witch as conceived in the unimaginative mind of the average English villager. It may be readily seen that she possessed none of the awesome qualities of the Weird Sisters as depicted in Macbeth. Hers was no mighty gift of prophecy, nor had she aught to do with the rise and fall of kingdoms. She dealt in petty hatreds or lusts, causing a man's crops

¹Samuel Harsnett, A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, quoted in George B. Harrison, A Last Elizabethan Journal, p. 323
to fail, or making him impotent by putting a snakeskin in his bed.

The fact that such questioning minds were in the minority where witchcraft was concerned must be emphasized. There is nothing to prove that the most famous playwrights, poets, and essayists of that day did not share that most popular superstition with their illiterate countrymen. It is certain that at least one English king bordered on fanaticism in his pursuit of witches. Though his Scotch background probably accounts for much of his belief in these weird hybrids of Earth and Hell, it was not until James gained the throne of England that he set about their extermination in earnest. His first parliament had been in session but eight days when it enacted the following law upon his demand:

If any person shall use, practise, or exercise an Invocation or Conjuration of any evill and wicked Spirit, or shall consult, convenant with, entertaine, employe, feede, or reward any evill and wicked Spirit to or for any intent or purpose; or take up any dead man, woman, or child out of his, her, or their grave, or any other place where the dead body resteth, or the skin, bone, or any part of any dead person to be employed or used in any manner of witchcraft, enchantment, charm, or sorcerie, whereby any person shall be killed, destroyed, wasted, consumed, pined, or lamed in his or her body, or any part thereof, every such offender is a felon without benefit of clergy.2

Thus witch-baiting reached the status of a legalized sport, and the hideous smoke from witch pyres tainted the bright air of rural England. A second offense in even the

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2Montague Summers, *Geography of Witchcraft*, p. 130.
apparently harmless practices was punishable by death. Some fifty witches were executed during the reign of James.

Witches, then, to the sixteenth century Englishman were far more than the subjects of old wives' tales. His family and his parson and his king spoke of them often; thus they were as real to him as his storm-shattered grain or sick child. Around the knowledge of their existence he accumulated a mass of fantastic stories of their evil deeds and malignant powers which he soon came to accept as truths also. A study in some detail of these peculiar talents of witches is interesting.

It is generally conceded by scholars that there existed few, if any, greater authorities upon witchcraft than Reginald Scot despite his obvious skepticism. Faithfully he recorded all the more popular accusations against witches in order that he might refute them. It should be stated in passing that such an attitude in that age called for an unlimited amount of spiritual courage and not a little of the physical variety. He risked not only his comfortable estate but his social standing and even his life in order to attack the deeply entrenched superstitions of his day. One is frequently impressed with his clear reasoning in a period sodden with emotion.

It would be difficult to find a more adequate summary of the classes of witches and the various powers delegated to each than that given in his Discoverie of Witchcraft:
Yet we read in Mallea Maleficarum of three sorts of
witches; and the same is affirmed by all writers hereupon,
new and old. One sort (they say) can hurt and not helpe,
the second can helpe and not hurt, the third can both
helpe and hurt. And among the hurtfull witches he saith
there is one sort more beastlie than any kind of beasts,
saving wolvem; for these usuallie devour and eate yong
children and infants of their owne kind. These be they
(saith he) that raise haile, tempests, and hurtfull
weather: as lightening, thunder &c. These be they that
procure barrennesse in man, woman, and beast. These can
throwe children into waters as they walke with their
mothers, and not be seene. These can make horasses kicke,
till they cast the riders. These can passe from place
to place in the aire invisible. These can so alter the
minds of judges, that they can have no power to hurt
them. These can procure to themselves and to others,
taciturnitie and insensibilitie in their torments. . . .
These can manifest unto others things hidden and lost,
and foreshew things to come; and see them as though they
were present. These can alter mens minds to inordinate
love or hate. These can kill whom they list with lighten-
ing and thunder. These can take awaie mens courage, and
the power of generation. These can make a woman mis-
carrie in childbirth. . . . These can with their looks
kill either man or beast.3

Perhaps the most striking thing about this list of
witch's powers is its strange mixture of the awesome and the
trivial. As is to be seen to an even greater extent in the
following excerpt, these powers range from the omnipotence
granted their gods by the ancients to the ridiculous trickery
and claims of a savage medicine man.

And first Ovid affirmeth, that they can raise and
suppresse lightening and thunder, raine, haile, clouds
and winds, tempests and earthquakes. Others doo write,
that they can pull downe the moone and the starres. Some
write that with wishing they can send needles into the
livers of their enemies. Some that they can transferre
corne in the blade from one place to another. Some that
they can cure diseases supernaturallie, flie in the aire,
and danse with divels. Some write, that they can plaie

3Reginald Scot, The Discoverie of Witchcraft, p. 5.
the part of Succubus, and contract themselves to Incubus, and so yoong prophets are upon them begotten. They can go in and out at auger holes, & saile in an egg shell . . . through and under the tempestuous seas.4

There are more, many more powers listed, but these are sufficient for the moment to show what a great variety of actions one might expect from a witch. One must confess that she was versatile. With apparently equal ease she could wreak vengeance by hurling the earth from its orbit or causing a man's cow to go dry.

One gathers, however, that no one witch possessed all these gifts. Even in this diabolic craft there was division of labor. In one scene the Wise-woman of Hogsdon is made to list her contemporaries and the fields in which they excel.5 Following, then, is an example of sixteenth century specialization in the supernatural arts.

1. Mother Nottingham and Mother Bomby were skilled in the casting of waters.

2. Hatfield in Pepper Alley was noted for her success in locating lost articles.

3. The Witch of Coleharbour was said to be skilled in the planets, meaning that astrology was her pursuit.

4. Mother Sturton in Golden Lane was supposed to be quite good in the art of forespeaking, or as we would say, prophesying.

4Ibid., p. 6.
5. Mother Phillips of Bankside specialized in weaknesses of the back, effecting cures in those afflicted with lumbago, rheumatism, etc.

6. The Matron of Clerkenwell Green was something of a general practitioner, being good, it was said, at a number of things.

7. Mistress Mary on the Bankside was the one to be consulted when it came to "recting a figure," which meant that she also dabbled in astrology.

8. The Witch of Westminster was said to practice the book and key and the sieve and shears, which meant that she utilized these articles in her system of fortune telling.

Middleton, in his play, The Witch, has followed the trend of his times in dividing the destructive tasks among the various witches in his cast. When one seeks the aid of a witch in some evil pursuit, his wants are classified, and he is sent to the one whose wicked talents might serve best to fill his needs. These talents, as summarized by the spokesman for the unhallowed group, were assigned as follows:

1. Stadlin raised ruinous storms and fearful tempests, wrecking any ship or house selected by her client.

2. Hoppo could, by incantation, destroy the young of cattle, blast vineyards, orchards, meadows, or transport a man's hay or corn by ricks onto another man's ground.

3. Hecate could cause impotence in a man or barrenness in a woman, thus helping to bring about the failure of their
marriage. These ends she accomplished by thrusting into the
pillows of the marriage bed needles that had been used to sew
up dead men in their sheets. She confessed that she could
procure the same results by using rare herbs or a snakeskin.⁶

But if the methods the witches employed were distinctive,
the end they sought was in almost every instance the same.
Their goal was the misery or destruction of some person or
group. And if their skills and arts differed widely, they
possessed some things in common, certain marks or qualities
by the discovery of which a man might identify them and so
avoid them or destroy them as he desired. Since James I was
recognized as an authority upon the identification of a witch,
the methods he suggested were most frequently employed. There
were two devices that he particularly favored:

The one is the finding of their marke, and the trying of
the insensiblenes thereof. The other is their floating on
the water: for as in a secret murther, if the deade carcasse
be at any time thereafter handled by the murtherer, it wil
gush out of bloud, as if the bloud wer crying to the heauen
for revenge of the murtherer, God hauing appoynted that
secret super-naturall signe, for tryall of that secret
ynnaturall crime, so it appeares that God hath appoynted
(for a super-naturall signe of the monstrous impietie of
the witches) that the water shall refuse to receive them
in her bosom, that have shaken off them the sacred water
of Baptisme, and wilfullie refused the benefite thereof:
no not so much as their eyes are able to shed teares
(thretten and torture them as you please) while first they
repent (God not permitting them to dissemble their obsti-
nacie in so horrible a crime) albeit the women kinde espe-
cially, be able other-waies to shed teares at every light
occasion when they will, yea, although it were dissembling
like the Crocodiles.⁷

⁷King James I, Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue, p. 6.
Perhaps this mention of the witch's mark may require some explanation. Again one need but refer the reader to the writing of James I. In his *Newes from Scotland*, he discusses the origin of the mark and the place to look for it on a suspect.

It hath latelie beene found that the Diuell dooth generallye marke them with a priuie marke, by reason the Witches haue confessed themselves, that the Diuell dooth lick them in some priuay part of their bodie, before he dooth receive them to be his seruants, which mark commonly is giuen them under the haire in some part of their bodye, wherby it may not easily be found out or seene.8

It must be added that there are numerous records of trials in which the inquisitors sought these marks on the bodies of the suspects, and the high percentage of these searches which were successful speaks highly of their keen perception. Needless to say, practically every person has some mole or blemish on his body that might be identified as such a mark by anyone seeking such proof. Even if it was not found, as in rare instances it was not, its absence was seldom taken as proof of innocence. Usually such a failure was considered as evidence of the Devil's cleverness in concealing it so well.

*Sometimes these marks of the evil master served a double purpose. Many believed that they were scars that marked the spots on the witches' bodies where the vampire-like "familiars" nourished themselves upon the blood of their*

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8King James I, *Newes from Scotland*, p. 12.
mistresses. For any witch worthy of the name kept about her or upon ready call a number of imps in the forms of well-known small animals whose duties consisted of performing the destructive works she wanted done. There was hardly a trial held during the Elizabethan period the evidence of which did not concern itself at some length with these creatures.

George Gifford in a work published in 1593 summarizes this phase of witchcraft as follows:

The witches have their spirits, some hath one, some hath more, as two, three, four, or five, some in one likenesse, and some in another, as like cattes, weasils, toads, or mise, whome they nourish with milke, or with a chicken, or by letting them sucke now and then a drop of blood: whome they call when they be offended with anie, and send them to hurt them in their bodies; yea, to kill them, and to kill their cattell.9

This then was the popular conception of the malignant significance of a lonesome old woman's desire for pets. Scot brushes it aside with the brief admission: "Some say they can keepe divels and spirits in the likenesse of todes and cats."10

Later in his dialogue, Gifford has M.B., a schoolmaster, relate the following example of the use of familiars as brought out in a trial he had witnessed:

She had three spirits: one like a cat, which she called Lightfoot, another like a Toad, which she called Lunch, the third like a Weasill, which she called Make-shift. This Lightfoot, she said, one mother Barlie of W. sold her above fifteene yeares agoe, for an oven cake and told her the Cat would doe her good service, if she

9George Gifford, A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes, p. B4r.
10Scot, op. cit., p. 6.
woulde, she might send her of her errand: this Cat was with her but a while, but the Weasill and the Toad came and offered their service: The Cat would kill kine, the Weasill would kill horses, the Toade would plague men in their bodies.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus we find specialization even among the familiars. Most witches, however, were not so well equipped with menials. In the majority of cases, one cat or dog was all the Devil allotted them to serve their sinister purposes. Usually, it is interesting to note, these demons assume the form of some creature which a man ordinarily dislikes, such as a toad, ferret, or a large and fierce cat. One wonders whether men believed this because they have always regarded these animals with distrust, or whether, on the other hand, their dislike dates from the time the origin of these creatures became sus-
picious. More than likely the later inference is the most log-
ical, for if man were to select as familiars the creatures he cared least for, he would undoubtedly have included the snake, and yet I can find no mention in any record of a witch's using one for that purpose. That omission seems odd when one con-
siders the fact that the serpent in the Garden of Eden is the first example we have of an animal with supernatural malevo-
ence. We find serpents frequently listed among the ingre-
dients for the witches' horrible brews, and now and then, as has been mentioned, a snakeskin was used to cause impotence in a victim, but in no instance do we find a snake serving

\textsuperscript{11}Gifford, \textit{op. cit.}, p. Clv.
the purpose for which Satan originally used him. In the occasional descriptions of the interior of a witch's novel, one would think the idea of a coiled and hissing serpent would have been very effective. Evidently snake charming was not one of the talents that the devil granted the English witch.

The simplicity of the names of the familiars is another indictment against the imagination of the witch-monger. The camouflaged imps answered to monosyllabic appellations with no discoverable sinister connotations. A quotation from a record of a witch trial held in 1582, a record bearing one of the ridiculously verbose titles that were so popular in that period, gives a fair example of the common conception of the names and duties of familiars:

The sayd Ursley Kemp had four spyrites, viz. their names Tetty a hee like a gray cat, Jack a hee like a black cat, Pygin a she like a black toad, and Tyfiin a she like a white lambe. The hees were to plague to death, and the shes to punish with bodily harme, and to destroy cattell.

Tyffyn, Ursley's white spirit, did tell her alwayes (when she asked) what the other witches had done; and by her the most part were appelleed, which spirit telled her alwayes true. As is well approved by the other witches confession.

The sayd Ales Newman had the sayd Ursley Kemp's spirits to use at her pleasure. Elizabeth Bennet had two spirits, viz. their names Suckyn, a hee like a blacke dog: And Lyard, red like a lyon or hare.

Ales Hunt had two spirits lyke colts, the one blacke, the other white.12

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12 A true and just Recorde of the Information, Examination, and Confession of all the Witches, taken at St. Oscees in the countie of Essex; whereof some were executed, and other some entreated according to the determination of lawes. Wherein all men may see what a pestilent people Witches are, and how unworthy to lyve in a Christian Commonwealth (author not given), quoted in Montague Summers, A Geography of Witchcraft, p. 123.
The average Englishman seemed somewhat confused as to whether the familiar was really Satan, himself, or one of his demons which had assumed the shape of a small animal. Those who belonged to the school that believed he did not entrust such work to his subordinates were somewhat vague as to how he managed to be in so many places simultaneously. There are other statements to show that he also served as a means of transportation for the witches and then doubled as a master of ceremonies at the conclaves to which he carried them. Still there is printed evidence to show that he stepped into a familiar's form at least upon the occasion of the initiation of a new member into his impious guild. For example, take the case of one Elizabeth Francis, who, when accused, glibly admitted that

She learned this arte of witchcraft at the age of XII yeres of hyr grandmother whose name Mother Eue of Hatfyelde Feuerell, diseased. Item when shee taughte it her, she conseiled her to renounce God and his worde and to geue of her bloudde to Sathan whyche she delyuered her in the lykenesse of a whyte spotted Catte.¹³

One gathers that this process just described was one of the regular stages of initiation into the mysteries of witchcraft, a sort of sealing of the oath in blood, so to speak. Perhaps the idea of nourishing the familiar from time to time in this same fashion arose from the necessity of having to

¹³The examination and confession of certaine Wytches at Chensforde in the Countie of Essex before the Quenes Maiesties Judges the XXVI daye of July anno 1566 (author not given), quoted Ibid., p. 118.
renew the oath, but more likely the very gruesomeness of the idea of the obedient demon demanding its remuneration in the blood of its mistress appealed to the rather morbid imagination of the believer in witches. In the trial of the Lancashire witches, a case later to achieve literary fame by dramatization, another instance of the vampire-like qualities of familiars is brought out when evidence is given that Mother Demdike's familiar "appeared vnto her in the likenes of a broune Dogg, forcing himselfe to her knee, to get blood vnder her left arme."14

Nor, oddly enough, need the familiar assume the form of a naturally carnivorous animal in order to possess this craving for blood. Familiars, one will recall, could be almost any well-known animals, frequently of the domesticated variety, although there are recorded instances of their appearing as creatures no zoologist ever heard of. Quite often, the demon dwelled in the body of such ordinarily harmless creatures as hares or colts. One of the more peculiar instances of this sort is given us in the record of the trial of the witches of Warboys. It also presents the evidence of Mother Samuel, a witch with a sense of humor.

Taken before the Bishop of Lincoln, she confessed that a dun chicken had sucked twice at her chin, and

14 Thomas Potts, *The Wonderful Discoverie of Witches in the countie of Lancaster with the Arraignment and Triall of Nineteene notorious Witches, at the Assizes and generall Gaole deliverie holden at the Castle of Lancaster upon Monday, the seventeenth of August last, 1612*, quoted ibid., p. 135.
when she wiped her chin, it bled. All the trouble to Throckmorton's children had come from this chicken, she said. It would bother them no more, being at the bottom of her belly, making her so full she couldn't button her coat.15

Some authorities of that day even went so far as to contend that the witch was especially equipped physiologically in order that she might furnish blood for her familiars. The testimony of and concerning one Elizabeth Clarke, "a wretched hag," is enlightening in this respect. She, when taken into custody and searched, was "found to have three teats about her, which honest women have not," placed there for the confessed purpose of nourishing her five familiars: "Holm, a white kitting; Jarmara, a fat spaniel; Vinegar Tom, a long-legg'd Greyhound with a head like an Oxe with a long taile and broad eyes; Sack and Sugar, a black Rabbet; Newes, like a Polecat."16 The finding of such a physical peculiarity, probably an elongated mole, was considered practically incontrovertible proof that the suspect permitted it to be used by familiars. How a witch filled the loathsome dietary demands of that many familiars and yet escaped anemia is not explained, although considering the senility of the average defendant, it is quite as strange as any of her other achievements.

15 The Most Strange and Admirable Discovery of the Three Witches of Warboys (1593), (author not given), quoted in George B. Harrison, An Elizabethan Journal, p. 239.

16 A True Relation of the Arraignment of Eightene Witches at St. Edmundsbury (author not given) quoted in Summers, op. cit., p. 140.
The trial of Elizabeth Clarke is also worthy of notice because it brings to light some ingenuity in naming these imps. In addition to those recorded above, there are brought into the evidence such odd appellations as Elemanzer, Peck in the Crown, Pyewacket, and Grizzel Greedigut. The reporter is convinced that these names are damning in themselves as evidence since they are such as "no mortall could invent."

This weird nourishment of familiars in some cases seemed to eclipse the other nefarious practices of the witches. And this is indeed strange when one considers that, of all the terrible things a witch was supposed to do, this was the one which could harm no one but herself. The fact remains that witches died for this alone. In the county of Essex, for example, Joan Cunny, Joan Upney, and Joan Prentice were convicted and executed for having "nourished their familiars in the shape of toads and ferrets respectively."

In passing, one can but wonder whether any babe in that vicinity was christened with that apparently ill-omened first name for some years thereafter.

From one set of directions for trapping a witch we gain the information that the familiar need not confine itself to the shape of a beast or fowl. This witch finder suggests that the suspect be placed in some uncomfortable position in the

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17 The Apprehension and Confession of Three Notorious Witches arraigned and by Justice condemnde in the Countye of Essex the 5 day Iulye last past, 1589 (author not given), quoted ibid., p. 119.
center of a room where she is watched and kept without food
or sleep for twenty-four hours. His instructions continue:

A little hole is likewise made in the door for the
Impe to come in at; and lest it might come in some less
discernible shape, they that watch are taught to be ever
and anon sweeping the room, and if they see any spiders
or flyes to kill them. And if they cannot kill them
then they may be sure they are her Impes.18

Thus it seems that the list of roles that an imp could
play was practically unlimited. He could, if he so desired,
aappear in the guise of any creature known to man, or with
equal ease, appear in a shape no one had seen before. Occa-
sionally some witness in a witch trial babbled hysterically
of having met some Thing upon a dark lane at night. This
Thing, if its appearance even approached its description,
must undoubtedly have been a familiar of the most fearsome
and deadly type. Only very rarely was the creature thus en-
countered unlike anything known to the rural English populace.
And when it was, it was seen only by little girls from ten to
fourteen years of age who were given ordinarily to trances or
traces of epilepsy. One should reiterate that the imagina-
tion of the average villager was totally incapable of con-
structing something unique in the animal world. Once in a
great while, he tested it timidly, and the result was some-
thing like this: "Annis Herd had vi impes or spirits like
kine, of the bygnes of rats, with short horns. . . . which

18 John Gaule, Select Cases of Conscience Touching Witches,
quoted ibid., p. 140.
she fed with straw and hay." The there is nothing in that tale to fill one with awe or terror. Yet that story displayed quite unusual creative ability by the witness who told it. It seems that audiences at witch trials were fairly easy to impress.

The belief in familiars, however, was only one of the several superstitions that supported, and were in turn supported by, witchcraft. Even a brief summary of the doings of the devil's own would be incomplete without some mention of the use of wax images in carrying out their works of destruction. Through this procedure the witch is supposedly capable of disabling or causing the death of a selected victim by certain sinister manipulations with a wax replica. Referring once again to the Demonologie as an unquestioned authority, we find the following:

They can be-witch and take the life of men or women, by roasting of the Pictures, which likewise is verie possible to their Master to performe, for although that instrumente of waxe haue no vertue in that turne doing, yet may hee not verie well even by that same measure that his conjured slaves meltes that waxe at the fire, subtilie as a spirite so weaken and scatter the spirites of life of the patient, as may make him on th' one part for faintnesse to sweate out the humour of his bodie.20

There were numerous attempts at this type of murder by proxy but the majority of such efforts were abortive, it seems,

19A true and just Recorde of the Information, Examination, and Confession of all the Witches (author not given), quoted ibid., p. 123.

20King James I, Demonologie in Forme of a Dialogue, p. 21.
however baleful they were in design. It appears to have been a common means of attempting the assassination of rulers. Of course one has no means of knowing how many of these supposedly deadly intrigues went undiscovered, but we have several records of those that were found out and foiled. There is, for instance, in Holinshed's _Chronicle_ a detailed discussion of the uncovering of such a plot against King Duffe, a plot, incidentally, which Shakespeare used in _Macbeth_. According to the chronicler, the king received word of this scheme against his life. The remainder of the story Holinshed relates as follows:

He sent foorth souldiers about the middest of the night, who breaking into the house, found one of the witches roasting upon a wooden broch an image of wax at the fier, resembling in each feature the kings person, made and devised by craft and art of the diuell; another of them sat reciting certeine words of inchantment, and still basted the image with a certeine liquor verie busilie. . . . Being streicltie examined for what purpose they went about such manner of inchantment, they answered to the end to make away the king; for as the image did waste afore the fier, so did the bodie of the king breake forth in sweat. And as for the words of the inchantment, they serued to keepe him still waking from sleepe, so that as the wax euer melted, so did the king's flesh: by the which means it should have come to pass, that when the wax was once cleane consumed, the death of the king should immediatlie follow.\(^{21}\)

It was, as one can readily see, a comparatively safe, if remarkably ineffective means of expressing one's discontent at a monarch's behavior. It seems quite probable that our custom of burning an unpopular figure in effigy was derived

\(^{21}\)Raphael Holinshed, _History of Scotland_, p. 149.
from this particular witch practice. Of course, we hardly expect the destruction of the figure to bring about the corresponding destruction of the model; but one wonders whether the witches hoped for more success. They were usually well paid for their efforts by some group of malcontents among the ruler's subjects, and the conspirators could at least feel that they were expressing their contempt and incurring a minimum of risk in this gesture of defiance. Naturally, then, it was a popular means of expression in an absolute monarchy where voicing one's disagreement with the actions of the reigning sovereign was tantamount to suicide. Ben Jonson, in a footnote to his _Masque of Queens_, admits that "such images of our late Queen were found on a dunghill near Islington." 22 Apparently, the greatly loved and feared queen was also the subject of such a plot.

However, the practitioners of this art did not confine their efforts solely to the attempted destruction of the great. At the behest of some vengeful neighbor or over-anxious heir, they quite often conspired to hasten the demise of some simple farmer in this manner. They usually contrived to let the knowledge of their efforts reach the intended victim, and since he probably believed implicitly in the efficacy of this method, the psychological effect was usually as deleterious to the health of the subject as the witch could wish.

it to be. Just as the realization that a doctor is ministering to one helps to ease one's pains, so the knowledge that the witch was attempting to bring about some physical failure magnified to noticeable proportions any normally negligible disorder.

Death, it should be understood, was not the sole object of this particular brand of malevolent activity. The witch more frequently used her images to torture or disable the victim. This end she sought by thrusting needles or pins in the part of the wax figure corresponding to the portion of the victim's anatomy she wished to affect. A needle stuck into the knee of the effigy, for instance, was supposed to bring about a lameness of that joint. A sliver of some sort piercing the head was intended to cause fierce headaches or possible insanity. The application of heat to the figure was said to cause fever and a slow wasting away of the selected victim, while a needle in the heart was supposed to cause practically instantaneous death. A reference to such dreadful pursuits is given almost casually by Thomas Middleton's witches in order, probably, to convince the audience that they were the ordinary type of witches in whom it was accustomed to believe.

**Hec:** Is the heart of wax
    Stuck full of magic needles?
**Stad:** 'Tis done, Hecate.
**Hec:** And is the farmer's picture and his wife's
    Laid down to th' fire yet?
**Stad:** They're a-roasting both too.
Hec: Good; then their marrows are a-melting subtly,  
And three month's sickness sucks up life in 'em.23

Scot also goes into detail as to the accepted methods  
in this type of evil practice. He states that the system  
must be revised somewhat when brass or clay images are used.  
The latter must be constructed from the moistened dust of a  
man who has been slain. The feet and hands must be exchanged  
on the brass figure. Following is his recipe for the making  
of a wax effigy:

Make an image in his name, whom you would hurt or  
kill, of newe virgine wax; under the right arme poke  
whereof place a swallowed hart, and the liver under the  
left; then hang about the necke thereof a new thred in a  
new needle pricked into the member which you would have  
hurt, with the rehearsall of certeine words.24

Scot also informs us that, according to the superstition  
of which he believed witchcraft constructed, these little  
models might be used for other than destructive or even harm-  
ful purposes. He records, "To obteine a woman's love, an  
image must be made in the houre of Venus, of virgine wax, in  
the name of the beloved, wherupon a character is written, &  
is warmed at a fier, and in dooing therof the name of some  
angell must be mentioned."25

In still another instance, Scot informs his reader that  
images might be had whose power was purely protective. It

24Scot, op. cit., p. 146.
25Ibid.
seems, as no poison is without its antidote, so there is no harmful enchantment that can not be neutralized by the work of a witch sufficiently skilled. The instructions he has gathered for the making of such an amulet of immunity are as follows:

On Christmas daie at night, a threede must be sporne of flax, by a little virgine girlie, in the name of the divell; and it must be by hir woven, and also wrought with the needle. In the brest or forepart thereof must be made with needle worke two heads; on the head at the right side must be a hat, and a long beard; the left head must have on a crowne, and it must be so horrible, that it maie resemble Belzebub, and on each side of the wastcote must be made a crosse.26

This bit of needlework, when worn about the neck, was supposed to cause a witch's evil efforts to be wasted completely upon the wearer. It would be unfair to Scot to leave the impression that he believed in its efficacy. He called it a "counterfeit charm."

An image of the intended victim was not essential in the witch's schemes of murder. There were other ways of causing personal injury to a subject without coming into contact with him at all. An article of clothing used by the person to be slain was the necessary element in this type of nefarious conjuration. King James I relates the details of such a plot directed against his own life in his Newes from Scotland.

The witch confessed that she tooke a blacke Toade, and did hang the same vp by the heeles three daies, and collected and gathered the venom as it dropped and fell from it in an Oister shell, and kept the same venom

26Ibid., p. 132.
close covered, untill she should obtaine any parte or piece of foule linnen cloth, that had appertained to the Kings Maistrie... and if she had obtained any one piece of linnen cloth which the King had wore and fouled, she had bewitched him to death, and put him to such extraordinary paines, as if he had beene lying upon sharp thornes and endes of needles.²⁷

Thus it is made known that there were more ways than one of slaying by sympathetic magic. A picture of the victim would serve as well for the machinations of the witch as any other image. Scot relates an incident wherein a juggler sought to amuse the king by drawing a picture of a pigeon on the wall and pricking it with a knife so effectively that a real pigeon fell off the roof, dead. This evidently frightened the king, for the juggler was forbidden "to use that feat any further, least he should empoise it in anie other kind of murther."²⁸

The witches of the Elizabethan period, however, did not occupy themselves so completely with their work of destruction as to exclude all recreational activities. And, since they were creatures of uncompromising evil, their pleasures consisted largely of appeasing the most loathsome of appetites. Any other behavior would have been incongruous with their business pursuits. Nothing so clearly exemplifies the sixteenth century Englishman's hatred of the witch as a brief list of the amusements in which he believed she indulged. Since he thought her capable of the vilest and most craven

²⁷King James I, Newes from Scotland, p. 16.
²⁸Scot, op. cit., p. 174.
plots against the health and happiness of her neighbors, he quite naturally believed that her pleasures were derived from correspondingly obscene practices.

Even in an age notorious for its laxity of moral censorship, Scot confesses qualms in describing these pastimes of the Devil's mistresses. He goes so far as to warn his more sensitive readers away from the chapter devoted to these practices.\(^{29}\) Still, it is quite apparent that any wholesome activity would not be compatible with her more serious missions.

Sexually she was supposedly insatiable. The Devil served as incubus, either in his own or some more hideous form. The progeny thus conceived were slain upon their birth, and their bodies devoured or used in one of the hellish brews. Incest was one of the less revolting sins of which they were frequently guilty. One can but wonder at the degeneracy of the minds that conceived this portion of the witch-lore of the age. Unfortunately, sometimes this phase of witchcraft was emphasized by playwrights who apparently vied with one another by sprinkling their dialogue with increasingly vulgar lines in order to draw the patronage of playgoers.

Not always, of course, was the witch's search for amusement confined to sexual debauchery. Sometimes, the pranks she played were those one would expect of a rather sadistic

\(^{29}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 41.\)
child, who suddenly found himself gifted with supernatural powers. In this mood she caused the housewife to churn for hours without butter appearing. She would set ordinarily well-disciplined sons and daughters to bickering with their parents, and cause usually obsequious servants to be afflicted with delusions of grandeur. Or perhaps she would transform herself into a large, fierce cat and make the night hideous with her yowling. If noise did not suffice to disrupt the slumbers of those she had set herself to trouble, she might enter the bed chamber and scratch the sleeper cruelly. Heywood and Brome have depicted this phase of witchcraft in some detail in their drama entitled The Late Lancashire Witches, which was suggested by the famous witch trials held in Lancashire in 1633. These witches concern themselves more with causing a loss of dignity in their victims than with causing a loss of life or property. In this frame of mind, they fall more readily into the category of public nuisances than that of fiends. Even their motivating force is a frivolous one. Their pranks are performed, as one of them puts it, "more for our myrth now then our gaine."

Like any other well-organized business group, they held conventions, at which the essential business was soon transacted, and the rest of the night given over to revelry. They

30 Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, The Late Lancashire Witches, I. iii.
31 Ibid., II. i.
transported themselves to these meetings in various ways. The most popular means of travel, of course, was riding the staff. Sometimes, however, Satan carried them, assuming the form of a goat upon whose back they rode with the speed of the wind. Occasionally, they traveled by sea, weathering the most violent storms in an eggshell or a sieve. For confirmation of this last power one need but refer again to the Demonologie:

She (Agnis Tompson) confessed that upon the night of Allhollow Even last, she was accompanied... with a great many other witches, to the number of two hundred; and that all they together went by Sea each one in a Riddle or Cive, and went in the same very substantially with Flaggons of wine making merrie and drinking by the ways in the same Riddles or Cives, to the Kerke of North barrick in Lowthian, and that after they had landed, tocke handes and daunced this reill or short daunce, sing- ing all with one voice.

It is also interesting to notice in the above quotation that a church was the designated meeting place. Their obscene revels were frequently held in sacred buildings, a further proof of their horrible impiety, were one wanting. And, in spite of the fact that the witches were usually well advanced in age, wild dancing seems to have been their most popular sport at these festivals. Scot describes one of these performances as follows:

Monsieur Bodin saith that at these magickal assemblies, the witches never faile to danse; and in their

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32 Scot, op. cit., p. 25.  
33 Ibid., p. 51.  
34 King James I, Demonologie in the Forme of a Dialogue, p. 13.
danse they sing these words; Har, har, divell, divell, danse here, danse here, plaie here, plaie here, Sabbath, sabbath. And whiles they sing and danse, everie one hath a broome in hir hand, and holdeth it up aloft.35

The weirdness of the picture captures one's imagination. One can readily conjure up such a scene: the moist chill of the ill-lit interior of the old stone church, the disheveled crones leaping madly about, shrieking incoherent phrases, and the sinister black-robed figure standing behind the ancient altar, sardonically watching the performance. Ben Jonson adds another line or two to the etching when he offers this information: "They dance with brooms in their hands, doing all things contrary to men, dancing back to back, and hip to hip, their hands joined, and making their circles backward, to the left hand, with strange, phantastic motions of their heads and bodies."36

It is particularly interesting to note that these trips occurred, whether by land, sea, or air, only after the witches had anointed themselves with an oil of their own making. It contained herbs, both common and rare, and some of the horrible ingredients that seemed essential to a witches' brew, whatever its purpose. The element most often mentioned was the fat boiled from the body of an unchristened babe. Scot records an instance when a gentleman, seeing his mistress rub her body with such an ointment and vanish, followed her

36 Jonson, op. cit., p. 56.
example and promptly found himself whisked away to one of the witches' assemblies. 37 Somewhat paradoxically, it is King James I who, perhaps unwittingly, offers the most plausible explanation of this incredible feat in this statement: "And some sayeth, that their bodies lying stil in extasy, their spirits wil be ravished out of their bodies, and caried to such places." 38

The recreational activities of the witches, then, were a peculiar combination of incredible obscenities and pranks that might have been invented by a problem child. Although some of the more imaginative playwrights were prone to give these witches powers formerly vouchsafed by men to their gods alone, there is no testimony to state that they ever used these powers even in circumstances that would seem to have demanded their use. Jonson, for instance, has his witch, Ate, boast:

When we have set the elements at wars,  
Made midnight see the sun, and day the stars;  
When the winged lightning in the course hath stayed:  
And swiftest rivers have run back, afraid,  
To see the corn remove, the groves to range,  
Whole places alter, and the seasons change. 39

Yet no trial was recorded wherein evidence was presented to show that a witch ever attempted to tamper with the weather.


38 King James I, Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue, p. 27.

39 Jonson, op. cit., p. 52.
Surely, had such evidence been offered, men would have hastened to record it for posterity.

As was suggested in the description of the amulet of immunity, the powers of even the most skillful witches were definitely limited. As was to be expected of so evil a group, they displayed a wholesome fear of anything truly sanctified. Since God had more than once demonstrated his supremacy over their master, they were supposed to exist only through His sufferance. The sight or mention of anything undeniably holy sent them into precipitate retreat.

These limitations are mentioned now and then by the dramatists. For example, one of Thomas Middleton’s detestable characters, Hecate, admits:

We cannot disjoint wedlock;  
‘Tis of heaven’s fastening. Well may we raise jars, Jealousies, strifes, and heart-burning disagreements, like a thick scurf o’er life, as did our master Upon that patient miracle (Job); but the work itself Our power cannot disjoint. 40

Thus it was given to the witch to annoy and perhaps to test the faith of a man of God, but real damage against him she could not inflict. However, in aiding the witch, herself, even the churchman was helpless. All his prayers could not dissuade Satan from forcing the witch to live up to her contract. Summers relates a tale wherein the son and daughter of a witch, a monk and a nun, tried to save their mother from the devil’s clutches after her death. They followed her final

instructions to the letter, sealing her in a casket of stone around which they locked three huge chains. Then for three nights a church full of clergymen attempted to ward off the assaults of the legions of Hell with a barrage of prayers. Their efforts proved futile, for on the third night, Beelzebub, himself, entered the church, opened the coffin, and carried her away behind him on a black stallion. He permitted no severance of alliances.

There were at least two sixteenth-century Englishmen who would have limited the powers of the witch to the point of insignificance. They were Reginald Scot and George Gifford, whose attempts to battle the credulity of their fellow countrymen with cold logic have made them famous in the field of witchcraft. With a patience that few educated men are able to exhibit when attacking a superstition, these authors set about refuting all the arguments of the witch-mongers.

Scot devotes one chapter to the fifteen accusations made against witches, and in one brief sentence manages to make each appear ridiculous. An example or two will suffice to show how he accomplished it.

They burn their children when they have sacrificed them.

Ans. Then let them have such punishment, as they that offered their children unto Moloch; Levit. 20. But these be mere devises of witchmoongers and inquisitors, that with extreme tortures have wroong such confessions from them; or else with false reports have beelied them;

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41 Summers, op. cit., p. 78-80.
or by flatterie & faire words and promises have woon it at their hands, at the length. They eate the flesh and drinke the bloud of men and children openlie.

Ans. Then they are kin to the Anthropophagi and Canibals. But I beleeve never an honest man in England or France, will affirme that he hath seen any of these persons, that are said to be witches, do so; if they shuld, I beleive it would poision them.

They kill mens cattell.

Ans. Then let an action of trespasse be brought against them for so doing.\(^42\)

Gifford's work, while not as extensive as Scot's, was based upon the same sound principles of reasoning. His discussion of the physical afflictions that beset men supposedly through the evil machinations of witches is based upon good psychology. A modern psychoanalyst could make no better diagnosis than the following:

The conceit, or imagination, does much, even when there is no apparent disease. A man feareth he is bewitched: it troubleth all the powers of his mind, and that distempereth his body, making great alterations in it, and bringeth sundry griefs. Now, when his mind is freed from such imaginations, his bodily griefs, which flew from the same, are eased.\(^43\)

It must be remembered that these two men, as far as actual proof is concerned, were alone in their doubts about witchcraft. The great mass of Englishmen apparently believed implicitly in witches as agents of the devil. And since they were real to the playgoers, the current playwrights depicted them as real, whether they actually considered them so or not. We have no proof that they were even dubious. Of course,

\(^{42}\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 18.}\)

\(^{43}\text{Gifford, op. cit.}, \text{ p. C3r.}\)
this fact must be taken into consideration: a man whose livelihood depended upon his retaining the good will of the public would not have been likely to express any doubt concerning so popular a superstition as witchcraft, even had one arisen in his mind.
CHAPTER II

PLAYS IN WHICH WITCHCRAFT APPEARED

Of all the witches who threaded their dark ways across the Elizabethan stage, none perhaps achieved the lasting fame of the "secret, black, and midnight hags" whose prophecies set Macbeth upon his bloody path to a throne. In the tragedy of Macbeth, the curtain parts first upon the closing moments of a probable witch's Sabbath. In the few lines they speak before the scene shifts, the three witches identify themselves as the creatures of evil so feared in that day and set the keynote of the black deeds and emotional conflicts that are to follow. They summarize the twisted sense of moral values that are to permit the commission of these crimes by saying:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Then, having summoned their familiars, a cat and a toad, they vanish.

Although they are termed the Weird Sisters, being the Scottish interpretation of the gloomy Scandinavian Fates, Shakespeare succeeds upon their next appearance in degrading them to the common type of English witch in whose existence his audience believed. The three old crones spend the opening

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1William Shakespeare, Macbeth, I. i. 11-12.
lines of Scene iii in prating of their petty dealings in evil magic. One speaks of killing swine. Another revels in the details of her anticipated vengeance upon a sailor's wife who had refused to share her chestnuts. She proposes to spend her ire upon the seafaring husband, and in two lines crowds in two popular superstitions concerning witches:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,
And, like a rat without a tail
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.2

Thus she refers to the oft-mentioned conveyance of witches who went to sea and the widespread belief that witches could, with the devil's aid, transform themselves into the shape of any animal, but, since they possessed no similar appendage, they had to forego a tail.

Just before the approach of Macbeth and Banquo, the three beldames dance a witch's round, making three turns for each witch, three being a number much used by witches. The dance is spoken of as part of a charm.

The fearsome appearance of the three is emphasized when Macbeth and Banquo discuss the possibilities of their being inhabitants of the Earth and debate the question of their being alive. The beards of the hags make their sex dubious.

When the witches obey Macbeth's somewhat fearful command to speak, their words set aflame his smoldering ambitions and ruthlessness. The first calls him Thane of Glamis, which he

2Tbid., I. iii. 8-10.
is. The second addresses him as Thane of Cawdor, which he is not aware of being. The third tells him that he will be the next king. Then they inform Banquo that he shall beget kings but never be one. Macbeth, wishing wholeheartedly to believe the prophecy, demands the source of their information, but they vanish, leaving the seeds of a hideous infection to fester in his conscience until it is destroyed.

When next the witches appear, in Scene v of Act III, they are being addressed by their legendary queen, Hecate. She is reproaching them for not having called her in before. Her speech suggests that the witches had entered into some sort of contract with Macbeth, though such was not the case. She terms him "spiteful and wrathful," and tells the three that he bears them no love, though one does not receive the impression from their previous meeting that he was supposed to do so. She leaves them with the order to prepare for his coming the next morning, telling them that she will be employed the balance of the night in catching and distilling a drop of potent liquid that hangs from the corner of the moon. With charms, incantations, and brews, she promises that they shall draw Macbeth on to his ultimate downfall. The scene closes with another witch's song.3

Act IV opens with the witches in their cave awaiting the appearance of Macbeth. Once again mention is made of their

3Ibid., III. v. 34-40.
familiars, now three in number. Some thirty-five lines are
next expended in a conventional enumeration of the nauseous
ingredients that have been tossed into the caldron. These
will be discussed in detail in the chapter devoted to witches' brews. Hecate, upon her entrance, commends their efforts.
Then she makes another somewhat disconcerting reference to
the gains they shall all share. One can but wonder to what
gains she alludes. One gathers from the preceding action that
no remuneration has been asked of Macbeth for the services
that the witches have rendered him. They are already aware
of his impending downfall. Hecate has hinted at that. Per-
haps, then, they will receive the sort of satisfaction from
having contributed to that ruin that witches are supposed to
enjoy when they realize that they have been instrumental in
a man's destruction. But this pride in malicious achievement
could scarcely be referred to as a gain. This vague and
rather confusing statement must fall into the same category
as the previous allusions to Macbeth's ingratitude and lack
of affection. They seem obvious attempts to trim the Weird
Sisters to the pattern of the sixteenth century English witch.

The evil foursome then join in a song and dance about
the caldron, a sort of rhythmical invocation of the aid of
their spirits. We receive warning of the approach of Macbeth
in the announcement of the second witch that the pricking of
her thumbs tells her of the coming of something wicked.
Macbeth is none too cordial in his greeting, but, in his
enumeration of their powers, he mentions only the more awesome, such as their destructive unleashing of the fury of wind and waves. Once again these hags seem to attain the stature of the immortal Weird Sisters, and in the ensuing scene with the fearsome spirits, they seem to be proportionately awe-inspiring.

Obviously Macbeth has sought the witches a second time in order to receive reassurances as to his destiny. The apparitions called forth by Hecate and her sinister subjects to give Macbeth the information he desires are no ordinary imps or familiars such as would be used by the common fortune-telling variety of witch. The first, an armed head, warns the king against Macduff, Thane of Fife. The second, a bloody child, bolsters Macbeth’s flagging courage somewhat with the assurance that he shall not be harmed by man born of a woman. The third, a child with a crown on its head and a tree in its hand, prophesies that he shall never be vanquished until the great Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane hill. The second and third apparitions contribute to his false sense of security and hasten his downfall with their advice to be bloody and bold and oblivious to all conspirators and resentment exhibited by his subjects. As it happened, the prophecies, while not so obscure as the oracular efforts of the average witch, were completely misleading. Macduff, whose sword was destined to abbreviate Macbeth’s bloody career, had been torn from his mother’s womb and therefore,
technically, was not born of woman. The soldiers that attacked the king on Dunsinane hill had attempted to camouflage themselves with branches cut from the trees in Birnam wood. Thus the third prophecy was fulfilled.

If the assurances of the three apparitions have succeeded in quieting Macbeth’s fears to some extent, the next action of the witches is avowedly intended to arouse them again. They conjure up a parade of eight kings, apparently the descendants of Banquo, for the ghost of that murdered friend appears and smilingly points at them. The witches then bring the scene to a close with the customary song and dance, and, vanishing, leave Macbeth a badly shaken man.4

In no other Shakespearean drama does witchcraft play so important a part; nor does any other of the playwright’s witches achieve the potential malignity that one senses in the Weird Sisters. In fact, with possibly one exception, his other plays that make use of witches at all, use them in a minor capacity that is of practically negligible importance to plot advancement.

It is rather difficult to estimate precisely the importance of witchcraft in Henry VI, Part I. The role of La Pucelle or Joan d’Arc is a major one in this drama, and yet her league with the devil is mentioned only now and then. Most of the time she seems to be nothing more than an

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4Ibid., IV. i.
amazingly successful girl warrior. In fact, so human is her character as delineated in most of her scenes, that the lines in which she consults her evil spirits seem utterly incongruous. Her connections with the nether world come as something of a startling revelation to the reader. She says:

Now, ye familiar spirits, that are culled
Out of the powerful regions under earth,
Help me this once, that France may get the field.
O, hold me not with silence over-long.
Where I was wont to feed you with my blood,
I'll lop a member off, and give it you,
In earnest of a further benefit,
So you do condescend to help me now.5

Although the name "witch" has been flung at her frequently as an epithet by bewildered English leaders who oppose her conquering forces, this degradation to the vulgar familiar-nourishing type of witch seems quite incompatible with her character as previously portrayed.

In the final scene, Shakespeare strips her of the last vestige of her glory. She denies her father, a shepherd, claiming that she was the child of noble parents. Finally, faced with execution, she contends that she is pregnant and names three different Frenchmen as the father of her unborn child.6 This was essential, it seems, if the playwright was to be consistent, for the virginal Joan could not have been a witch. A witch must of necessity be a harlot. The two terms were practically synonymous in the Elizabethan era.

5William Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part I, V. iii.
6Ibid., V. iv.
In *Henry VI, Part II*, witchcraft again rears its ugly head, though but momentarily, in the person of one Margery Jourdain. She is assisted in her conjurations by Bolingbroke, Southwell, and Hume. Bolingbroke's speech designating the time when witches prefer to work is good:

Deep night, dark night, the silent of the night,
The time of night when Troy was set on fire;
The time when screech-owls cry, and ban-dogs howl,
And spirits walk, and ghosts break up their graves.  

Jourdain with her incantations calls up Asmath, an evil spirit, and, oddly enough, commands him to speak "in the name of eternal God." The spirit replies to the questions asked him, prophesying the fall of Henry, Suffolk, and Somerset. The conjurors are apprehended in the midst of their unlawful and unholy labors. A short time later King Henry pronounces sentence: "The witch in Smithfield shall be burned to ashes."  

Aside from the disgrace it brought to the Duchess of Gloucester, who was involved in the conspiracy with those mentioned, the whole incident had but little bearing on the plot of the drama.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* no witch actually appears. However, Falstaff dons the dress of the Witch of Brentford as a disguise, in an effort to escape the clutches of the husband of the woman he is attempting to seduce. The fat one is drubbed soundly for his pains, for it seems that the

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husband despises witches. The scene has small bearing on the plot, and may be classed merely as a humorous incident.  

No witch appears upon the stage in *The Tempest*, either. Still, Sycorax is mentioned several times, and her gay familiar, Ariel, and her hideous offspring, Caliban, appear in several scenes. Once again one finds references strongly reminiscent of the English villager's conception of a witch. One is reminded, for instance, of the tales about Satan's assumption of the role of incubus when Prospero calls Caliban,

> Thou poisonous slave got by the devil himself  
> Upon thy wicked Dam.

Later in the same scene, Caliban wishes,

> As wicked dew as ere my mother brushed  
> With Raven's feather from unwholesome Fen  
> Drop on you both.  
> · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·   
> All the charms  
> Of Sycorax: Toades, Beetles, Batts light on you.

Even when the low order of Caliban's intelligence is taken into consideration, one realizes that these curses designate his mother as an ordinary Elizabethan witch.

By way of summary, then, one may conclude that Shakespeare used the common conception of a witch in various roles or by mere suggestion in several of his plays. But only in the Weird Sisters did he create characters of awe-inspiring malignity. Even these he degraded somewhat, perhaps in order that

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the theater-goer of that day might match them successfully against the feeble pattern of his own undeveloped imagination.

It was to be expected that the Elizabethan dramatist would not overlook so fertile a field as witchcraft in his attempt to please his patrons and fill the theaters. The witch trials were widely publicized, and the most notorious defendants were thus made to order for dramatization by an alert playwright. The use of a witch as an antagonist was advantageous to the writer in several respects. In the first place, characterization was not difficult since most playgoers were familiar with the qualities one might expect in a witch's personality. In the second place, no unpleasant criticism could arise from the use of her name, since she had been found guilty of the most heinous of crimes and duly executed. No one would have dared speak seriously in her defense. In the third place, a play about a witch lent itself readily to the lewd comedy and vulgarity so attractive to the masses that filled the pit. It is a small wonder that more dramatists did not succumb to the obvious temptation and make use of witchcraft as plot material.

The Witch of Edmonton is a joint effort by Rowley, Ford, and Dekker in this field. Perhaps its only unique quality is its presentation of the development of a witch. For Mother Sawyer is not a witch when she first appears in the play. Persecution drives her into the arms of the devil. When she is cursed, reviled, and finally beaten by Old Banks, a pious but intolerant villager, she asks;
And why on me? Why should the envious world
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,
And like a bow buckled and bent together
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself.
Must I for that be made a common sink
For all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues
To fall and run into? Some call me witch,
And being ignorant of myself, they go
About to teach me how to be one, urging
That my bad tongue—by their bad usage made so—
For speaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse.
This they enforce upon me, and in part
Make me to credit it.\(^\text{11}\)

This is possibly the only attempt made by a playwright
to offer an excuse for a witch's entering into a league with
the devil. The old woman reasons quite plausibly that one
might as well reap some of the rewards of witchcraft while
being forced to suffer many of the penalties. It is her de-
sire for vengeance that finally drives her to apply for admis-
sion into the unholy order of witchcraft. Upon her request,
the devil appears to her in the shape of a small black spaniel
and promises her the revenge she seeks in return for her body
and soul. She agrees to the bargain, and the contract is
sealed in blood when the dog sucks at her arm. The impor-
tance of the familiar in the witch's schemes is emphasized
in this as in no other drama that deals with witchcraft.

Her first request of the dog is that he kill old Banks,
but she experiences her first disappointment as a witch when
the devil informs her that he can not slay a man who loves

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\(^{11}\)William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, \textit{The Witch}
of \textit{Edmonton}, II. 1.
goodness. Satan can destroy such a person's corn or his cattle but not his life. With this petty vengeance she must needs be content.\textsuperscript{12} Here, then, is an unusual interpretation of a witch's power. Only by one's own evil thoughts or deeds can he make himself vulnerable to her destructive magic. It follows that when one accuses a witch of doing him bodily injury, he tacitly admits that his own conduct has not been above reproach.

Mother Sawyer is quite irked at being thus foiled in her first efforts at destruction. She threatens to break her contract with the devil, but he laughs at the suggestion. She makes the best of a bad business, then, and orders the destruction of Old Banks's crops. After the dog's departure upon this errand, the newly ordained witch is visited by Cuddy Banks, the son of her arch enemy. This lovelorn young man is not certain of the source of Mother Sawyer's powers, but he wants assistance in his amorous pursuit of Katherine Carter, the wealthy yeoman's daughter. The witch sees an excellent chance of wreaking her vengeance upon Old Banks through his son and promises to aid him. With a Latin phrase she calls her familiar for a consultation. Then she instructs Cuddy to go to the stile at the west end of his father's pasture shortly after sunset and to follow thence the first live thing that appears. This will lead him to the object of his

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.
quest. Cuddy has heard her words with the devil, but, being a tolerant sort and a bit stupid, is seemingly untroubled by her obviously evil connections and promises to follow her instructions.\textsuperscript{13}

When he arrives at the stile, Cuddy is met by the dog, which immediately strikes his fancy. The familiar leads him to a spot where a spirit waits in the shape of Katherine. He pursues the coyly retreating apparition and falls into a pond. The dog laughs at his woes, and Cuddy grows angry, but his ire is quickly transformed into amazement when the dog speaks. His normally gay disposition reappears, and he offers his hand to the dog. However, he skillfully avoids any entangling alliances with the unholy creature, promising him bones and fish and stolen bread in return for his affection but nothing more. In this scene, the dog displays some peculiar qualities for a demon. It appears, for instance, that he possesses a sense of humor. When Cuddy discovers that he likes fish and promises to bring him some maids and soles from a fishmonger, the imp makes use of the double entendre when he replies, "Maids and soles? O, sweet bits! banqueting stuff those."\textsuperscript{14} And another time he warns the boy against placing any trust in the devil's words.

Before they part, the dog promises Cuddy to mingle with

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, III. i.
\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}
the dancers at the celebration the next day. He seems to
have conceived a liking for the youth, for he says that Cuddy
need no longer fear him. Then he prophesies woe for the
other man who seeks fair Katherine's hand. 15

The next glimpse one gets of the dog's character reveals
qualities more in keeping with his hellish origin. His pres-
ence and touch drive Frank to murder his wife, Susan, in an
effort to extricate himself from the web in which he finds
himself enmeshed. The devil even assists the murderer in
cunningly devising a plot that points the finger of guilt at
an unsuccessful suitor for Susan's hand. Frank's testimony
also implicates Somerton, Cuddy's rival for Katherine's affec-
tions. Thus the dog brings about the fulfillment of his proph-
ecy to Old Banks's son. 16

There is no indication that the familiar was sent upon
this murderous mission by Mother Sawyer. Nor is it quite
clear just what the devil expects to gain from his friendly
association with Cuddy. One almost suspects that he was
lonely for companionship. Certainly, the youth's friendliness
seems to have a good effect upon him, for when they are to-
gether, the dog busies himself with nothing more sinister
than an occasional mischievous prank. At the Morris-dance,
for example, he contents himself with causing the fiddler's

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., III. iii.
instrument to fall silent, much to that worthy's amazement and disgust. But when the officers interrupt the festivities to arrest Warbeck and Somerton for murder, one is forced to recall that he is still the embodiment of evil and receives as much satisfaction out of being instrumental in men's death as in their discomfiture.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, III. iv.}

A series of misfortunes now befall the countrymen round about Edmonton, and it is these, and not the more serious crimes, that are laid at the doorstep of Mother Sawyer. Old Banks finds his horse suddenly afflicted with glanders. Another farmer stumbles upon his wife and his serving-man at an inopportune moment, and she hastens to explain her infidelity by saying that she is bewitched. These ridiculous accusations are typical of those brought against the Elizabethan witch.

Her accusers make use of a rather unusual test to determine whether or not she is a witch. They set fire to a handful of thatch from her roof, and the fact that she immediately appears on the scene is considered as incontrovertible proof of her connections with Beelzebub. She is rescued from the fury of the mob by the timely entrance of Sir Arthur Clarington and a justice. When these authorities reprimand the countrymen for their attack on the old woman, Old Banks adds to the previously mentioned accusations the account of his ridiculous, frequently recurring, and irresistible
impulses, to rush into the yard and kiss his cow's backside. Here one seems to detect the mischief of that whimsical spaniel again. 18

In answer to the questions of the authorities, Mother Sawyer stoutly denies that she is a witch. Her replies are calculated to disturb Sir Arthur, whose moral house could stand a bit of cleaning itself. The playwrights utilize her defense and counter accusations to take several thrusts at the sins and foibles of the rich and powerful, which must have proved popular with the throngs in the pit. For example, she retorts to one of Sir Arthur's queries:

A witch! who is not?  
Hold not that universal name in scorn, then.  
What are your painted things in princes' courts,  
Upon whose eyelids lust sits, blowing fires.  
To burn men's souls in sensual hot desires. 19

The lord insists that these can not be compared with witches; Mother Sawyer admits as much, but adds that they are much worse, continuing a detailed indictment of their sins:

These by enchantments can whole lordships change
To trunks of rich attire, turn ploughs and teams
To Flanders mares and coaches, and huge trains
Of servitors to a French butterfly.
Have you not city-witches who can turn
Their husbands' wares, whole standing shops of wares,
To sumptuous tables, gardens of stolen sin;
In one year wasting what scarce twenty win?
Are not these witches? 20

The justice is compelled to concede that they might be so regarded but hastens to add that they do not overstep the

18Ibid., IV. i. 19Ibid. 20Ibid.
bounds of the law. Mother Sawyer wonders aloud why the law should single out the aged, poor, and ugly for its persecutions and let the more beautiful transgressors go free. Slashing at the lecheries of Sir Arthur, she states that she has never sought a maiden's honor, using gold as bait. Her knowledge of his moral weaknesses convinces his lordship that she is a witch indeed. He departs hurriedly, admonishing her to go home and pray.

Her dog enters, but, in answer to her importunities, offers her small comfort. He reports that he has carried out her orders, having lamed a mare and caused a maid to churn for nine hours with no results. All of these, of course, have been mere annoyances for which the law can exact no great penalty, but her next words reveal that she has been engaged in more serious evil-doing. She asks of her familiar whether he has exacted vengeance of one Ann Ratcliffe, who she says has struck her sow and almost lamed it. At this moment, Ann enters quite mad. At the witch's command, the dog touches the unfortunate woman, and a few minutes later Ratcliffe, Old Banks, and other countrymen come in and carry Ann off, hurling accusations at Mother Sawyer all the while. Almost immediately they return, shouting that the mad woman has beaten out her own brains and that the witch is her murderer.

As they speak of getting a warrant for Mother Sawyer's arrest, they mention destroying her dog also. Here Cuddy
intervenes, contending that the spaniel has done no harm. The dog, who remains invisible, barks, and the youth pretends that it was he. The men leave to find an officer. The witch orders her imp after Sir Arthur, but he assures her that pangs of conscience are troubling his lordship sufficiently.21

When the witch appears in the final act she is nearly frantic with fear and hatred. In answer to her persistent calls the dog appears, but he is now white. This change, he informs her, is symbolic of her approaching end. She implores his aid, but he ignores her. She threatens to sell herself to other demons in order that she may be revenged, but he tells her that she has nothing with which to bargain, for her soul is already doomed. As she is borne away to the trial, the dog laughs.22

Cuddy Banks now pleads with the dog to reform, offering to find him a good home with some rich family. The dog refuses but offers to enter into the same sort of partnership with him as he participated in with Mother Sawyer. Cuddy hastily refuses and reminds the familiar that he always regarded him as a dog and not as a devil. This the animal admits, and he adds that this is why he has always treated the youth "doggishly and not devilishly."23

The familiar confesses that he has taken the shape of Katherine upon those occasions when Cuddy pursued her, and

21Ibid. 22Ibid., v. 1. 23Ibid.
boastingly admits that he can assume any shape but prefers that of "Those coarse creatures, dog, or cat, hare, ferret, frog, toad." It will be noticed that these are the creatures most commonly accepted by the masses as familiars.

In the final scene, the witch appears briefly on her way to her execution. The countrymen are still telling of certain neighborhood misfortunes which they are certain that she had a hand in. It is always a source of amazement to the student of witchcraft that the common people of that day should make no apparent distinction in iniquity between causing a sow to cast her pigs prematurely and murdering a child. Either act branded the suspect as a witch. Mother Sawyer will not admit any connection with the murder of Frank's wife, but she tells them that there are other devils than hers abroad in Edmonton. Although still bitter toward her persecutors, she repents in a terse statement to the court and concludes that the devil is a cheat.

Thus the play ends on a tragic note, with justice being meted to all but the devil. Frank also dies for his crime, but since he, like Mother Sawyer, is suitably repentant, the ending, according to the standards of that day, must have been considered satisfactory.

Another play rich in the witch-lore of the masses is The Late Lancashire Witches by Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome.

24 Ibid.
These authors, too, were quick to take advantage of the notoriety gained by a witch trial, in this case the one held in the county of Lancashire in 1633. It is rather difficult to classify the drama as either a comedy or a tragedy. Since most of the plot consists of the childish pranks and petty attempts at vengeance of a largely unidentified group of witches and the dialogue is generously garnished with lewd humor, one is tempted to brand it as a comedy. Yet that there is room for doubt one must admit after perusing the last scene. Witches, it must be remembered, could not be left alive to prey upon other innocents; consequently, they are summarily disposed of by a general death sentence as the play closes.

About the only charge that could be brought against these witches is the possession of a somewhat malicious sense of humor. One is first made aware of their activities through the peculiar state of affairs in the home of Seely, an honest country squire. It appears that he is completely under the control of his son, Gregory, and his wife is being subjected to strong disciplinary measures by their daughter, Minny. The entire family seems ridiculously afraid of offending the servants, Parnell and Lawrence. In the background moves Arthur, Seely's nephew, who is about to lose his estate because his bewitched uncle refuses him any financial assistance.

25 Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, The Late Lancashire Witches, I. iii.
One naturally concludes that someone is gaining materially by this evidently bewitched condition of Seely's family, but the witches confess in private that they have cast the spell for their own amusement.

This desire for laughter at the expense of others furnishes, with one exception, the motivation for all the witches' evil deeds. And those deeds are mainly the sort of pranks one might expect of a truant schoolboy who suddenly finds himself capable of performing supernatural feats. Perhaps to the theater-goer of that day, the fact that their actions proved them to be witches was sufficient to justify their execution. Some three centuries later, the reader is merely mildly amused at their antics, and their violent end furnishes additional proof of the fact that many Elizabethan playwrights recognized no such term as incongruity.

The plot, which is very weak to begin with, is almost completely obscured under a heavy encrustation of contemporary witch-lore. The Lancashire witches transform themselves into hares and lead the hunters' dogs astray. Then they assume the shapes of greyhounds and infuriate the hunters by refusing to pursue anything. As cats they scratch the miller when he tries to sleep at night. They very nearly exhaust the well-known witch-power of transformation.26

Although no attempt is made to characterize the familiars,
they are frequently mentioned by the witches as being responsible, in some unidentified fashion, for the success of their malicious efforts to ruffle the even tenor of community life. These imps possess none of the personality of the dog in The Witch of Edmonton. One suspects that they were thrust headlong into the play simply because they were considered as an essential equipment of the Elizabethan witch. For these Lancashire witches are nothing if not conventional. The following dialogue is a fair example of their studied efforts to live up to the expectations of the sixteenth century theater patron:

Meg. May dame,
Before we play another game,
We must a little laugh and thanke
Our feat familiars for the prank
They played us last.
Come my Mamilion like a Puggy
Mawd. And come my puckling take thy teat,
Your travels have deserv'd your meat.
Meg. Now upon the Charle's ground
On which we're met, let's dance a round;
That Coole, Darnell, Poppia wild,
May choke his graine, and fill the field.27

Considerable attention is given in this play to the witch's means of transportation. Mal, who is mildly enamored of Robin, takes that frightened young man to London and back, a trip of several hundred miles, in one night. It seems that she cares not what suspicions she may arouse, for they bring back some wine for Robin's master, Generous, wine which can be purchased only at a certain London tavern. Mistress

27Ibid.
Generous, who is also a witch, finding that her suspicious husband has given Robin orders not to let her use his grey gelding, harnesses Robin instead and rides him many a weary mile to a witch’s party and back. One witch even rides a tiger. Oddly enough, no mention is made of the traditional broomstick. 28

Heywood and Drome have incorporated at least one unusual quality in their play. Two of their witches do not conform to the traditional standards of age and hideousness. Mal is a comely wench with several suitors, and Mistress Generous is the wealthy and attractive wife of one of the pillars of the community. Neither of the women has been driven into witchcraft by a desire for vengeance or material gain. Both were evidently motivated by a thirst for excitement and a strain of deviltry that now and then makes itself apparent in their natures.

Only once in the drama does Mal exhibit a spirit of vengefulness, and then it is tempered with a sense of humor. At some previous time she has numbered Lawrence, Seely’s servant, among her suitors. Thus, when he marries Parnell, she feels a twinge of jealousy, and casts a spell upon her erstwhile lover that makes him impotent. Of course, the opportunity for vulgar comedy that arises from this incident is not overlooked by the authors. 29

28 Ibid., IV. i. 29 Ibid., IV. iii.
As has been intimated, the play seldom approaches the witch problem from a serious angle. One of the rare occasions when it does is brought about by the discovery of Generous concerning his wife's nocturnal pursuits. Throughout the play, he has been loath to believe in the existence of witches when he is confronted with irrefutable evidence of his wife's connections with the suspected group of women, he questions her as follows:

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. Resolve me, how farre doth that contract stretch?
Mrs. What interest in this Soule, my selfe coo'd claire
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 clayne me but the least little part,
He will usurpe the whole; th'art a lost woman.30

It is perhaps worthy of comment that Mistress Generous repeated verbally, albeit with mental reservations, and wept profusely. One may remember that King James made a statement, so authoritative in tone as to brook no exceptions, to the effect that a witch could never shed a tear, not even for purposes of dissembling.

In the final act, a soldier, who has taken the job of miller, is attacked by the witches who have again assumed the forms of large, fierce cats. His temper aroused, he draws his sword and lays about him quite lustily. In the melee,

30Ibid., IV. 11.
he cuts off a cat's paw, which immediately becomes a human hand. He shows the hand to his employer, Generous, who recognizes it as his wife's. Confronted with this evidence of her lack of sincerity, he offers no resistance when the officers come for her.31

The final scene is taken from the trial records, and thus lacks any great dramatic quality. The miller's son is really the sole witness of the prosecution. He relates a weird tale of a fierce combat with a youth of his own age who turns out to be Satan in another of his many disguises. This combat has no apparent connection with the now somewhat raveled thread of plot, but on the strength of his almost incoherent testimony the witches are condemned to death. Perhaps it was the object of the authors to demonstrate the flimsiness of the average evidence that was used against a witch on trial for her life. Somehow, though, one is left with the impression that the witches, having served their purpose in amusing the audience for some five acts, must be disposed of in the approved manner.32

There is little remarkable about The Late Lancashire Witches. Heywood and Brome used somewhat lively tints in painting this picture of the popular conception of the Elizabethan witch. Their contemporaries usually presented their efforts in more somber hues. The Lancashire witches

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31 Ibid., V. ii.  
32 Ibid., V. iii.
seem more mischievous than vicious, but some latent reverence for historical facts or public opinion caused the authors to let them meet the same unhappy fate as deadlier members of the witch guild.

One of the better known plays that concerned themselves with witchcraft was Thomas Middleton's tragicomedy entitled The Witch. In spite of its name, however, the witches have little to do with the main plot. Certain scenes in which they appear could be deleted without noticeable damage to the theme. Nevertheless, for the study of contemporary notions about the Elizabethan witch, her pursuits and recreational activities, this play is of considerable value to the scholar. Almost all of the witch's powers, her obscene desires, the horrible ingredients of her poisonous brews, and her activities in muddling the affairs of men are reviewed in detail by the author of this drama.

Middleton's witches are, without exception, cut to the popular pattern. All the qualities that the sixteenth century Englishman demanded in a witch are present in these, most of them exaggerated for emphasis. Whereas most witches must needs be content with one or two familiars, these have a practically unlimited supply. Every sin that an embittered public had, at one time or another, attributed to witches, this group not only practices, but delights in. The nauseous substances that were boiled in the caldron are merely suggested by most playwrights. Middleton lists them in detail. And, although
everyone seems thoroughly aware of their evil connections, Hecate and her sisters are not molested throughout the play. No one has even suggested their arrest when the final curtain falls. Presumably, they continue to flourish and commit their depredations upon the community indefinitely.

A more loathsome evil group than the inhabitants of Hecate's nove1 would be difficult to imagine. If their prattle is to believed, they have indulged in every obscene sin in the devil's lexicon. More emphasis is laid in this play upon the apparently insatiable sexual appetites of the witches than in any other drama in which witchcraft is mentioned. But the author's obvious effort to appease the public's demand for vulgarity does not confine itself to a description of the witches' lusts. There is hardly a line of the hags' discussions that does not seem deliberately intended to shock the audience. The following excerpt from a discussion concerning the preparation of the body of an unbaptized infant that is to be used as an ingredient of their hellish broth is a fair example:

Stad. Where be the magical herbs?
Hec. They're down his throat;
His mouth crammed full, his ears and nostrils stuffed.
I thrust in eleoselinum lately,
Aconitum, frondes populeas, and soot.
You may see that, he looks so black i' the mouth.33

Firestone, Hecate's son, is a stupid lout who performs, with considerable grumbling, the tasks his mother sets him to.

He hates his mother and looks forward eagerly to the day three years hence when he shall inherit her possessions as she has promised. He admits to himself that he would like to hasten the approach of her prophesied demise, but he does not possess the necessary courage or power. His reluctance in carrying out his mother's orders arises from no qualms of conscience. He merely resents being her errand-boy. In only three plays, *The Tempest*, *The Witch*, and *The Sad Shepherd*, is there mention of a witch's son. The similarity in these three characters is remarkable, considering the fact that they are the creations of three different authors. All are stupid and sullen and filled with bitterness at their lot.

Despite the fact that Hecate and her sisters are creatures of unmitigated evil, the sole effect that they have upon the major characters of the play is to assist in a readjustment of their emotional entanglements. In this respect, they are largely responsible for the happy ending of the drama. Regardless of the motives which prompted the act, the witches' only successful enchantment aids materially in bringing about the eventual triumph of virtue.

Sebastian, who was contracted to Isabella in their childhood, returns from a war to find himself reported dead and his erstwhile fiancée married that day to Antonio, whose reputation with women is not above reproach. Deeply grieved, Sebastian disguises himself as a servant and secures a position in the home of the newly wedded pair. Then he hastens
to the abode of Hecate and acquires from her a snakeskin which she guarantees to make the marriage a barren one.\footnote{Ibid.}34 Although she cannot destroy the marriage itself, since it was made in heaven, she can, by causing Antonio to be impotent, make both parties so unhappy that the union may become unbearable. This enchantment is effective, so that, when Antonio's death frees Isabella, she comes again to Sebastian's arms, unsullied.

Almachildes, a gay young blade, seeks Hecate's aid in the seduction of Amoretta, a maid in waiting. More than a little intoxicated, he causes pandemonium in the circle of witches. He stumbles against Stedlin and Puckle, pushing the former headlong into one of her own filthy brews. Hecate immediately becomes infatuated with him and invites him to stay for supper. His reply indicates another popular notion concerning witches.

\textit{Alm.} How? sup with thee? dost think I'll eat fried rats and pickled spiders?\footnote{Ibid.}35

She informs him, however, that she can serve him the best meat in the whole province; so he remains. He remarks on his way home that, in spite of the fact that he partook of every dish, he is still as hungry as ever.\footnote{Ibid., II. 11.}36

The next scene in which the witches make their appearance has no significance as far as plot development is concerned. However, it furnishes one with a glimpse of a witch's
preparation for night riding. The stage directions call for voices from above, shouting for the tardy witches to hasten. Hecate's verbal anticipation of the serial jaunt makes it sound quite attractive. As she starts upward, she chants:

Now I go, now I fly,  
Malkin my sweet spirit and I.  
O what a dainty pleasure 'tis  
To ride in the air  
When the moon shines fair,  
And sing and dance, and toy and kiss  
Over woods, high rocks, and mountains,  
Over seas, our mistress' fountains,  
Over steeple, towers, and turrets,  
We fly by night, 'mongst troops of spirits:  
No ring of bells to our ear sounds,  
No howls of wolves, no yelps of hounds;  
No, not the noise of water's breach,  
Or cannon's throat our height can reach.37

The final witch scene finds the Duchess consulting Hecate about a means of disposing of Almachildes. The witch suggests melting a wax figure, but the Duchess maintains that that method is too slow. Impatiently, she questions the witch's ability to concoct a suitable plan for the gentleman's dispatch. This attitude of doubt angers Hecate, who, as Firestone puts it, "spits Latin." The Duchess, recognizing the temperament of the true artist, placates her, and the witch agrees to undertake the task.

After the departure of the Duchess, the witches set about mixing the poison she has ordered. There follows, then, a detailed account of the ingredients and charms that go into

37Ibid., III. iii.
the preparation of this frightful brew. The first charm is a foolish chant by Hecate:

Black spirits and white, red spirits and gray,  
Mingle, mingle, mingle, you that mingle may!  
Titty, Tiffin,  
Keep it stiff in;  
Firedrake, Puckey,  
Make it lucky;  
Liard, Robin,  
You must bob in.  
Round, around, around, about, about!  
All ill come running in, all good keep out!  

The witches of Middleton's conception are a hideous and vulgar crew. There is nothing unusual about them, unless it is the depth of iniquity into which they have sunk. They perform their feats of evil magic for no mentioned remunera-
tion, unless the sheer joy of wrong-doing may be so termed. They possess none of the awesome qualities of the Weird Sisters. They are simply embodiments of all the sordid fears and superstitions that clustered about the Elizabethan belief in witchcraft.

It is a far cry from the bawdy beldames of Thomas Middleton's creation to the harmless old prognosticator, Mother Bombie. In fact, John Lyly's drama which bears her name can not be placed in the category of plays dealing with witchcraft without certain reservations. For Mother Bombie is not, in the strictest sense of the word, a witch. Since she used her powers to help her neighbors, she might be termed by some a white witch, but, since she brought about

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38Ibid.
no miraculous cures, it is doubtful whether she may fall into that classification. The people simply called her a wisewoman, for the only supernatural power she displayed was that of prophecy. For that matter, the information she offered was couched in such cryptic phraseology that the person who sought it was often unable to interpret it until the events it foretold had already occurred. Under those conditions, her prophecies were invariably verified. Like the announcements from the famous Greek oracles, Mother Bombie's forecasts in doggerel were too vague to be definitely discredited.

Her appearances in the drama are infrequent and brief and have little bearing upon the plot until the final scene. One sees her first when she is consulted by the foolish daughter of a rich man. The girl tells her bluntly that people think she is a witch. Mother Bombie denies the charge, saying she is but a cunning woman. Then, upon the girl's abrupt command to tell her something, the old lady recites the following rhymed prophecy:

Thus father knowes thee not,
Thy mother bare thee not,
Falsely bred, truely begot:
Choice of two husbands, but neuer tyed in bandes,
Because of loue and naturall bondes.39

As may be readily understood, the verse is utterly meaningless to the foolish maid, and one gathers that Mother

39John Lyly, Mother Bombie, II. iii. 90-94.
Bombie intended that it should be. The plot denouement makes the prophecy intelligible and proves it true. The girl was exchanged as a baby with the real daughter of the rich man by her poverty-stricken mother, Vicinia. No one but the wise-woman and the guilty mother are aware of the substitution.

Mother Bombie is next visited by Maestius and Serena, an unhappy pair who, believing themselves to be brother and sister, are deeply disturbed by the apparently unnatural passion they have conceived for one another. In this scene, as in that with the foolish girl, the wise-woman resorts to her skill in palmistry and offers her prophecy in doggerel. She foretells the marriage of the couple and their restoration to their rightful positions in life. Oddly enough, they are angered by her words, for, although the prophecy forecasts happiness beyond their fondest hopes, they can not find it in their hearts to believe it. They depart, cursing her for a lying hag, even though she has assured them that she has never yet told an untruth.40

When consulted by five impudent servants, Mother Bombie displays her versatility by interpreting their dreams. She silences their impertinences with the lucidity of her explanations. Although her words foretell no particular good fortune for the group, they are well pleased with her interpretations and offer her money. She refuses it, saying that

40Ibid., III. iv.
the only remuneration she desires is their good word. It should be noted that no fanfare precedes her oracular efforts; nor is there any magical folderol about her prophecies. Evidently she is no charlatan, for time invariably proves the truth of her words, and she makes no attempt to impress people with her powers or to profit in any way from her remarkable skill.

It is not until her final appearance in the play that Mother Bombie has any bearing upon the development of the plot. In a brief scene, she convinces Vicinia that she should right the wrong she has done in substituting her own foolish children for Maestius and Serena. Her conscience pricked by the words of the wise-woman, Vicinia confesses her crime, and the lovers are permitted to marry as Mother Bombie prophesied. Thus she is instrumental in bringing about the happy ending.41

Thomas Heywood's comedy, The Wise-woman of Hogaden, offers an example of pure quackery in the field of witchcraft. Her enemies hurl at her frequently the epithet "witch," but to her apprentice the wise-woman confesses that she has acquired her reputation through shrewdness and clever trickery. Nor does real witchcraft appear in the play, even through implication. One can but wonder whether the drama is not a quiet attempt at exposing the basis of the superstitious terrors that assailed the heart of a sixteenth century Englishman

41Ibid., v. ii.
whenever witchcraft was mentioned. The deadliest weapon that can be brought to bear upon conviction is laughter. And the surest way to destroy a false doctrine is to let the believer suspect that someone is profiting by his gullibility.

The Wise-woman of Hogsdon is considerably more versatile than the majority of her contemporaries. She admits that she seldom overlooks an opportunity to make a penny. To her apprentice, who she thinks is a boy and whom she calls Jack, she boasts of her varied but profitable pursuits:

Let me see how many trades have I to live by: first, I am a wise-woman, and a fortune-teller, and under that I deal in physic and fore-speaking, in palmistry, and recovering of things lost; next, I undertake to cure mad folks; then I keep gentlewomen lodgers, to furnish such chambers as I let out by the night; then I am provided for bringing young wenches to bed; and, for a need, you see I can play the match-maker.
She that is but one, and professeth so many, May well be termed a wise-woman, if there be any.42

Offering cures, then, for so many ills, she is never at a loss for customers. It is interesting to watch her work. The tricks she employs are startlingly similar to those used today by sooth-sayers, crystal-gazers, astrologers, and the like. Following is an example of one of her interviews:

1st Cit. Wife. I would not have it known to my neighbors that I come to a wise-woman for anything, by my truly.
Wise-wo. For should your husband come and find you here---
1st Cit. Wife. My husband, woman! I am a widow.
Wise-wo. Where are my brains? 'Tis true, you are a widow, and you dwell----let me see, I can never remember that place.
1st Cit. Wife. In Kent-street.

42Thomas Heywood, The Wise-woman of Hogsdon, III. i.
"Wise-wo. Kent-street, Kent-street! and I can tell you
wherefore you come.
1st Cit. Wife. "Thy, and say true?
Wise-wo. You are a wag, you are a wag: shy, what do you
think now I would say?
1st Cit. Wife. Perhaps to know how many husbands I should
have.
Wise-wo. And if I should say so, should I say amiss?
1st Cit. Wife. I think you are a witch.
Wise-wo. In, in: I'll but read a little of Ptolemy and
Erra Pater; and when I have cast a figure, I'll come to
you presently. 43

The Wise-woman of Hogsdon displays none of the altruism
that is evident in the character of Mother Bombie. She pos-
sesses no discernible scruples, yet there is something likable
about her. Her deeds are largely motivated by a desire for
monetary gains. Only once does she exhibit any bitterness
toward an individual, and then, one is forced to admit, it is
justifiable. It is true that she caters to needs that are
not approved of by society. Her home serves as an assigna-
tion house as well as a lying-in hospital for unmarried
mothers. But there is no indication that her tolerance in
these matters extends to loose behavior on her own part.

Young Chartley has incurred the wrath of the Wise-woman
by treating her abusively when in his cups. Her well-planned
vengeance not only leads to a happy solution for most of the
problems in the play, but even brings about the reformation
of the wild youth. 44 Thus, this is one of the few plays
extant in which a witch really has a major role, and she is
only a pretender.

43Ibid., II. i. 44Ibid., V. iv.
Were it not for Heywood's collaboration in writing the play entitled *The Late Lancashire Witches*, one might be able to infer from his amusing exposures of the Wise-woman's trickery that he, at least, was not a believer in witchcraft. Still, it must be remembered that there was a sharp distinction in Elizabethan definitions between a witch and a wise-woman. People might be quite tolerant of a humorous play concerning the latter, while considering any implication of the falseness of the former as sheer heresy. There is absolutely no indication that Heywood penned his portion of *The Late Lancashire Witches* with his tongue in his cheek. Consequently, it should be admitted that this playwright could have been as deeply imbued with superstitious fear of witches as was the simplest villager. There is no actual proof to the contrary.

Ben Jonson followed the example of a number of his predecessors and contemporaries in the field of the drama, and borrowed heavily from the witch-lore of his day for the material for two of his efforts. Unfortunately his unusual pastoral, *The Sad Shepherd*, is fragmentary, supposedly being left unfinished at the author's death, although there is a possibility that a portion of it was lost through the carelessness of unappreciative heirs. However, enough remains to enable the reader to form some idea of the theme and most of the major characters of the play.

Sorrow hangs like a pall over the greenwood because of
the machinations of one Maudlin, termed the envious, the Witch of Paplewick. In the forest of Sherwood, Robin Hood and Maid Marian are giving a feast for the shepherds, but Eglamour, normally the gayest of the lot, is overwhelmed with grief at the loss of his beloved Earine, whom Maudlin has reported drowned. The witch has captured the girl and imprisoned her in a tree, in the hope that she will succumb to the clumsy wooing of Lorel, the witch's son. Earine, of course, virtuously repulses the swineherd's advances, and his mother rails at him for his oafishness. It is interesting to note that Lorel considers it necessary to deny to Earine that he is the product of incubus. Perhaps, too, it is appropriate that a witch's son should proffer such gifts as a bear cub, the young of a badger, two hedge-hogs, and a ferret, all often mentioned as familiars.45

Maudlin now turns her attention to her daughter, Douce, sending her to wander among the shepherds with the admonition to be as attractive as possible in their eyes. She has garbed her in Earine's clothes, apparently with the belief that the admiration accorded that beautiful shepherdess may be transferred with her apparel. A glimpse of Douce thus arrayed brings Eglamour to the point of madness, for he is convinced that it is the ghost of his adored one, returned to demand vengeance of her murderer who was perhaps her ravisher also.

45Ben Jonson, The Sad Shepherd, II. 11.
Douce flees, and, since the play mentions her no more, one can but wonder which of the shepherds' hearts she wished to capture and whether she was even momentarily successful in her attempts.\textsuperscript{46}

Maudlin now turns the full power of her witchcraft to an attempt to gain for herself the huge buck slain by Marian and her hunters. Using her power of transformation, she assumes the form of Marian and cruelly offends the shepherds. When Robin Hood reproaches her for her inhospitality, she turns on him also. Then she orders the venison taken to Mother Maudlin who, she states, will exhibit more gratitude than the uncouth shepherds. Scathlock, one of Robin Hood's men, suspects that this is somehow the work of Maudlin, of whom he says:

\textit{They call her a wise-woman, but I think her An arrant witch.}\textsuperscript{47}

Here again, we have evidence of the differentiation between those two terms.

When Marian returns, she quickly grasps the import of the witch's deviltry and sends Scathlock to regain the stolen deer. Maudlin, meanwhile, has come in her true form to express her thanks for the gift. When Marian reprimands her for attempting to acquire the venison by such trickery, she grows furious and mumbles three curses:

\begin{quote}
The spit stand still, no broches turn\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., I. ii. \textsuperscript{47}Ibid., I. ii.
Before the fire, but let it burn
Both sides and haunches, till the whole
Converted be into one coal!

The swilland dropsy enter in
The lazy cuke, and swell his skin;
And the old mort-mal on his shin
Now prick and itch, withouten blin.

The pain we call St. Anton's fire,
The gout, or what we can desire,
To cramp a cuke, in every limb,
Before they dine, yet seize on him.48

The cook is stricken with a multitude of ills immediately
upon Maudlin's departure. This convinces the men that she is
indeed a witch, as Scathlock has suggested, and they ask Robin
Hood to permit them to hunt her down. He, agreeing that she
must be allowed to do no more harm, grants their request, and
guided by the old shepherd, Alken, who is something of an
authority on witches and their habits, they set out eagerly
upon her trail.49

For supplying the malodorous atmosphere of witchcraft,
Alken's description of Maudlin's haunts and pursuits is truly
excellent. As a poetic summary of the Elizabethan conception
of the witch, it is worthy of quotation in full.

Within a gloomy dimble she doth dwell,
Down in a pit, o'ergrown with brakes and briars,
Close by the ruins of a shaken abbey,
Torn with an earthquake down unto the ground,
'Mongst graves and grots, near an old charnel-house,
Where you shall find her sitting in her fourm,
As fearfull and melancholic as that
She is about; with caterpillars' kells,
And knotty cobwebs, rounded in with spells,
Then she steals forth to relief in the fogs,

48 Ibid., II. 11. 49 Ibid.
And rotten mists, upon the fens and bogs,
Down to the drowned lands of Lincolnshire;
To make ewes cast their lambs, swine eat their farrow,
The housewives turn not work, nor the milk churn!
Writhe children's wrists, and suck their breath in sleep,
Get vials of their blood! and where the sea
Casts up his slimy ooze, search for a weed
To open locks with, and to rivet charms,
Planted about her in the wicked seat
Of all her mischiefs, which are manifold.50

In no other play dealing with witchcraft does the author busy himself with such a detailed description of the witch's surroundings. Most playwrights were content to set the stage with a steaming caldron hung over a smoldering fire in a cave or ragged glade. Verbally, Jonson paints a backdrop, the somber tones and fitful gleams of which seem to reflect the evil workings of the witch's mind. All the sinister appurtenances, every object or creature that in the mind of the superstitious possesses devilish or fearsome connotations, Jonson blends into a picture of Maudlin's environment.

Where the sad mandrake grows,
Whose groans are deathful; the dead-numbing nightshade,
The stupefying hemlock, adder's tongue,
And martagon; the shrieks of luckless owls
We hear, and croaking night-crows in the air!
Green-bellied snakes, blue fire-drakes in the sky,
And giddy flitter-mice with leather wings!
The scaly beetles, with their habergeons,
That make a humming murmur as they fly!
There in the stocks of trees, white faires do dwell,
And span-long elves that dance about a pool,
With each a little changeling in their arms!
The airy spirits play with falling stars,
And mount the sphere of fire to kiss the moon!
While she sits reading by the glowworm's light,
Or rotten wood, o'er which the worm hath crept,
The baneful schedule of her nocent charms,

50Tbid.
And binding characters, through which she wounds her puppets, the sigilla of her witchcraft.\textsuperscript{51}

Maudlin, too, must have her familiar. It is unfortunate that the fragmentary character of the play enables us to catch but a fleeting glimpse of this goblin with the singularly appropriate name of Puck-hairy. Aware of the approach of Robin Hood's men, she calls up the imp and relates her woes. He offers her no consolation, warning her that there are threats to her well-being which she does not suspect. He informs her that she must abandon the conviction that her power is comparable to her malice. He advises her to escape until the storm of wrath aroused by her evil machinations has somewhat dissipated. The means of transportation that Puck-hairy suggests is further proof that Ben Jonson was conversant with the witch-lore of his day.

\begin{quote}
Sail in an egg-shell, make a straw your mast, 
A cobweb all your cloth, and pass unseen, 
Till you have 'scaped the rocks that are about you.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

The Sad Shepherd, although unfortunately abbreviated, offers an exceptionally well-limned portrait of the Elizabethan witch. One can but wonder what other exhibitions of her powers were called forth by her feud with wholesomeness as exemplified by the shepherds and the merry men of Sherwood forest. One must puzzle over the part Puck-hairy played in her efforts to avenge her fancied wrongs. And, finally, one can but speculate upon the justice meted out to her in the last act. Was

\textsuperscript{51}\textit{Ibid.} \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{52}\textit{Ibid.}, III. 11.
she destroyed as were most of her sister witches in the dramas of that period? Any attempt upon the part of the reader to answer these questions to his own satisfaction will amount to little more than guesswork. The actual solutions to these problems probably died with Ben Jonson.

Jonson's other effort to bring witchcraft to the stage of the Elizabethan theatre was the presentation of his The Masque of Queens. In this brief spectacle, he offers not one witch but a dozen. In numerous footnotes he gives his authorities for every unusual word and action of the beldames, and his stage directions include the details of their weird costumes. Perhaps it was the scholar's love of thoroughness, coupled with a somewhat naive desire on the author's part to display his erudition, that prompted the careful explanations of the powers and pursuits of witches in general. He states that his elucidations were made at the request of his friend, Prince Henry. Whatever the motivation, these descriptions are welcomed by the student of witchcraft as further confirmation of the superstitious beliefs of the period.

The theme of the masque is a simple one. It deals with the vanquishing of certain vices as personified by the witches. Various virtues, personified by numerous queens of legendary and historical fame, are the conquerors. The action, of course, is of negligible importance. Interest is engendered by the costumes, scenery, and weird charms recited by the hags. Singly and in small groups, eleven witches first appear
upon the stage lighted by the flickering flames of a hell below. They await the arrival of their Dame with some impatience, and, to hasten her appearance, they chant their first charm. In its mention of the habitats of witches it is reminiscent of Alken's descriptions of their haunts in *The Sad Shepherd*. The hags babble of fens and dank woods and forgotten graves in lonely churchyards. In a footnote, Jonson explains: "These places, in their own nature dire and dismal, are reckoned up as the fittest from whence such persons should come."53

Once again the several means of transportation preferred by witches is touched upon. Mention is made of the "horse of wood," the goat, who is the devil himself, and a green cock, upon which a witch once escaped justice, according to a tale the author had heard as a boy. In words almost identical with those used in *The Sad Shepherd*, and already quoted in this chapter, Jonson describes the craft with which the hags skimmed over oceans:

We must home in the eggshell sail;  
The mast is made of a great pin,  
The tackle of cobweb, the sail as thin.54

Their Dame is Ate, or Mischief, modeled somewhat after the traditional Hecate. Upon her arrival, the witches set about confounding the elements into a storm such as the world

has never witnessed. Each witch has brought some of the essential ingredients for the brew that is to release chaos. Many lines are given to an enumeration of these ingredients and a description of the methods employed in their acquisition. To the utter disappointment of the witches, the nauseous broth and numerous chanted charms fail to ruffle the calm of night, and finally the whole motley crew are forced to flee before the approach of the virtuous queens. No unusual phase of witchcraft is introduced in *The Masque of Queens*, but the treatment of the rather hackneyed ideas of witchcraft is freshened by Jonson's facile pen.

The twelve plays discussed in this chapter comprise the group of Elizabethan plays which deal in some fashion with witchcraft. It must not be implied that these were the only dramas written during this period in which a real or pseudo witch appeared. Many plays of this era have been lost, and some of them probably made use of witches for plot advancement or atmosphere. The titles of two such dramas have survived the erosive efforts of time. Mention is made of *The Witch of Islington*, acted in 1597, and *The Witch Traveller*, licensed in 1623, but no line of either is to be found in print.55 Probably there were others, but the twelve we have discussed are sufficiently indicative of the effect that the practically universal belief in witchcraft during the latter

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part of the sixteenth century had upon the products of the playwrights of the Elizabethan period.
CHAPTER III

SOURCES OF WITCHES IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

Few of the witches which appeared in plays written during the Elizabethan period were purely products of the playwright's imagination. Several reasons might be suggested for this apparent lack of ingenuity. Some of the dramas, such as Macbeth, were vaguely historical, and the author probably felt some compunctions about departing too radically from the known facts. Since legend or chronicle had supplied him with a sufficient number of characters, he did little more than develop or delineate them according to his plot requirements or the scope of his imagination. In the case of such efforts as The Late Lancashire Witches, the authors, one might infer, deliberately took advantage of the notoriety gained by some unusual witch trial to increase the attendance at their dramatic presentation of the characters about whom the curiosity of the public had been previously whetted. Perhaps in some instances an actual rather than a fictitious witch was used in order to lend a realistic touch to the drama that the writer's talents were incapable of achieving otherwise.

There is, of course, no question as to where Shakespeare discovered his original pattern for the Weird Sisters whose prophecies opened the floodgates of Macbeth's ambition and
unleashed a torrent that finally destroyed him along with those unfortunate enough to stand in his way. These witches were lifted, as well as most of the plot of this dramatic study of the decay of a conscience, from the pages of Holinshed’s Chronicles. Stripped of the sinister aura with which Shakespeare’s talent clothed them, they are readily recognizable as the three strange women whom Macbeth and Banquo encountered, according to Holinshed’s version of Scottish history. The account in the Chronicles follows:

It fortuned as Makbeth and Banquo iournied towards Fores, where the king then laie, they went sporting by the waie together without other companie, saue onelie themselues, passing thorough the woods and fields, when suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world, whom when they attentiuelie beheld, woondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said; All haile Makbeth, thane of Glammis (for he had latelie entered into that dignitie and office by the death of his father Sinell). The second of them said; Haile Makbeth thane of Cawder. But the third said; All haile Makbeth that hereafter shal be king of Scotland. . . . Herewith the foresaid women vanished immediatlie out of their sight. . . . The common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinee, or else some nymphs or fairies, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromantical science because everie thing came to passe as they had spoken.1

There is in existence a still older version of the story of Macbeth in the Wintownis Cronykil. In this tale, Makbeth-Fynlayk dreamed that he met three women whom he thought were the "Werd Systrys." The first said, "Lo, yonder is the Thane of Crwmbawchty." The second said, "I see the Thane of Morave."

The third simply stated, "I see the King."² If Shakespeare read this version, he discarded it for the one in Holinshed, probably because real witches were much more suitable as dramatic subjects than figments of a dream, and the scene could be staged much more effectively.

The scene in which the prophecies of the witches lead Macbeth to believe himself to be invulnerable to attack is not derived so directly from Holinshed. The Chronicles relate that "a certeine witch, whome hee had in great trust, had told that he should neuer be slaine with man borne of anie woman, nor vanquished till the wood of Bernane came to the castell of Dunsinane."³ Shakespeare evidently saw no purpose in ignoring three characters, already introduced and fairly well delineated, and bringing in a new witch. Thus, he simply enlarged the scene to embrace a number of the actions ordinarily imputed to witches during the Elizabethan age and retained all three hags to guide Macbeth on his path to destruction.

It is, then, quite simple to trace to its source the central plot of Macbeth. One can not always be so accurate, perhaps, in suggested derivations of the hints of dark magic with which Shakespeare garnishes his witch scenes. References which the playwright possibly consulted can be designated, but


³Holinshed, op. cit., p. 274.
one must admit that actual proof is wanting. Superstitions, like the legends upon which they are often based, are usually quite nebulous in origin. It is often impossible to dissect a certain bit of folk-lore and then to analyze each of its component parts. One must content oneself with the presentation of sources with which, it is logical to infer, the author may have come in contact, and which he subsequently utilized.

In the ninth line of the opening scene of Macbeth, for example, the witches announce that "Paddock calls." The context informs one that a paddock is probably one of the less liked creatures which popular opinion has thrust into the role of the witch's familiars. Then, in a volume entitled The History of Serpents, the following information is offered: "This crooke-backed Paddock. . . is not altogether mute, for in time of perrill. . . they have a crying voyce, which I have oftentimes proved by experience."\(^4\) It is quite possible that Shakespeare's discovery of this information was responsible for the cry of the paddock in Macbeth. On the other hand, the knowledge that this small reptile possessed vocal chords may have been garnered by the playwright from some old wives' tale which he heard as a boy. One might pursue the quest for the source of this line and the one preceding it in the following manner. Graymalkin was a common name for a cat during the Elizabethan period, and a toad was frequently

referred to as a paddock. The use of these two creatures as familiars in the first witch scene may very well have been based upon Scot's simple assertion: "some say they can keepe divels and spirits in the likenesse of todes and cats."5

When the witches next appear in Scene iii of the first act, their conversation fairly reeks of traditional witch practices. Each of the hags relates her recent accomplishments in the field of malignant magic. One confesses that she has been killing swine. There are numerous recorded cases where such accusations were hurled against suspected witches. One example should suffice. In a trial in 1579, witnesses testified that a witch grew angry at one Robert Lathburie and shortly after his hogs died "to the number of twenty."6 This was a method frequently employed by witches in an effort to secure vengeance for some real or fancied wrong done them.

In the eleventh line of this scene, one witch offers to contribute a wind to aid her sister in an attempt to make unhappy the voyage of a sailor whose wife has offended the bel dame. It was commonly believed that a witch could give or sell to a seafaring man as much wind as he desired. Thus it followed that she could unleash the furies of a tempest if her ire was aroused. Scot says that some credulous writers give the witch control over all the elements. He quotes Ovid

5Reginald Scot, The Discoverie of Witchcraft, p. 6.

6A Detection of Damnable Driftes Practized by Three Witches (author not given), quoted in Macbeth, op. cit., p. 31.
as affirming, "They can raise and suppress lightening and thunder, raine and hile, clouds and winds, tempests and earthquakes."7 In *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, published in 1600, Thomas Nashe says, "Witches for gold will sell a man a wind, which, in the corner of a napkin wrap'd, Shall blow him safe unto what coast he will."8 Either Scot or Nashe could have been consulted by Shakespeare. In another scene Macbeth himself refers to their reputed powers in brewing tempests:

> Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
> Against the churches; though the yeasty waves  
> Confound and swallow navigation up.9

These lines are somewhat reminiscent of King James' account in *Newes from Scotland* of a witch who left a christened cat before the town of Lieth. "This doone, ther did arise such a tempest in the Sea, as a greater hath not beene scene; which tempest was the cause of the perrishing of a Boate or vessell comming ouer from the towne of Brunt Iland to the towne of Lieth."10

It is not the purpose of this paper to enter into the controversy between the champions of Middleton and Shakespeare over whose hand penned certain lines in the witch scenes. One

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10King James I, *Newes from Scotland*, p. 17.
can but note in passing that in Macbeth Hecate, over whom most of the storm has raged, gives no hint of the sensuality that characterizes her in The Witch. One would also be inclined to regard as significant the fact that only Shakespeare consistently gave her name a dissyllabic pronunciation. More pertinent to the subject of this chapter is the knowledge that neither Middleton nor Shakespeare is responsible for the invention of the mistress of the witches. Scot informs one that many ancient writers told of the witches' meeting at night with a pagan goddess, such as Minerva or Diana, as their queen. The Elizabethan playwrights seem to have preferred Hecate as being a more appropriate associate for beldames than intellectual Minerva or coolly beautiful Diana.

When the witches list the ingredients that they throw into the caldron, one mentions the "swelter'd venom" of a toad. Topsell confirms the poisonous qualities of this unprepossessing little creature in his The History of Serpents: "All manner of Toads of the earth and of the water are venomous, although it be held that the Toads of the earth are more poysionful then the Toads of the water. . . . But the Toads of the land, which do descend into the marishes, and so live in both elements are most venomous." The deadly nature

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11 William Shakespeare, Macbeth, III. v.
12 Scot, op. cit., p. 37.
13 Shakespeare, op. cit., IV. 1. 8.
14 Topsell, op. cit., p. 247.
of the toad is further emphasized in this quotation from Newes from Scotland: "She confesses that she tooke a blacke Toade, and did hang the same vp by the heeles, three daies, and collected and gathered the venome as it dropped and fell from it in an Oyster shell." Shakespeare's misconceptions in the field of zoology can be blamed upon the authorities of that period.

In the illusory parade of kings conjured up by the witches, the eighth bears a glass in which Macbeth confesses he sees many more of the monarchs of Scotland yet to come. The playwright could have garnered the idea for this dramatic bit from the following information offered by Scot: "You may have glasses so made, as what image or favour soever you print in your imagination, you shall thinke you see the same therein; others, wherein you may see one comming and another going; others, where one image shall seeme to be one hundred."

After the departure of the hags, Macbeth, who is deeply displeased at the things their conjured apparitions have implied, mutters, "Infected be the air on which they ride." This, of course, recalls the popular notion that witches were transported through the air to their various rendezvous. King

15 King James I, Newes from Scotland, p. 16.
16 William Shakespeare, Macbeth, IV. 1. 119-120.
17 Scot, op. cit., p. 179.
James believed that they might have effected this "by being carried by the force of the Spirit which is their conductor, either above the earth or above the Sea swiftly, to the place where they are to meet." Scot confirms the popularity of this belief, even while he ridicules the possibility of such transportation.  

In *Henry VI, Part I*, there seems little reason for terming Joan d'Arc a witch save, perhaps, the necessity of explaining her success in arms against the English forces. Courage and military skill could not be offered as suitable excuses for her victories. Only a league with the devil would suffice as an explanation for her defeat of England's finest soldiers. This obvious and fairly logical interpretation of her apparent invincibility was not to be ignored by an English playwright who was seeking to draw patrons into his theater. However, it is but fair to point out that Shakespeare was not the first to defame the character of La Pucelle in this fashion. Her condemnation as a witch was historically authentic, and even the scene in which she pleads pregnancy in an effort to save herself from the stake is to be found in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. In relating the incidents that occurred at Joan's trial, the chronicler states,  

19King James I, *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue*, p. 38.  
"But herein (God helpe vs) she fullie afore posset of the feend, not able to hold hir in anie towardnesse of grace, falling streight waeie into hir former abominations... stake not... to confess hir selfe a strumpet, and (vnmarried as she was) to be with child."22

Margery Jourdain, the witch who appears briefly in Henry VI, Part II, was also garnered from the Chronicles. There is no record of her conjuring up the spirit, Asmath, and of the prophecies he made, but Holinshed does mention her participation in the conspiracy against the king's life.23 In discussing the trial of the conspirators, the historian says: "The matter laid against them was, for that they (at the request of the said duchesse) had devised an image of wax, representing the king, which by sorcerie by little and little consumed; intending thereby in conclusion to waste and destroie the kings person."24 A little later, Holinshed states briefly, "Margerie Iordeine, the witch of Ele, was burnt in Smithfield." It would appear, then, that Shakespeare used his imagination and dramatic sense to transform an ordinary plot of assassination into a scene in which the dark prophecies of an impatient apparition quickens the suspense of the audience and leaves it tense with the expectation of

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sinister things to come. An incident of negligible importance, historically, becomes an essential bit of dramatic foreshadowing under the playwright's touch.

There is almost no proof concerning the derivation of the witch, Sycorax, whose name is mentioned several times in *The Tempest*. Several theories pertaining to the origin of her name have been advanced, but they are too tenuous to warrant a discussion of them here. Gifford, however, relates a story of a witch who was examined and made to confess that she had a spirit which resided in a hollow tree and spoke to her out of a hole in the trunk. Whenever she was offended by someone, she went to that tree and sent the spirit to kill his cattle for vengeance. It is possible that this tale prompted Shakespeare to imprison Ariel, the familiar of Sycorax, in a tree.

Elizabeth Sawyer was another of the several convicted witches of this era whose exploits furnished grist for the mills of the dramatists. She was executed at Edmonton on the nineteenth of April in 1621. On the twenty-ninth of December in that year, the play entitled *The Witch of Edmonton* was presented on the stage at Whitehall. The authors of this drama acknowledge the indebtedness of the theater to Mother

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Sawyer in the opening lines of their prologue:

The Town of Edmonton hath lent the stage
A devil and a witch, both in an age.\(^{27}\)

The devil referred to is not Mother Sawyer's familiar, but a play called *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, which was published anonymously in 1608.

Mother Sawyer, it will be recalled, was not a witch at the opening of the play. Bitterness toward her persecutors drove her to call upon the devil to aid her in securing vengeance. His appearance in the form of a dog was not unusual. King James states that Satan often chose the form of a dog or a cat when answering a witch's plea.\(^{28}\) When the devil sucks blood from Mother Sawyer's arm in order to seal the contract between them, he is also following the approved technique in such matters as discussed in the *Demonologie*.\(^{29}\) Furthermore, the spirit's masquerading as Katherine in order to delude the gullible Cuddy Banks is given the stamp of plausibility by the King.\(^{30}\) Such practices were common, he assures his readers, among whom, quite likely, were the authors of *The Witch of Edmonton*.

The dog admitted to Cuddy, it will be remembered, that he could assume any shape he desired in order to further his

\(^{27}\)William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*.

\(^{28}\)King James I, *Demonologie in Forme of a Dialogue*, p. 19.

\(^{29}\)Ibid., p. 33.

\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 53.
own mischievous ends. Then his conversation displayed a
ghoulish tinge when he confessed:

The old cadaver of some self-strangled wretch
We sometimes borrow, and appear human;
The carcass of some disease-slain strumpet
We varnish fresh, and wear as her first beauty.31

In the *Demonologie*, King James explains the devil's power to
enter the bodies of the dead and give them the appearance of
life. In answer to a query, this authority on hellish prac-
tices states that Satan can clothe himself in the abandoned
earthly flesh of good Christians.32

Another incident in *The Witch of Edmonton* indicates that
the authors may have consulted the writings of the Scottish
monarch. Sir Arthur Clarington is dubious of Mother Sawyer's
devilish connections in spite of all the evidence presented
against her by the countrymen. However, when she displays a
knowledge of his moral weaknesses, particularly his predatory
attitude toward maidens, he is quickly convinced that she is
indeed a witch.33 A similar incident occurred at a witch
trial which King James witnessed and recorded. The evidence
presented against the accused had failed to convince the King
of her guilt until she repeated verbatim the conversation
that had taken place between his wife and him upon their
wedding night. As embarrassed, perhaps, as Sir Arthur was to

31Rowley, Ford, and Dekker, *op. cit.*, V. 1.

32King James I, *Demonologie in Forme of a Dialogue*, p. 52.
33Rowley, Ford, and Dekker, *op. cit.*, IV. 1.
be under similar circumstances, the King hastily voted for the witch's execution.34

There is, of course, no question about the source of The Late Lancashire Witches, the topical drama by Heywood and Brome. The county of Lancashire evidently furnished soil most conducive to the growth of Satan's doctrines, for a score or so of witches were apprehended there at various times. The trial upon which the play was based was held in 1633, when Young Robinson created pandemonium among the superstitious in the county with his testimony which he afterward confessed to be the product of a vivid imagination. Some seventeen persons were tried and condemned, only to be reprieved by King James, whose faith in witchcraft was apparently a bit shaken by this occurrence.35

Heywood and Brome emphasize the vulgar comedy in the incident, dwelling largely upon the annoying and mischievous pursuits of the witches rather than upon their more sinister practices. Apparently, they were guilty of no murderous designs upon anyone, nor did they practice their arts for vengeance or material gain. Most of their pranks were based upon variations of three powers which, according to Scot, the Elizabethan witches were popularly supposed to possess.36

34King James I, Newes from Scotland, p. 15.
36Scot, op. cit., p. 6.
They transformed themselves into hares, hounds, and cats upon different occasions. They charmed a man into impotency upon his wedding night. They rode to their rendezvous upon a number of odd steeds including two unwilling human beings. One is mildly amused by the antics of the Lancashire witches and completely unprepared for the justice that is meted out to them.

Whereas the paths that lead from the Elizabethan dramas to their sources have in most cases become dim and hard to follow, with the passing of centuries the lane from The Witch to Scot’s Discoverie of Witchcraft is still well-defined, so often was it trod by Middleton. Few are the samples of witch-lore found in the witch scenes of Middleton’s play that are not traceable directly to information gathered by Scot. In many instances, the playwright scarcely troubled himself to edit Scot’s work. In fact, Hecate’s first speech in the drama drafts from the Discoverie the names of her sister witches.

Concerning Hoppo and Stadlin, Scot writes:

It is constantlie affirmed in M. Mal. that Stafus used alwaies to hide himselfe in a monshoall, and had a disci-\[\text{p\[\text{le called Hoppo, who made Stadlin a maister witch, and could all when they list invisiblie transferre the third part of their neighbor's doong, hay, corne, &c;}\]

\[\text{37Thomas Heywood and Richard Broke, The Late Lancashire Witches, II. i.}\]
\[\text{38Ibid., IV. iii.}\]
\[\text{39Ibid., IV. i.}\]
\[\text{40Ibid., V. iii.}\]
\[\text{41Thomas Middleton, The Witch, I. ii. 4.}\]
into their owne ground, make haile, tempests, and flouds, with thunder and lightning; and kill children, cattell, &c. 42

In this scene, the witches are busying themselves with the preparation of their flying ointment. Hecate lists the fat of "an unbaptized brat" as one of the essential ingredients. She states that a generous application of this oil will enable the beldames to fly hundreds of leagues in the air and "feast and sing, dance, kiss, and coll." 43 She lists additional elements essential to the potency of this ointment:

I thrust in eleoselinum lately, Aconitum, frondes populeas, and soot, 
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Then sium, acarum vulgare too, 
Pentaphyllon, the blood of a flitter-mouse, 
Solanum somnificum et oleum. 44

In these lines Middleton quotes Scot almost verbatim. In the chapter in the Discoverie devoted to recipes for witches' brews, we find:

The fat of yoong children, and seeth it with water in a brased vessell, reserving the thickest of that which remaineth boiled in the bottome, which they laie up and keepe, untill occasion serveth to use it. They put here- unto Eleoselinum, Aconitum, Frondes populeas, and Soote. . . Sium, acarum vulgare, pentaphyllon, the blood of a flitter- mouse, solanum somniferum, & oleum. They stampe all these togethuer, and then they rubbe all parts of their bodies exceedinglie, till they looke red, and be verie hot, so as the pores may be opened, and their fleshe solubel and loose. . . . By this means (saith he) in a moone light night they seeme to be carried in the aire, to feasting, singing, dancing, kissing, and culling. 45

42 Scot, op. cit., p. 126.
44 Ibid., 36-41. 45 Scot, op. cit., p. 105.
It becomes readily apparent, then, that the playwright scarcely bothered to rearrange Scot's phraseology. All of the pranks and evil deeds that he attributed to Hecate and her vulgar group may be found in the Discoverie under the heading, "What miraculous actions are imputed to witches by witch-mongers, papists, and poets." From the intimate grouping of those three offenders, one is led to infer that Scot felt no great admiration for Middleton's profession. It is particularly ironical that most of the authenticity of the witch scenes of one of the best known witch plays should stem from the work of a man whose efforts were intended to dispel those very superstitions.

Hecate's speech just before the entrance of Sebastian is meaningless unless looked upon as an effort to create the proper atmosphere. She simply lists a number of real and legendary creatures that are in some manner related to the pursuits of witches:

Urchins, Elves, Hags, Satyrs, Pans, Fawns, Sylvans, Kitt-with the candlestick, Tritons, Centaurs, Dwarfs, Imps, the Spoorn, the Mare, the Man-i'-th'-oak, the Hellwain, the Firedrake, the Puckle! A ab hur hus! It will be noticed that, among these fabulous creatures, she mentions two of her sister witches, Hellwain and Puckle. A glance at the original in Scot may help to explain the apparent oversight:

They have so fraied us with bull beggers, spirits, witches,

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46 Ibid., p. 5.  
47 Middleton, op. cit., 103-106.
urchens, elves, hugs, fairies, satyrs, pams, faunes, sylens, kit with the cansticke, tritons, centaurs, dwarfes, giants, imps, calcars, conjurors, nymphes, changlings, Incubus, Robin good-fellowe, the spoorne, the mare, the man in the oke, the hell waine, the fierdrake, the puckle, Tom Thombe, hob gobblin, Tom tumbler, boneles, and such other bugs, that we are afraid of our owne shadowes.48

It is quite obvious that Middleton has omitted from Scot's list only the too well known, such as witches and spirits, and the too obscure, such as calcar and boneles. Oddly enough, the playwright retained the two terms, Hellwain and Puckle, which he had previously garnered from the same source as names for two of his witches. The "A ab hur huz" of Hecate's chant is given by Scot as a charm for the tooth-sache.49

In her enumeration of the powers of her crew, Hecate gives to Stadlin and Hoppo the same talents attributed to them in the quotation from Scot, already cited in tracing the source of their names.50 One can not reproach Middleton for inconsistency.

In an effort to impress Sebastian with her erudition, perhaps, Hecate names some of the herbs she could use in preparing the potion he desires:

I could give thee
Chirocinets, adincantida,
Archimedes, marmaratine, calicia,
Which I could sort to villanus barren ends.51

Each of these herbs and their supposed virtues are

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48 Scot, op. cit., p. 86. 49 Ibid., p. 139.
50 Middleton, op. cit., 131-146. 51 Ibid., 160-163.
painstakingly listed by Scot.\textsuperscript{52} Middleton has but rearranged the order of their cataloging in the semblance of poetry.

Then Almachildes comes to Hecate for some love potion with which to facilitate the seduction of Amoretta, the witch offers him a choice of several potent charms. She mentions a remora, a small fish, but this fails to arouse his enthusiasm. It soon becomes obvious that he rejects her suggestions in order that she may display her knowledge of the various means of thawing frozen hearts. She next proposes,

The bones of a green frog too, wondrous precious,  
The flesh consumed by pismires.\textsuperscript{53}

The subject is then changed, and Hecate invites him to dinner. However, in another scene, he states indignantly that the beldame had offered him also the brain of a cat and "a little bone in the hithermost part of a wolf's tail."\textsuperscript{54} Once again, one need seek no further than Scot for the source of these charms:

The toies, which are said to procure love, and are exhibited in their poison looving cups, are these: the haire growing in the nethermost part of a woolves taile, a little fish called Remora, the braine of a cat, of a newt, or of a lizzard: the bone of a greene frog, the flesh thereof being consumed with pismers or ants.\textsuperscript{55}

One notices that, for some unidentified reason, Middleton changes the hair from the tip of a wolf's tail to a bone from

\textsuperscript{52}Scot, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 67.  
\textsuperscript{53}Middleton, \textit{op. cit.}, 211-212. \textsuperscript{54}\textit{Ibid.}, II. ii. 27-30.  
\textsuperscript{55}Scot, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 71.
the same region. He retains the brain of a cat in Hecate's lines but omits the same organs of a newt and a lizard, probably because they would sound repetitious.

The scene in which the witches are preparing to take their evening flight is largely a rearrangement of the information already secured from Scot. Additional emphasis is placed upon the components of the magic oil with which the beldames anoint themselves in order to fly.56

When the Duchess comes to Hecate for aid in disposing of Almachildes, Middleton again makes the best of his opportunity to display the knowledge of witch-lore he has garnered from Scot. The witch offers to slay the youth by the use of the familiar wax image.57 As has been shown, Scot made frequent mention of the various uses of sympathetic magic. The Duchess discards this suggestion. She states that only a swift and certain death will fulfill her requirements. Then, somewhat impatiently, she intimates that Hecate may not be capable of performing the task. The witch, her professional pride injured, flares into a fit of temper and recites a Latin verse.58 This verse Middleton has transcribed from the Discoverie, with the omission of but one line. The witch's recitation terminates as abruptly as does the original in Scot's volume, leaving out only the latter author's customary "&c."59

56 Middleton, op. cit., III. iii. 57 Ibid., V. ii. 3-7. 58 Ibid., 18-25. 59 Scot, op. cit., p. 128.
By way of summary, then, it can be said that Middleton made almost no effort to conceal his reliance upon Scot for the material for his witch scenes. The herbs, a knowledge of the uses of which Hecate displays so ostentatiously, are all enumerated in the Discoverie. The various ingredients that go into the love potions and poisons are mentioned in the same source. The names of four of Hecate's sister witches are found there also. Thus, one can infer safely that Middleton is deeply indebted to Scot for much of the ring of authenticity which one recognizes in the scenes in The Witch that deal with the evil practices and obscene recreations of the beldames.

Tracing the sources of Ben Jonson's lines pertaining to witches is a much more difficult task than following the clearly emblazoned trail that leads from The Witch to the Discoverie of Witchcraft. It is a simple enough matter to confirm his statements about witches in some of the authoritative works that deal with that subject. However, one gathers the impression that Jonson made use of the great mass of floating witch-lore of his day rather than the printed volumes on witchcraft or demonology. If he did consult the published compendiums of the supernatural, his vivid imagination and masterly presentation often conceal it deftly. It can never be said of him, as it can of Middleton, that he borrowed from his contemporaries and predecessors in so generous a fashion as to verge on plagiarism. His rare artistry
manages somehow to make the ugly facts of witchcraft delightful reading.

Jonson mentions Hecate in *The Sad Shepherd*. Maudlin, the wicked witch of Paplewick, who serves as the antagonist in the pastoral, refers to the legendary witch queen as her Dame. He does not attempt to characterize Hecate.

Maudlin, infuriated because the deer she has stolen has been recovered and taken back to be prepared for the shepherds' feast, mutters dire threats and places a curse upon the cook. He promptly is stricken down with all the ailments that the witch has wished upon him. It was evidently a common belief in the Elizabethan era that witches had such powers, for Scot says:

The witching writers hold opinion, that anie thing almost maie be therby brought to passe; & that whether the words of the charme be understandable or not, it skillett not: so the charmer have a steddie intention to bring his desire about. And then what is it that cannot be done by words? For L. Vairus saith, that old women have infeebled and killed children with words, and have made women with child miscarrie; they have made men pine awaie to death.

Maudlin uses her magic powers of transformation frequently, but confines that talent to an impersonation of Maid Marian that hoodwinks even Robin Hood. Her imp, in fact, accuses the witch of relying too heavily upon that particular talent for gaining her ends. Scot devotes an entire chapter

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60Ben Jonson, *The Sad Shepherd*, II. i.
61Ibid., II. ii.  
63Ben Jonson, *The Sad Shepherd*, III. i.
to the reputed powers of witches to transform themselves into any shape they may desire. In the fragment of *The Sad Shepherd* that remains to us there is no instance of Maudlin's transformation into animal shapes, although Alken, the wise old shepherd who is an authority on witches, states that they may find her disguised as a hare.

The witch's familiar, Puck-hairy, is admittedly none other than that mischievous sprite, Robin Goodfellow. He is more articulate than most familiars, complaining of the tasks that witches set their imps to perform. He intimates that her confidence in her evil prowess gets her into predicaments from which he is constantly having to extricate her. Robin Goodfellow is mentioned by name in the *Discoverie* in company with a large number of other creatures whose alignment with Satan is never questioned by the superstitious. When Maudlin finds her plans going awry and a number of angry men close upon her heels, she frantically calls for Puck-hairy. Her gratefulness at his appearance and her whining complaints to him of her unwarranted persecution are strongly reminiscent of the final scene between Mother Sawyer and her dog in *The Witch of Edmonton*. Like the dog also, Puck-hairy warns his

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64 Scot, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-53.

65 Jonson, *op. cit.*, II. 11.

66 Ibid., III. 1.

67 Scot, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

mistress that her bitterness and desire for vengeance are about to bring about her undoing. He says,

You must be wary, and pull in your sails,
And yield unto the weather of the tempest.
You think your power's infinite as your malice,
And would do all your anger prompts you to;
But you must wait occasions, and obey them. 69

He tells her then that she must flee, going to sea in an egg-shell with cobweb for tackle and a straw for a mast. Scot admits that witches are popularly supposed to utilize that peculiar means of transportation. 70

As has been stated, it is impossible to prove that Jonson used any particular publication as a source for his witch scenes in The Sad Shepherd. The facts, if indeed he gathered them from a book, are so embellished by his poetic artistry that they are not recognizable as the statements of any one authority. When one remembers Jonson's obvious pride in his own intellectual attainments, one realizes that he quite possibly considered his own knowledge of witch-lore as adequate as that of any other self-constituted authority in that field.

The sources of The Masque of Queens seem, at first glance, much easier to trace, for Jonson, at the request of Prince Henry, explained in footnotes most of the obscure references to the evil pursuits of witchcraft. Wherever

69 Ben Jonson, The Sad Shepherd, III. 11.
70 Scot, op. cit., p. 6.
possible, he listed the authorities from which he gained the information concerning the habits of the beldames. It is particularly interesting to note that he cautiously refrains from quoting Scot, although he frequently refers to the same writers whom Scot has quoted. Jonson's omission of Scot from the footnotes with which The Masque of Queens is so copiously embellished is merely an indication of the playwright's awareness of the antipathy which King James felt toward the author of the Discoverie of Witchcraft.

Understandably, Jonson's first reference is to his sovereign's Demonologie. It pertains to the dance in which the eleven witches participate upon their first appearance on the stage. Prompted to some extent, no doubt, by a desire to impress his readers with the extent of his research in this field, the playwright also mentions Bodin, Remig, Mal, and Malefi as authorities for this action. He need not have gone any further than the Discoverie for confirmation of this familiar belief. Scot often quotes these same continental demonologists, and concerning the witches' dancing, he says:

And here some of Monsieur Bodins lies may be inserted, who saith that at these magiocal assemblies, the witches never fails to danse; and in their danse they sing these words; Har, har, divell, divell, danse here, danse here, plaie here, plaie here, Sabbath, sabbath. And whiles they sing and danse, everie one hath a broome in hir hand, and holdeth it up aloft.

71Ben Jonson, Works, edited by Francis Cunningham, III, 46.
The obvious contempt with which Scot regards this information would have forbidden his being credited as a source by Jonson.

In the first charm which the eleven hags chant in an effort to call their dame, they mention as their places of origin such unprepossessing habitats as fens, caves, graveyards, and a tree upon which someone has been hanged.\(^73\) Jonson justifies his selections of probable haunts of witches with the following explanation: "These places, in their own nature dire and dismal, are reckoned up as the fittest from whence such persons should come, and were notably observed by that excellent Lucan in the description of his Erichtho."\(^74\)

The third charm of the beldames touches upon a number of animals who have often been mentioned in connection with witchcraft in the gossip of the superstitious:

\begin{verbatim}
The owl is abroad, the bat, and the toad, 
And so is the cat-a-mountain, 
The ant and the mole sit both in a hole, 
And frog peeps out o' the fountain; 
The dogs they do bay, and the timbrels play, 
The spindle is now a turning; 
The moon it is red, and the stars are fled, 
But all the sky is a burning.\(^75\)
\end{verbatim}

This rhymed chant Jonson explains by saying, "All this is but a periphrasis of the night, in their charm, and their applying themselves to it with their instruments, whereof the spindle in antiquity was the chief: and beside the testimony of

\(^{74}\)Ibid.  
\(^{75}\)Ibid., p. 47.
Theocritus, in Pharmaceutria; (who only used it in amorous affairs) was of special act to the troubling of the moon."76

In the same charm, there is a reference to the traditional power of the witch to destroy a person by sympathetic magic, mention being made of the conventional waxen images with needles stuck in the general location of the liver. In his footnote concerning this type of attempted murder, Jonson relates a story found in Bodin which tells of the discovery of such images on dunghill near Islington, images supposedly designed for an assassination of Queen Elizabeth.77 Scot, also crediting Bodin with the origin of the report, says:

Were there not three images of late yeeres found in a doonghill, to the terror & astonishment of manifold thousands? In so much as great matters were thought to have beene pretended to be done by witchcraft.78

The frequency with which Scot and Jonson find the same examples in their quotations from demonological authorities is, perhaps, more than a coincidence.

The dame, when she appears, is found to bear the name of Ate, or mischief, rather than the conventional Hecate. She, like each of the other hags, is but a symbol of the vices that beset mankind. Jonson, however, contends that he has based his characterization of the witch queen upon a description in the Iliad.79 After Ate has ascertained that each of her belles-dames is present, she orders them all to join in bringing

76Ibid.  77Ibid.  78Scot, op. cit., p. 275.
about a confusion of the elements, to "Mix hell with heaven, and make nature fight within herself."80 In regard to this command, Jonson explains: "These powers of troubling nature are frequently ascribed to witches, and challenged by themselves wherever they are induced, by Homer, Ovid, Tibellus, etc."81 In Scot we find a remarkably similar bit of information:

And first Ovid affirmeth, that they can raise and suppress lightening and thunder, raine and haile, clouds and winds, tempests and earthquakes. Others doo write, that they can pull downe the moone and the starres.82

The dame then apparently recalls the traditional procedure in such meetings as theirs and says:

But first relate me what you have sought,
Where you have been, and what you have brought.83

In his footnote, Jonson informs one, "This is also solemn in their witchcraft, to be examined, either by the devil or their dame, at their meetings, of what mischief they have done: and what they can confer to a future hurt."84 This common belief that the witches in their conferences with their master or mistress are called upon to testify as to their recent evil accomplishments is also mentioned by Scot.85

The hags then enumerate the ingredients they have secured

80Ibid., 4. 49. 81Ibid.
82Scot, op. cit., p. 6.
83Ben Jonson, Works, edited by Francis Cunningham, III, 49.
84Ibid. 85Scot, op. cit., p. 25.
for the hellish broth they are about to concoct. Many of these elements, such as wolves' hairs, flesh of a dead man, brain of a cat, Night-shade, the bone of a frog, and the fat of an unbaptized infant, were mentioned in other plays that dealt with witchcraft, and previously in this chapter an effort has been made to trace mention of these rather gruesome articles to Scot as a possible source from which playwrights might have acquired knowledge of them.

After the eleven witches have reported their finds, the dame begins an awesome invocation of the aid of fiends and furies, in the course of which she boasts of most of the important powers that the superstitious have delegated to witches through the ages. She ignores the peevish pranks and petty vengeances with which the average beldame was supposed to concern herself. Instead, she lists among her talents the powers of destruction placed by the ancients in the hands of their angry gods. Most of these powers Scot enumerates briefly in one chapter.

The increasingly frantic attempts of the crones to stir up a destructive tempest are foredoomed to failure. They throw ashes, cross sticks, bury rotten sage, and throw a piece of flint over the left shoulder, all to no avail. In his explanatory footnote, Jonson quotes a number of authors as his


sources of information about these charms and their purported effectiveness. It is more than possible, of course, that he read the following statement in the Discoverie concerning a witch's ability to confound the elements, and the means she employs for accomplishing these ends:

They may at their pleasure send raine, haile, tempests, thunder, lightening; when she... casteth a flint stone over hir left shoulder, towards the west, or hurleth a little sea sand up into the element... or laieth sticks acrosse upon a banke, where never a drop of water is; or burieth sage till it be rotten: all which things are confessed by witches, and affirmed by writers to be the means that witches use to move extraordinarie tempests and raine, &c.

Since all the various devices practiced by the eleven hags and their dame are found in one paragraph in the Discoverie, it seems quite plausible that Jonson consulted Scot's work rather than the volumes of several more obscure authors.

The task, then, of tracing the witch-lore that Jonson made use of is not so simple as it at first appears to be. At the behest of Prince Henry, the playwright has listed a number of demonologists from whose writings he stated that he gleaned his information. Perhaps those authorities were his true sources. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Reginald Scot was anathema to King James, in whose reign The Masque of Queens was presented. And it has been shown that the information that Jonson needed was to be found in

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89Scot, op. cit., p. 34.
the Discoverie of Witchcraft. The contentions and often the quoted words of the continental demonologists whom the playwright gives credit in his footnotes were much more accessible in Scot's volume than in their own little known publications. It does not seem unjust, then, to suggest that Jonson may have been more heavily indebted to Scot than he cared to confess to a king who considered the author of the Discoverie a heretic of the most dangerous type.

By way of summary, it may be stated that most of the Elizabethan playwrights made frequent use of the more popular compendiums of witch-lore as sources for the witch scenes in their dramas. Middleton, perhaps, borrowed more heavily than any other dramatist from such an authority. Hardly an allusion is made by Hecate and her crew to their evil practices that cannot be traced directly to some statement made in Scot's Discoverie of Witchcraft. The sources relied upon by Ben Jonson are more difficult to detect for he made a conscious effort to camouflage them. It seems logical to infer that he derived much of his material for The Masque of Queens from the Discoverie also, but because of his anxiety to please King James I, he refrained from acknowledging his indebtedness to Scot.
CHAPTER IV

FUNCTIONS OF WITCHES IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

One can but admire the versatility of the Elizabethan witch. Although her repertoire was necessarily limited, the range of roles she was called upon to play was quite extensive. In the few dramas in which she was cast she served in such varied capacities as comedy relief, evil incarnate, and, in some cases, a somber backdrop before which tragedy occurred. Frequently she menaced the happiness and welfare of the major characters. Sometimes, through her efforts, a satisfactory solution to the problems of the plot was achieved. Evidently she drew patrons into the theater, for a number of playwrights found places for her in their dramas.

It was quite possibly the popularity attained by the Weird Sisters in Macbeth that inspired the use of witch-lore in a number of other Elizabethan plays. More than likely, too, Shakespeare's inclusion of the witch scenes in that great tragedy was something of an accident. It has been shown that he garnered his plot and the witches along with it from the Chronicle of Holinshed. Much of Shakespeare's greatness is due to his talent for imbuing even his minor characters with a believable vitality. Thus the three hideous creatures, whose meeting with Macbeth and Banquo on the Scottish heath
had been rather colorlessly reported by Holinshed, sprang to fearsome life under the creative touch of the master playwright. In order to make their direful prophecies credible, Shakespeare found it necessary to fashion the Weird Sisters after the pattern of the Elizabethan witch in whose malignant powers the majority of the theater patrons firmly believed. Therefore, the three prattled of familiars, charms, and nauseous brews. In the mind of the playgoer that conversation definitely marked them as the devil's own. Then when the witches foretold that Macbeth would become king of Scotland, the audience believed their prophecy more readily than did Macbeth himself. Thus, one of the chief functions of the Weird Sisters in the play is that of dramatic foreshadowing.

With their opening lines in the play, the three witches perform another task. At the close of that brief introductory scene, they chant in unison:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair.
Hover through the fog and filthy air.\(^1\)

Those lines act as a keynote for the sinister and bloody action to follow. To the Elizabethan, the witch was a symbol of evil, and the initial appearance of these hideous hags in Macbeth darkened the atmosphere with portentousness. For when the average sixteenth century Englishman witnessed anything that indicated that witches were abroad, Fear slunk close and greeted him intimately.

In addition to acting as evil portents and somber backdrops, the Weird Sisters have a definite task to perform in the plot development of Macbeth. It was their dark prophecies that fanned into blazing life the smoldering embers of Macbeth's henceforth uncontrollable ambition. It is, of course, impossible to determine definitely the degree of the witches' responsibility for the bloody means he chose to gain and keep the throne of Scotland. Probably his remorseless thirst for power would have driven him eventually to stumble upon the same path along which the Weird Sisters directed him. It is certain, however, that the admonition of the apparitions to be "bloody, bold, and resolute" did much to foster the confidence in his own invulnerability that precipitated his downfall.\(^2\) Therefore, when all this is taken into consideration, it must be conceded that, in spite of the comparative brevity of their roles, the Weird Sisters played an important part in the plot development of the tragedy.

It is difficult to analyze the importance of the role that witchcraft plays in *Henry VI, Part I*. Scarcely a reference is made to La Pucelle's league with the devil until after her capture by the English forces. Then she pleads with her familiars to aid her in escaping her enemies.\(^3\) She is, of course, burned as a witch. One somehow receives the

\(^2\)Ibid., IV. 1. 79-81.

impression that her connections with the nether regions are emphasized by the playwright in order to soothe English pride that the French Maid of Orleans has so successfully ruffled. In all fairness to Shakespeare, however, it must be remembered that he was only following historical records in dubbing Joan d'Arc a witch. Among the uses to which Elizabethan playwrights put witchcraft in their dramas, one must then list the soothing of outraged national pride.

Middleton’s hideous beldames serve little purpose in his play, The Witch, other than to cater to the growing demand for the dramatization of contemporary witch-lore. It is true that they aid slightly in the plot development of the drama by charming Antonio into impotence upon his wedding night in order that true love may triumph in the final act. However, their connections with the plot in general are so frail as to make possible the deletion of most of the scenes in which they appear without noticeably affecting the smoothness of the drama’s flow.

As has been shown, Middleton’s witches are in no wise products of his imagination. They are simply incarnations of all the crude fears and vulgar superstitions of the average Elizabethan villager. In fact, so eagerly does the playwright attempt to make his hags conform to the standards set up by tradition that he succeeds in making them quite incredible. He bestows vices upon them with so lavish a hand as to make them appear ridiculous. In short, the boldness of his strokes
and the garishness of his colors cause his portraits of sixteenth century witches to assume the proportions of caricatures.

Middleton's beldames do not claim for themselves the awesome talents of the Weird Sisters. They have in no way usurped the powers of the ancient gods. Theirs is largely an obscene but comparatively superficial type of wickedness. Hecate does boast of Stadlin's ability to raise tempests and of Hoppo's powers of wholesale destruction, but none of them offers to demonstrate her advertised talents. The witches that the villager's imagination conceived displayed their supernatural skills in exacting petty vengeance for fancied wrongs and concocting various potions to aid the purchaser in winning a maid or destroying an enemy. Middleton's witches did likewise. Regardless of their boasts, Hecate and her sisters were successful only in causing the impotence of Antonio. The love charm that they gave Almachildes was only moderately effective.

In The Witch, the scenes in which the hags appear are replete with obvious efforts to convince the patron of the theater that these are the witches of whose wicked intrigues and malignant powers he has heard all his life. Elizabethan witches were supposed to indulge in sexual debauches. The

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5 Ibid., II. 11.
conversation of Middleton's witches reeks with references to such obscene practices.\textsuperscript{6} Elizabethan witches were said to have familiars at their beck. Hecate and her motley crew possessed a number of these imps.\textsuperscript{7} The sixteenth century Englishman believed that witches anointed themselves and rode through the night air. Middleton devotes an entire scene to the flights of his hags.\textsuperscript{8} In The Witch, then, Middleton attempts to clothe in flesh the superstitious fears of the average playgoer.

In The Wise-woman of Hog'sdon, Thomas Heywood tries an entirely different approach to the subject of witchcraft. He discovers humorous possibilities in this apparently humorless topic. It is interesting to note the means he employs in order to develop the potential comedy in this hitherto fearsome field. In the first place, in order to circumvent the attitude of loathing which the Englishman of that day exhibited toward witches in general, the playwright finds it necessary to classify his leading character as a wise-woman. Then, since a person with supernatural skills is not a subject for laughter, he must needs characterize the woman as a merry old charlatan. And, if the Wise-woman of Hog'sdon can hardly be termed an altruistic soul, neither can she be regarded as a threat to the placidity of community life.

"Cozenage" was a term much used by the Elizabethan writer

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., I. 11. \textsuperscript{7}Ibid. \textsuperscript{8}Ibid., III. 111.
of comedy. It referred to the swindling activities of unscrupulous wretches who collected the fruits of another man's toil. This type of humor is based upon an elementary psychological principle. The audience detects a trick being played upon some gullible character in the drama and immediately bursts into laughter with a distinctly derisive tone. A person likes the smug feeling that comes from the conviction that his mental equipment is superior to that of his fellowman. He is oblivious to the fact that the playwright has gone to great pains to make evident the deception being practiced by the cozenor. The audience sees only a stupid lout being deceived by a trick that seems quite obvious. The patron is thus made to feel immensely satisfied with his own quality of perception and laughs condescendingly. The care with which Heywood makes apparent the deceptions practiced by the Wise-woman of Hogsdon shows that he is deliberately fostering this feeling of condescension in his audience. The old woman, at intervals, explains in detail the methods of cozenage she employs. Her instructions to her apprentice are certainly given for the enlightenment of the audience:

If any knock, you must go to the door and question them, to find what they come about—if to this purpose or that. Now they ignorantly telling thee their errand, which I sitting in my closet, over hear, presently come forth, and tell them the cause of their coming, with every word that hath passed betwixt you in private; which they admiring, and thinking it to be miraculous, by their report I become thus famous. 9

Naturally, the audience laughs heartily at the gullibility of the victims of the Wise-woman of Hogsdon, and Thomas Heywood may congratulate himself for successfully having thrust a pseudo witch into the role of comedian.

The authors of The Witch of Edmonton emphasize still another phase of the subject of witchcraft. Their drama presents the metamorphosis of Mother Sawyer from an embittered old woman into a full-fledged witch. As is often true of the beldames in other witch plays, the Witch of Edmonton has little or no effect upon the main plot of the play to which she has given a title. Since Rowley, Ford, and Dekker have merely dramatized the records of an actual witch trial, their characterization of Mother Sawyer is perhaps more credible than any similar effort by an Elizabethan dramatist. Oddly enough, too, their delineation of her personality is largely a sympathetic one. One can but pity the aged crone when she asks:

And why on me? Why should the envious world
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,
And like a bow buckled and bent together
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself.10

The Witch of Edmonton is unique, then, in that it suggests excuses for a witch’s wicked behavior, and portrays her character as being worthy of sympathy.

In his two dramatic efforts dealing with witchcraft, Ben

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10 William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, The Witch of Edmonton, II. i.
Jonson used the witch in two quite different capacities. In his pastoral, The Sad Shepherd, the playwright has thrust Maudlin, the wicked witch of Paplewick into the role of antagonist as a substitute for the conventional Faun or Satyr. All the ills that disturb the idyllic existence of the shepherds originate in Maudlin's evil brain. She is the traditional Elizabethan witch, greedy, malicious, envious, shriveled by the fires of her own petty hatreds. She steals the deer upon which the shepherds intended to feast, and with a mumbled curse causes the cook to be afflicted with a number of strange and painful maladies.\(^{11}\) She apparently possesses no powers not vouchsafed to the common English witch. Everything about her is quite conventional save the function she performs as antagonist in a pastoral.\(^{12}\)

In his Masque of Queens, Jonson presents the witch in still another guise. He portrays her as the personification of the various evils which work toward the destruction of human weal. The eleven hags who first wander into view from out of the smoke and flames of an offstage hell are the petty sins that tarnish the souls of men. They answer to the names of Ignorance, Suspicion, Credulity, Falsehood, Murmur, Malice, Impudence, Slander, Excretion, Bitterness, and Rage.\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\)Ben Jonson, The Sad Shepherd, II. ii.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., III. ii.

\(^{13}\)Ben Jonson, Works, edited by Francis Cunningham, III. 49.
in answer to their clamorings, their dame appears, we discover that she is not the conventional Hecate, but is greeted by the others as Ate or Mischief. The efforts of this evil crew to raise a destructive tempest are symbolic of the attempts of these wicked traits of character, whose names they bear, to mar the placidity of man's existence.

In summarizing, then, one may state that the authors of the witch plays exhibited little ingenuity in the delineation of their beldames' characters. In these dramas, no witch is presented whose counterpart cannot be found in the superstitious convictions of almost all sixteenth century Englishmen. The playwrights used their skill, however, in devising unusual roles and functions for the witches in their plays. Considerable versatility was demanded of the beldames in performing the tasks allotted them. The Weird Sisters stirred the ambitions of Macbeth and the curiosity of the audience with their prophecies. They aroused suspense with the cleverest type of dramatic foreshadowing. The condemnation of La Pucelle as a witch in Henry VI, Part I aids in healing English pride which has been rather sorely wounded in battles with an opponent who is not only successful but feminine and French. Middleton's hags serve little purpose in The Witch other than that of giving the playgoer the questionable satisfaction of seeing his superstitious fears personified. The Wise-woman of Hogadon exposes the covenage that is practiced by pseudo witches, for the chief character
in Heywood's play is a merry old charlatan who finds it profitable to let her customers believe that she has supernatural talents. Heywood has built a comedy around this exploitation of credulity. The Witch of Edmonton is different in that it presents the initiation and development of a witch and almost succeeds in explaining why old women enter into a league with the devil. Jonson's casting of the witch, Masudlin, in the role of antagonist in his pastoral, The Sad Shepherd, is unusual, and the same author puts witchcraft to still another use in the Masque of Queens, in which he offers the hags as hideous symbols of petty sins. It may be true that the witches in the Elizabethan drama were cast in a conventional mold, but the playwrights displayed considerable ingenuity in the functions that they required of the beldames in their plays.
CHAPTER V

WITCHES' BREWS IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

Of all the gruesome elements that composed the witch-lore of sixteenth century England, none seems to have excited the morbid interest of the credulous more than the ingredients that went into the witches' brews. The dark compacts with Satan that the beldames sealed with their own blood and the familiars which the hags called to aid them in their wicked pursuits evoked considerable comment, it is true. However, the recipes for the brews were usually elastic enough to permit each self-constituted authority on witch practices to add as many ingredients as his imagination supplied. The comparative efficacy of the various potions then furnished excellent material for debate.

It has been shown in previous chapters that in the witch scenes in the Elizabethan plays the writers conformed very closely to the conventional pattern of popular superstition. The patrons of the theater had definite ideas about witches and witch practices, and the work of the dramatists had to fit these standards. Only in the recipes for the hellish broths were the imaginations of the playwrights permitted any latitude, and even in these the scope was limited to embellishment. Each of the various ointments that the witches concocted
demanded the inclusion of certain elements. To these basic ingredients the ingenious author could add others of a quality to appease the morbid appetites of the play-goers. There seemed to be an unannounced contest between several of the popular playwrights to determine which could devise the most loathsome mixture.

Shakespeare was quite probably the first to make use of the preparation of the magic brew as a subject for dialogue. The Weird Sisters prepare a hellish mixture as part of the ritual necessary to arouse the apparitions who confront Macbeth.¹ One can find no recorded instance in which witches utilized a brew for a similar purpose. Ordinarily, an incantation was quite sufficient for calling up any desired imp or spirit. The plot of Macbeth, however, required no love potion or deadly poison, and, since Shakespeare needed the enumeration of various loathsome ingredients in order to add a sinister quality to the atmosphere before the entrance of Macbeth, the witches mixed the brew for an unusual function. Precedent or fact seldom won a conflict with Shakespeare's dramatic sense.

The items that go into the caldron are not limited by the traditions of witch-lore, since no authority in this field gives a recipe for such a magical concoction. Most of the components of the brew are evidently products of the

¹William Shakespeare, Macbeth, IV. i. 4-38.
playwright's imagination, but the fact that they are all thoroughly appropriate is another example of Shakespeare's genius. Among the ingredients he listed which are not mentioned in any of the several accepted compendiums of witch magic are: the eye of a newt, the wool of a bat, scale of a dragon, witches' mummy, maw of a shark, the liver of a blaspheming Jew, nose of a Turk, and a Tartar's lips. As concessions to popular beliefs, the playwright adds: a toad's poison, finger of a birth-strangled babe, root of hemlock secured in the dark, the adder's fork, lizard's leg, and owlet's wing. Thus the brew was conventional enough to be convincing and unusual enough to impress the audience.

As was shown in the chapter devoted to the probable sources consulted by the playwrights before producing their witch scenes, Middleton gathered most of the material for the speeches of Hecate and her sisters from the *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Certainly the author of *The Witch* displayed a startling lack of originality in his enumeration of the ingredients used by the beldames in the preparation of their ointments and poisons. With the omission or insertion of scarcely a single item he adheres to the recipes as given by Scot. The brews are also designed for the two conventional purposes of poisoning a selected individual and permitting the witches to fly. As has been stated, Hecate and her evil

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\(^2\text{Tbid.}\)
crew are simply personifications of popular Elizabethan superstitions, and thus it is to be expected that their brews would conform to the accepted standards for the appurtenances of their craft.

A perusal of the list of ingredients used by the witches for their magic broths leads to some interesting inferences. The nauseating quality of the majority of the substances mentioned is, of course, to be expected as being in harmony with the loathsome practices attributed to witches. Much emphasis is laid upon the belief that the beldames used human flesh, particularly that of infants, in some of their hideous rituals. That ghoulish touch was to be expected, for grave robbing, or even cannibalism, is no worse than other hideous pursuits in which the devil's own were supposed to indulge. Each playwright that dwells upon the contents of the caldron, lists among the repulsive elements some part of a corpse. In Macbeth, Shakespeare uses two such portions; the liver of a blaspheming Jew and the finger of a birth-strangled babe are both called for by the Weird Sisters as they prepare their concoction for the summoning of the apparitions.3 The seventh hag in The Masque of Queens boasts in her report to her dame:

A murderer yonder was hung in chains,
The sun and the wind had shrunk his veins;
I bit off a sinew; I clipped his hair,
I brought off his rags that danced i' the air.4

3Ibid.
Middleton has one scene in which Hecate hands Stadlin the
corpse of an unbaptized infant with the admonition to pre-
serve the fat after the body was boiled. 5 One of Scot's
recipes calls for the fat of children boiled with water in a
brass vessel. 6 From the fact that it is mentioned as a part
of every brew one might infer that some portion of human
flesh was essential to the potency of the witches' prepara-
tions.

Several other substances may be regarded as basic, for
they are listed in the formulas used by the witches in sev-
eral different plays. Both hemlock and adders' tongues are
alluded to by the Weird Sisters in Macbeth 7 and by the ninth
hag in The Masque of Queens. 8 Mandrake is mentioned as a
desirable ingredient by Jonson 9 and Middleton. 10 One may
suggest safely, however, that these elements appear in the
efforts of several different playwrights largely because they
were sufficiently rare or repulsive to make them peculiarly
appropriate in the dialogue of witches. Aside from the poi-
sonous qualities of mandrake and hemlock, these ingredients
possess no significant properties that would be useful in
supernatural pursuits.

7 William Shakespeare, Macbeth, IV. 1. 16, 25.
8 Ben Jonson, Works, edited by Francis Cunningham, III, 51.
9 Ibid., 50. 10 Middleton, op. cit., III. 111.
An excellent example of Ben Jonson's skill in creating the atmosphere he desires for a certain scene is to be found in that portion of *The Masque of Queens* wherein the eleven hags report to their dame on their success in securing the necessary ingredients for a tempest-raising brew. The playwright is particularly skillful in blending the products of his imagination with the conventional substances designated as essential to such brews in witch-lore. By the use of this clever combination, Jonson succeeds in lending a touch of realism to this scene while he evades the triteness of which Middleton is guilty in similar circumstances. For instance, one can find no authority who lists among the essential elements in witches' broths such things as a mad dog's foam, an adder's ears, and the spurgering of a dead man's eyes, but one must confess that these unsavory ingredients possess the same qualities found in the substances frequently included in such recipes.\(^{11}\) The same statement can be made concerning Shakespeare's inclusion of such elements as a Tartar's lips, the scale of a dragon, and the blood of a baboon in the Weird Sisters' revolting brew.\(^{12}\)

It is of course, readily apparent to the student of witchcraft that the ingredients mentioned above do not possess any attributes capable of giving to the brews in which they


were used any of the powers claimed for them by the superstitious. This is not necessarily true, however, of some of the herbs listed by both Scot and Middleton as components of the famous flying ointment. It is difficult to believe that all the stories concerning the night flights of witches and their adventures upon these jaunts have absolutely no factual basis. One cannot but be impressed by the similarity of these narratives of aerial wanderings by witches and the sensations of a person while under the influence of a drug. An examination of the recipe for the ointment used by beldames in their preparation for such flights brings to light the fact that *solanum somniferum*, or belladonna, was included in the list of essential ingredients. After a generous application of this ointment, Hecate and her group actually fly in one scene of *The Witch*.13 Middleton always shows a tendency to interpret witch-lore literally.

There is no greater skeptic concerning witchcraft than Reginald Scot. He subjects to merciless ridicule a great part of the practices in which witches are popularly supposed to indulge. He laughs to scorn the superstitions concerning familiars and a compact between the beldames and Satan. With cold logic he attempts to assault the credulity of his fellow-men. Yet he does not discard as entirely without foundation the belief that witches can travel through the air with the

13 Middleton, *op. cit.*, III. iii.
aid of their ointments. On the contrary, he suggests that the witches themselves may be deluded in this case. After giving in detail the instructions for the preparation of this potent oil, he continues:

They stampe all these together, and then they rubbe all parts of their bodies exceedinglie, till they looke red, and be verie hot, so as the pores may be opened, and their flesh soluble and loose. They joine herewith all either fat, or oile in steed thereof, that the force of the ointment maie the rather pearse inwardly, and so be more effectuall. By this means (saith he) in a moone light night they seem to be carried in the aire, to feasting, singing, dancing, kising, culling, and other acts of venerie, with such youthes as they love and desire most.14

One is impressed by the casual suggestion that this particular phase of witchcraft may actually be an hallucination of the participants brought on by the effect of the drug absorbed through the pores of the body. Strength is given to this inference when one remembers that one of the ingredients of the ointment is belladonna. Again, in discussing the report of one Danaeus concerning the bawdy behavior of the beldames at one of their assemblies with the devil presiding, Scot states:

In these matters they doo but dreame, and doo not those things indeed, which they confesse through their distemperature, growing of their melancholike humor: and therefore. . . these things, which they report of themselves, are but meere illusions.15

Such a theory of the aerial antics of witches is worthy of comment when advanced by the skeptical Scot. A quotation from the writings of King James, the most credulous of all

14Scot, op. cit., p. 105.  
15Ibid., p. 25.
witchmongers, demonstrates that Scot, who toyed with the conception, was not alone. In the *Demonologie* we find this admission: "And some sayeth, that their bodies lying stil in extasy, their spirits wil be rauished out of their bodies, and carried to such places." Of course, no absolute proof of the soundness of this theory is likely to be discovered. That is unfortunate, because such confirmation would furnish a real nucleus for the huge mass of superstitions related to witchcraft. In any case, even the supposition lends considerable significance to the witches' brews.

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16King James I, *Demonologie in Forme of a Dialogue*, p. 27.
CONCLUSION

The fact that the belief in witchcraft approached universality during so comparatively enlightened a period as the Elizabethan age may be regarded as one of the paradoxes of history. But if the superstition itself was somewhat incongruous, its complicated trappings were singularly appropriate in an era that placed a premium upon elaborateness in everything including dress and speech. Witchcraft stripped of its appurtenances was simple enough. An old woman, motivated by greed or a desire for vengeance, gave her soul to the devil in return for certain malignant powers. Upon that bare foundation the credulity of the sixteenth century Englishman erected a towering structure of kindred superstitions. To aid her in her nefarious pursuits the beldame must needs have a retinue of familiars, imps who usually assumed the form of such unprepossessing creatures as toads and weasels. With their assistance and with the use of certain charms, incantations, and noxious brews, the witch was able to engage in a wide variety of destructive activities that ranged from arousing the elements to such ridiculous feats as causing a sow to cast her young prematurely. She could, at will, impoverish, maim, or slay those who incurred her displeasure. It follows that she was regarded with a smoldering resentment which sometimes flared into a mass hysteria that consumed her.
Quite naturally, anything that affected the public as strongly as did the belief in witchcraft would leave its imprint upon the literature of the period. Thus it is not surprising to find that at least twelve Elizabethan dramas show in a marked degree the influence of the superstitions concerning witches. In some of the plays, it is true, the witches do little more than lend a sinister note to the atmosphere or add to the dramatic suspense by direful predictions concerning the future of the major characters. In most of the dramas, however, the authors have made generous use of the witch-lore of their age, thus reflecting faithfully one rather important phase of Elizabethan life. Five of William Shakespeare's plays depict or suggest some aspect of witchcraft: Macbeth; Henry VI, Part I; Henry VI, Part II; The Merry Wives of Windsor; and The Tempest. Only in Macbeth, however, does this playwright attempt to delineate his witches in sharp detail. The Wise-woman of Hogsdon and The Late Lancashire Witches are Thomas Heywood's dramatizations of witch-lore; in the last named play he collaborated with Richard Brome. Ben Jonson made generous use of similar material in The Sad Shepherd and The Masque of Queens. In The Witch, Middleton adheres closely to the pattern of the belles-dames as set up by the superstitious but unimaginative English villager. John Lyly touches upon another phase of the belief in witchcraft in Mother Bombie. The old wise-woman in that drama is much revered for her helpfulness and altruism, two
qualities almost unknown to witches. The effort in this field by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*, is merely a dramatization of a famous witch trial. It does offer a restrained and plausible characterization of an Elizabethan witch that is worthy of praise.

In most instances it is a comparatively simple task to discover the original patterns for the witches that appear in the casts of the plays enumerated. Shakespeare dipped frequently into Holinshed's *Chronicles* for his plots and characters, and this work is undoubtedly the source of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, La Pucelle in *Henry VI, Part I*, and Margety Jourdain in *Henry VI, Part II*. Basically the activities of these witches are the same in the dramas as those related in the *Chronicles*. In the case of the Weird Sisters the playwright's talent for character delineation shrinks each of those originally awesome creatures to the stature of the vulgar English witch, thus making their prophecies completely believable as far as the audience was concerned. However, in his attempts to convict Joan d'Arc of being in league with Satan, Shakespeare is but following Holinshed's example. *The Witch of Edmonton* is largely a dramatization of the testimony offered at the trial of Mother Sawyer in 1621. The records of a similar trial held in Lancashire in 1633 furnished most of the material for *The Late Lancashire Witches*, topical drama by Heywood and Brome. Middleton's tragicomedy, *The Witch*, bears no such stamp of
authenticity, however. The beldames in this drama are simply the personification of the conglomerate fears and superstitions of the average sixteenth century Englishman. For the material for his witch scenes Middleton borrowed so generously from Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* as almost to merit the stigma of plagiarism. The playwright, in some instances, scarcely troubled to edit the information thus acquired, occasionally quoting it verbatim. Ben Jonson's talents permitted him to exercise more finesse in the use of his sources. Much of the knowledge of witch-lore he displays so ostentatiously in *The Masque of Queens* is quite probably garnered from Scot also. Jonson, however, is attempting to gain the favor of King James I, and since that witch-hating monarch considers Scot a rank heretic, Jonson acknowledges in his copious footnotes no indebtedness to *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* for any of the witch-lore used in *The Masque of Queens*.

The witch is assigned a variety of roles in the dramas in which she appears. In *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Wise-woman of Hogadon* she is quite helpful in unraveling the tangled threads of the plots. Although her motives in the latter play are a bit mercenary, she earns the gratitude of all concerned. On the other hand, Hecate and her sisters in *The Witch* are an evil and obscene crew, but, although they boast frequently of their destructive powers, they actually accomplish very little in the way of plot development. The
Weird Sisters serve a double purpose in *Macbeth*. They strike a sinister keynote upon their first appearance. Moreover, the prophecies they utter are a clever combination of portentous atmosphere and dramatic foreshadowing. Jonson uses witches in two unusual capacities. Maudlin, the witch of Papplewick, acts as an antagonist in the pastoral, *The Sad Shepherd*. The twelve hags in *The Masque of Queens* serve as symbols of the petty sins that beset the souls of men. Heywood undertakes a really difficult task when he attempts to make the Wise-woman of Hogsdon a comedian. He effects this purpose with some skill.

The recipes for the various nauseous brews concocted by the witches and used in their evil pursuits contain certain basic ingredients enumerated by Scot in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. The imaginations of the playwrights supplied other elements, appropriately hideous. One is inclined to class all these broths in the same category with other ridiculous superstitions concerning witchcraft. But a close perusal of the recipe for the ointment used by the witches for their night flying reveals that one of the ingredients is belladonna. This might, when properly applied, cause hallucinations. The witches' confessions concerning their aerial jaunts are often startlingly reminiscent of the illusions of drug addicts. Both King James I, the ardent believer in witchcraft, and Scot, the skeptic, admit that the witches might believe they were floating through the clouds when, in
reality, they were lying in a trance. Since these facts and statements indicate some basis for Elizabethan ideas concerning the witches' brews, perhaps there is a nucleus of plausibility in other seemingly ridiculous beliefs concerning witches.

One gathers, then, that the superstitions concerning witchcraft and all of its ramifications played an important part in the life of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Englishman. Naturally these superstitions would find their way into the drama of the period. It should not be forgotten that the primary purposes of the Elizabethan playwrights were to attract patrons to the theater and to entertain them. The public was intensely interested in the activities of witches, and so witches performed their dark rites upon the Elizabethan stage.
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