

“A Witch? Who is Not?”: Engendering Witchcraft on the Shakespearean Stage

By

Caroline Porter

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Department of English and Comparative Literature
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INTRODUCTION

Modern conceptions of the witch bring up the stereotypical images of broomsticks and cauldrons, cackling older woman with warts and pointed hats. If we introduce the name Shakespeare into the stereotypical imagination of the witch, our minds immediately go to the Weird Sisters with their portentous prophecies, witch's brew, and oft-quoted lines ("By the pricking of my thumbs/Something wicked this way comes" [4.1.44-45]).

In reality, the true witches of early modern England find little in common with the preternaturally powerful Weird Sisters. They were most often the poorest, oldest women of the village, the ones who lacked familial and financial support and were thus a burden upon their communities. Keith Thomas proposes that these women "were the most dependent members of the community, and thus the most vulnerable to accusation" (568), while Karen Newman characterizes them as "disorderly or unruly women" who operated outside of the patriarchal structure and "transgressed cultural codes of femininity" (56).

Of course, early modern scholars and religious figures who were thinking and writing about witchcraft at this time were not nearly as concerned as modern scholars with regard to the "women question"¹ of witchcraft. The reason women were most often witches is, as King James' character Epistemon remarks in *Daemonologie*, "easie, for as that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill" (35). That is to say, women were commonly considered to be both physiologically and mentally inferior to men. The notoriously misogynistic witchcraft treatise the *Malleus Maleficarum* confirms this notion, reasoning that "since they are defective in all the powers of both soul and body, it is not surprising that they

¹ As Deborah Willis terms it (11)

cause more acts of sorcery to happen” (164). Both King James and the authors of the *Malleus* go on to cite the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, for the very nature of Eve being formed from Adam’s bent rib makes her both subordinate to him and inherently imperfect.² Even among thinkers skeptical of the power of witches, the dismissal of their capacities was still rooted in misogyny. Reginald Scot described the feminine body as “more weake and fraile than the masculine, and much more subject to melancholie” (30). This sort of tacit misogyny was the norm; and thus, the question of why so many witches were women was a non-issue, relegated to the realm of “not surprising” and not worth particular consideration.

More concerning to these early modern scholars was how and from where these women obtained their preternatural power, or whether that power even existed at all. Skeptics such as Reginald Scot were convinced that these “old, lame, bleare-eied...poor, sullen, superstitious” (5) women actually possessed no true power. They were simply “miserable wretches” (5) who were “so odious unto all their neighbors and so feared, as few dare offend them...[that the women] sometimes thinke that they can doo such things as are beyond the abiltie of humane nature” (5-6). To Scot, these women were deluded, melancholic women who had been convinced by their neighbors and themselves that they had power. More superstitious scholars such as Johann Weyer acknowledged the work of the devil within witchcraft, but only so far in that the devil,

with subtlety and inimitable cunning...mocks and deludes these instruments of his who incline toward his promptings, these poor feeble-minded, bewitched, and idle women, whom he so maddens that—twice wretched!—they falsely believe (at the suggestion of this evil counselor of theirs) that they themselves have done all the things he puts into their imagination, or all the evils that have been committed by him (or even by human beings) with God’s secret permission (106).

² Kramer follows with “From this defect there also arises the fact that since she is an imperfect animal, she is always deceiving, and for this reason she is always deceptive” (165).

Weyer's witch has no true power herself—it is all derived from the Devil. Despite the skepticism of Scot and Weyer, there were numerous witchcraft believers who were convinced that these old women possessed some preternatural influence over others. Detangling the discussion of witchcraft from more academic debates, we can determine the common understanding of the village witch and the source of her powers through cheap print, in pamphlets that detailed scandalous accounts of real witchcraft trials. Most pamphleteers considered the witches to possess a true preternatural power, though the origin of this power was still ultimately attributed to the Devil or the witch's familiar(s). The Devil of the pamphlets was often characterized as “exceedingly crafty” and “always laboring to seduce” (Gibson 162). The pamphleteer Thomas Purfoot notes that the Devil “hath devised to entangle and snare mens soules withall, unto damnation” (160-161), stressing here the common idea that God allowed witchcraft to occur in order to weed out those prone to sin (162). The women the Devil seduced became his “agents,” carrying out his malevolent deeds in his stead. As the pamphleteer Edward White succinctly puts it, “the Witche beareth the name, but the devil dispatcheth the deedes, without hym the Witche can contrive no mischief” (34).

Early modern thinkers rarely subscribed to the idea that the women's bodies or minds—though imperfect, frail, and susceptible to *maleficium*—could actually exercise power. That is not to say that the women were considered entirely powerless, for many early modern natural philosophers indicated that woman possessed an inherent, sympathetic magic. The body could form sympathetic connections with other people, objects, and animals through emitted invisible vapors. These vapors were most often malevolent, considered to be tangible manifestations of the person's negative emotions (Floyd-Wilson, 47). Cruentation is a good nongendered example of this: the bodies of murder victims were said to bleed when in the presence of their murderers,

physically displaying their guilt (49). In *Richard the Third*, King Henry VI's corpse begins to bleed in the presence of Richard, causing Lady Anne to cry out "Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity,/For 'tis thy presence that exhales this blood" (1.2.59-60). However, natural phenomena such as this were not necessarily gender exclusive. One notable exception is the phenomenon of fascination, in which children were sickened by older woman who were said to weaponize their emotions of hatred by revenge via the emission of "malevolent rays" from their eyes (Floyd-Wilson 51).

My main point of establishing that there were generally no strong beliefs in preternatural feminine influence is to emphasize the main locus of power that women's bodies possessed: the womb. As Mary Fissell extensively discusses in her book on the status of the womb in early modern England, the start of the seventeenth century marked dramatic change in perceptions of the womb: "No longer was the womb the bringer of life; instead, it was the source of many women's maladies" (53). It was characterized as temperamental, overactive, and incredibly dangerous to a woman's health. Physician William Harvey details this perception,

the *Womb* being unmindefull of his *function*, many mischiefs do befall the Body in general: because the *Womb* is a principal part, which doth easily draw the *whole body* into consent with it. No man (who is but never so litle versed in such matters) is ignorant, what grievous *Symptomes*, the Rising, Bearing down, and Perversion, and Convulsion of the *Womb* do excite; what horrid extravagancies of minde, what Phrensies, Melancholy Distempers, and Outragiousness, the *praeternatural Diseases* of the *Womb* do induce, as if the affected Persons were enchanted (501-2).

Importantly, Harvey here also links the womb with preternatural phenomena: he likens the womb to some sort of witch-figure, able to enchant and curse its body to illness. Further characterizing the womb as a space of anxiety and fear, the advent of cheap print produced numerous accounts of infanticidal mothers, women birthing monsters, and strange womb-based illnesses. Women,

though perceived to be the frailer, weaker sex in early modern England, nevertheless possessed a fearful, volatile power through their wombs.

In regards to feminine power and the womb, it is equally important to my thesis to address why some women were labelled witches while others were simply called bad women or whores. I argue that much of the distinction was rooted in the classification of the bodies of these women. As I will discuss later in my chapter on Lady Macbeth, the womb represented a source of volatile feminine power and the possession of a fertile vs. non-fertile womb functioned as a means by which to codify feminine evil. Motherhood was perceived as a “special vocation” for women, and their reproductive capabilities heavily informed their social and domestic value (Willis 67). For women of procreative age, reproductivity was essential; moreover, it was a continued source of both male and female anxiety. Fertile women were characterized as whores if they bore children out of wedlock or children with questionable paternity (Crawford and Mendelson 148). Unmarried, poor women who were suspected of infanticide or who had procured abortions were characterized as “lewd and unnaturall,” and they were labelled whores just as often as the woman who birthed and kept their children (Gouge 507). On the other hand, barrenness was identified as “an unhappy female condition, perhaps even, as the Bible suggested, punishment for sin” (Crawford and Mendelson 150). Post-menopausal women, conversely, possessed bodies that were physiologically incapable of reproduction and thus “in effect encode[d] maternal rejection of the human child” (Willis 33). Their bodies were, by nature of their sterility, perversely anti-maternal, which made them especially predisposed to being accused of harming those bodies of children and fertile women who were most often witchcraft’s victims (58-59). Likewise, these women’s incapability of fulfilling the socially-prescribed role of

their gender made them a financial burden on the community, rendering the benefits of accusing them of witchcraft—and thus ridding the community of its burden—all the more appealing.

In the first chapter, I attempt to ground my discussion in the female body by analyzing the ways in which William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* defines witchcraft as a socially-localized occurrence that is rooted in the disordered and disorderly female body. It should be noted that Rowley, Dekker, and Ford penned *The Witch of Edmonton* sometime around 1621, so that it was written around fifteen years after the two later Shakespeare plays I discuss.³ I chose to include this work and make it the first chapter of my discussion precisely because of its more retrospective nature. The 1620s marked a turning point for witchcraft—criminal trials for witchcraft sharply declined around this time. While the reasons for this are various and nuanced—changes in scientific and philosophical beliefs, rising anxieties towards evidence-based proof, and a decline judge's willingness to take these sorts of cases can all be cited as potential reasons—the denouement in the number of trials created at least a small measure of distance from which these playwrights could critically examine and comment upon the witchcraft craze (Thomas 570-83). Thus, the play itself is attempting to accomplish many of the things I wish to do with this thesis, namely figuring out what determines a witch-figure and where witch power is located. The play does not shy away from inviting the audience to consider all of the possibilities of witchcraft that I have outlined above, from social construct, to women who possess true preternatural power, to the foolish old women who have been duped by the devil. Likewise, *The Witch of Edmonton* provides a wonderful template for “reading” witchcraft into Shakespeare's works where its presence is not always as overt. Mother Sawyer is intentionally presented as the most stereotypical iteration of the witch—old, poor,

³ Both *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are said to have been written before or around 1606.

female, and without familial or other social connections—and thus functions well as a paragon of witchcraft when analyzing more non-traditional witch-figures.

In the next chapter, I move into the realm of Shakespearean texts by analyzing the ways in which Lady Macbeth's attempts to negotiate power are grounded in the perversion of the fertile feminine body. I discuss how anxieties towards Macbeth's political bid for power and Lady Macbeth's alienation from her socially-prescribed role as the mother to Macbeth's heirs leads the queen to purposefully pervert her fertile body. By characterizing her body as infertile and inviting "spirits" to alter it, she aims to gain preternatural feminine power in a deviant attempt to provide Macbeth with 'reproductive' aid in his political maneuverings. By repurposing her womb as a site of the preternaturally maternal, Lady Macbeth attempts to embody the role of the 'good' upper-class wife even whilst the Macbeths remain heirless.

In the final two chapters, I turn our discussion away from women and the disordered feminine body and look instead at the disordered male body. I examine both King Lear and Richard the Third through early modern perceptions of witchcraft, tracking the ways in which their physical bodies—Richard's as deformed, Lear's as decrepit and aged—predispose these men to adapting the feminine mode of witchspeak. By analyzing these two male characters, I hope to show that Shakespeare recognizes that men, too, when placed in socially and politically marginalized roles, can embody the social role of witch.⁴ Unable to access more masculine modes of political and physical power, both Lear and Richard attempt to reestablish and negotiate patriarchal structures by manipulating witchcraft discourse and co-opting the feminine weapon of witchspeak. Both men introduce the concept of witchcraft into their respective plays

⁴ I believe that this is particularly true when this marginalization comes from physical deformity.

and at times (be it inadvertently or intentionally) cast themselves in the role of witch, even while the overt labelling of their behavior as witchcraft is foregone by Shakespeare.

Perhaps most fascinating about turning the discussion towards men is the discovery that despite attempts to gain distance from the feminine, this male co-optation of witchcraft is still very much rooted in female physiology, specifically the womb. My discussion of the conception of the “male witch” is entirely dependent upon my primary discussion of the womb as the locus of witchcraft discourse. Richard himself is the product of the unruly womb—his mother, the Duchess of York, is blamed for Richard’s evil nature, her womb characterized as a “bed of death” (4.1.57). She bemoans the fact that she did not smother him in the womb when she had the chance, thus also flavoring her feminine transgression as avoidable only through the alternative feminine evil of infanticide. Richard’s continual association with monstrous birth thus links his deformity and his evil nature to his origins in the womb, casting the blame just as much on his mother as on himself. Likewise, Lear identifies the womb as the root of his social and political marginalization. He curses Goneril to infertility when he cries, “Into her womb convey sterility. / Dry up in her the organs of increase” (1.4.292-293) and he considers Regan’s filial disobedience as plausible evidence that his late wife was an “adulteress” (2.4.148). At the same time that Lear curses the womb and casts himself as the witch, he also manages to identify himself as a victim of witchcraft, citing his own imagined unruly womb (“O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio!” [2.4.62-63]) as evidence for witchcraft. When fashioning himself as both witch and witch-victim, Lear locates feminine evil in the contentious nature of the womb as both life-giving and life-threatening.

The main goal of my thesis is to examine the ways in which expressions of early modern witchcraft can be nontraditionally read into Shakespearean works. I hope to stress how

witchcraft, while rooted in the feminine body, is not a practice exclusively performed by the old poor widow women who are commonly associated with it. As the witch of Edmonton herself recognizes, “A witch? Who is not? / Hold not that universal name in scorn then” (4.1.104-105). Reading witchcraft into Shakespeare’s work in nontraditional ways allows the analysis and discussion of witchcraft in the period to break away from the gendered construct it is often relegated to. I hope to emphasize that men, too, can be vulnerable to a marginalized discourse that shares many similarities with witchcraft. By tracking this discourse in Shakespeare’s works, we can further see how witchcraft thinking and language permeates the writing on more than just a superficial level, often shaping social and political conflict and struggles for power in telling ways.

“This ruined cottage”: Witchcraft and the Repurposing of the Aged Body in *The Witch of Edmonton*

In order to nontraditionally read witchcraft into early modern texts, I think it is important to first identify what constitutes a traditional witchcraft situation as a sort of ‘home base’ to refer back to. I would be hard-pressed to think of a better contemporary work to utilize than *The Witch of Edmonton*, which features a witch-figure, Mother Sawyer, who is simultaneously a stereotypical rendering of a witch as well as a figure who proves incredibly self-aware of her marginalized position. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which witchcraft offers Mother Sawyer a means to repurpose her post-menopausal body, which is deemed irrelevant and obnoxious to her community. Through witchcraft, Sawyer gains not only power but also newfound bodily agency within her perversely maternal relationship with Dog, her familiar. Sawyer ultimately uses this bodily purpose and authority to negotiate social relevance and find a niche within her community where she otherwise holds no place.

Sawyer’s position within her community can be considered the worst position for a woman to occupy—she is husbandless, childless, and poor, circumstances that would have garnered the bare minimum of monetary aid, just enough to keep her alive (Crawford and Mendleson 193). Her womb is no longer valuable as a source of production, nor has it seemingly produced any children that could offer her financial aid or housing in her later years. While the real Elizabeth Sawyer of Goodcole’s pamphlet was married,⁵ the playwrights notably decide to

⁵ Goodcole questions Sawyer with: “...tell the reason, why you did not reveale it to your husband, or to some other friend?” (Gibson 311).

portray their Mother Sawyer as unmarried and presumably childless. Her title of “Mother” comes from her old age alone, and it also carries its own tinge of irony. While she socially should be respected as a ‘Mother’ to the community, a role that many old women capitalized upon in order to maintain social relevancy and charitable aid, Sawyer finds herself on the outskirts of society, due to her status as nothing but a case of need. To the community, she is simply a decrepit body that requires maintenance.

Due to her marginalized status as a poor, older woman without familial ties, Sawyer is turned into a body vulnerable to abuse and degradation rather than one of potential growth and nourishment, as we might consider to be true of the bodies of fertile women by early modern perceptions. When the character Old Banks discovers Sawyer gathering up rotten sticks for firewood in his yard, he threatens her with physical violence, warning her that if she does not leave his property he will “make thy / Bones rattle in thy skin else” (2.1.21-22). Aside from the fact that Banks’ threat mirrors that of the witch’s curse, an utterance that corroborates Sawyer’s claims that the men of the community “teach [her] how to be one [a witch]” (2.1.10), we can also see in Banks’ words a corporeal categorization of Mother Sawyer as a physical body. To Banks, she is nothing but bones and skin, a waste of body that is subsequently worthy of physical abuse. In contrast to Banks’ ominous threat, Sawyer’s own curses and threats of physical violence feel comparatively impotent. Later when Banks actually enacts his threat of physical violence (The stage direction in one transcription reads: *[Beats her and exit.]*), we as audience members are presented with a very real act of violence upon an old, feminine body that Sawyer herself describes as “deformed” and “like a bow buckled and bent together.” As Sarah Johnson notes “the stark juxtaposition of Sawyer’s words with Banks’s blows in this terribly unbalanced conversation would be all the more obvious and startling with the sounds and sights of

performance” (73). I would suggest even further that the physical embodiment of the characters—the stark contrast of Sawyer’s decrepit, weak body against Banks’ masculine, physically capable one—would have underscored the powerlessness of her body and her subsequent complete societal marginalization.

While Sawyer herself is presented as a hated nuisance in the community of Edmonton, Old Banks and the other men of the town should also be viewed as socially dysfunctional due to their choice not to aid Mother Sawyer. An old female body, unable to bear and raise children or work a trade, was considered the community’s responsibility. The men with authority should support an aging woman with no connections: such women typically relied on their parish and the kindness of neighbors simply to meet their bare needs for survival. However, as Crawford and Mendelson have noted, “charitable relief also kept women in a more dependent situation than men” (180). Their moral conduct was under close observation, and any behavior deemed inappropriate could be cause the local community to revoke funds or label these women as witches. This was particularly true in the 17th century, when economic and social changes resulted in a greater number of older women and widows dependent upon charity, as well as when inversely changing attitudes towards charitable responsibility resulted in communities being either incapable or unwilling to support those in need of charity (Clark 107). We can see this drawn out to even its most preposterous, heartbreaking conclusion—Old Banks will not even allow Sawyer to gather rotting sticks on his property with which to warm herself.

Sawyer herself recognizes these attitudes towards her burdensome existence. She refers to herself as “shunn’d / And hated like a sickness” (2.1.98-99), likening her being to a physical illness infecting her community. However, Sawyer also turns her critical eye towards society itself—she recognizes the failures of her community when she delivers an impassioned speech to

Sir Arthur and others at the end of the play, further highlighting changing attitudes towards the old and indigent in early modern society. “Reverence once,” she says, “Had wont to wait on age; now an old woman, / Ill-favoured grown with years, if she be poor, / Must be called a bawd or witch” (4.1.123-126). Sawyer observes that the concept of the “old woman” itself has grown into something worth hatred and annihilation.

This dysfunctional system of withheld charity inevitably leads Mother Sawyer to question and abject her own obsolete feminine body. “Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant/...Must I for that be made a common sink / For all the filth and rubbish of men’s tongues / To fall and run into?” she questions in her opening soliloquy (2.1.3-8). The label of “common sink” connotes a likening to a public sewage system, a metaphor that carried implications for early modern individuals, particularly physicians who chose to write about women’s bodies. Nicolaas Fonteyn, the same physician who linked the necessity of a womb to a woman’s status as an idle homemaker, directly compares the womb to a sewer when he calls it a “common shoore of the body, where most of the excrements are exonerated” (147). In his pamphlet on womb sickness, Edward Jorden likewise depicts the womb’s primary function as that of excretion, calling it a “fountain” for the superfluities of the female body (1). For these writers, the womb was viewed not as life-giving and miraculous, but as a sewer for the “grosse and superfluous bloud” that women were much more apt to produce (Fonteyn 122).

It follows then that a post-menopausal women’s womb was even more vile than that of a menstruating woman and much more prone to being viewed as a site of sickness. Fonteyn himself notes that “wives are more healthfull then Widowes, or Virgins, because they are refreshed with man’s seed, and ejaculate their own, which being exluced, the cause of the evil is taken away” (4), suggesting that both the absence of a male sexual partner and the cessation of

menstruation cause women's wombs, and subsequently the rest of the women's bodies, to breed illness. According to Fonteyn and other contemporary male physicians, the imperfect nature of the woman's body itself as responsible for the production of noxious substances that the uterus must subsequently expel. Likewise, the male body's intervention within a women's body via ejaculation as a healthy, purifying thing. The male seed refreshes the women's imperfect body, bringing her back to physical and subsequently mental health.

In her soliloquy, Sawyer seems to challenge and subvert this claim. She cites the impure "filth and rubbish" occupying her sink not as the "feculent and corrupt" menstrual blood, the physical product of her feminine body, but rather as "men's tongues" themselves, suggesting that the masculine body is sickening rather than restorative. It is this identification of the masculine tongue with excrement that makes her desirous of the powers of the witch—if she can obtain tangible power, she will no longer be subject to the castigation of men and the subsequent transformation of her body into a proverbial "social sewer" for their words.

Sawyer, much like Lady Macbeth asking to be "fill[ed] from the crown to the toe-top full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.49-50), attempts to negotiate the accrual of power via the perversion of her feminine body. However, unlike Lady Macbeth, who seeks to make her functional womb sterile, Mother Sawyer identifies her body as a "ruined cottage," (2.1.109) suggesting that she, like the men of her community, views her body and womb as a vessel past its prime. The cottage connotes the idea that something *should* be dwelling inside Mother Sawyer, most logically a child, but that the house of her body itself is unfit for habitation. She envisions her body as subsequently "ready to fall with age" (2.1.109), implying that her abandoned house has no true purpose for existing within her community.

Further abjecting her body, which she perceives as socially useless, Sawyer proposes that she will “go out of [herself]” if a spirit so wished to occupy her body (2.1.107). The idea of Sawyer wishing to abjure her physical body in the name of revenge could be perceived by audiences and readers as excessive and demonic, but Sawyer reminds us that this desire does not truly change the way in which her body is currently being used and abused. She calls Old Banks “this black cur, / That barks and bites, and sucks the very blood / Of me and of my credit” (2.1.114-116), anticipating a comparison with the familiar, Dog, who will appear to her immediately after she finishes uttering her demonic appeal. In Sawyer’s current marginalized social position, she recognizes that her body is already performing a physical labor for Old Banks—it is he, not her familiar, whom she initially perceives as biting and sucking her as a child would at his mother’s breast. In this way, her claim that “’Tis all one / To be a witch as to be counted one” (2.1.116-117) holds validity, as she faces the same metaphorically corporeal treatment at the hands of Old Banks as she does at those of the Devil. Because of this, the perversion of a body that is already abused and perceived as socially useless feels almost inconsequential—in the eyes of her community, her body is already imperfect in its femininity and agedness. In the eyes of Sawyer herself, her body is already a site for male abuse.

The parallels that Mother Sawyer sets up between Old Banks and Dog further underscores the powerlessness of her body within both the community and supernatural patriarchal structures. Upon ending her soliloquy, a familiar in the shape of a black dog appears. “Ho!” he says, “Have I found thee cursing? Now thou art / Mine own” (2.1.118-119). Mother Sawyer’s utterance of her curse, rather than bringing her a familiar that she exercises control over, has simply caused a transference of ownership under the patriarchal power structures that are in place. Rather than her body being subject to physical abuse of Old Banks, Sawyer now

must use her body to nurse her familiar. She does so under the same threat of physical violence, as Dog makes the fantastical proclamation that “if [she] deniest, / [He’ll] tear [her] body in a thousand pieces” (2.1.134-135). Both structures cast Mother Sawyer as a witch, be it a real or imagined witch, and use this status as a way to further exploit her female, aged body.

However, despite these initial parallels between Old Banks and Dog, Sawyer’s relationship with Dog is markedly different from that of her and Banks. Rather than being considered a “sink” and “ruined cottage,” Sawyer is given newfound corporeal agency, autonomy, and power through her role as Dog’s pseudo-mother. Though her preternatural powers prove to be limited—Dog cannot kill Old Banks, seemingly going back on his promise that he can do whatever Sawyer wishes him to—Mother Sawyer finds new purpose through her body’s capacity to nurse and mother Dog. Johnson, on this maternal relationship, says that “the dismissive attitudes towards Sawyer’s body and speech which drive her into a relationship with Dog ultimately drive her into a tragically false experience of her own body” (78). While it is true that this relationship can be interpreted as a grotesque perversion of motherhood, as I will later discuss, I do not believe that the newfound corporeal usefulness that Mother Sawyer finds as Dog’s wet-nurse is “tragically false.” Rather, it represents a very real experience and function for Sawyer’s aged body, one that gives her renewed purpose and maternal agency despite its perverted nature. I would even go so far as to say that her role as Dog’s wet-nurse is somewhat restorative—despite the negative associations and grotesqueness of their union, the maternal use of her body by her familiar is a positive transformation for her.

Sawyer experiences real maternal affection for Dog. She calls him pet names such as “my dainty” and “my little pearl,” and christens him “my Tommy” and “my Tomalin.” She nurses him from a mark in her arm, he sucks at her like a “great puppy” (5.3.176) as Cuddy Banks later

scolds him for. She comforts him as one would a fussy baby when she ensures him “thou shalt have the teat anon” (4.1.154). For a woman who has experienced relationships characterized by both physical and verbal abuse, this maternal role repurposes her aged body. As Mary Fissell notes in her writings on the early modern womb, “motherhood in all its depraved varieties is described in intensely bodily terms, with a near obsession with blood and milk” (75).⁶ While we see this intense focus on the body drawn out in grotesque ways between Sawyer and Dog, it can also not be ignored that a focus on Sawyer’s body as a useful life-giver rather than as a “ruined cottage” imbues her body with power that it otherwise would not have been privy to.

Sawyer’s new role as a true witch figure (in that she nurses an actual devil rather than just being perceived as doing such) subsequently gives her relevance within the play’s community that she otherwise was denied. The play’s two subplots, one regarding a bigamist marriage and the other focused on the misadventures of Banks’ son, are primarily concerned with matchmaking. The fathers of Frank and Susan, Old Thorney and Carter, attempt to arrange their marriage in the second act. Susan’s sister Katherine and Susan herself must, meanwhile, ward off the advances of their other suitors. Likewise, Winnifred, who is a serving maid and Frank’s first wife, must navigate the tricky situation of her marriage to Frank while pregnant with Sir Arthur’s child. Within these subplots, there is no space for Mother Sawyer to participate—being poor, female, and childless, she has no stake in these community interests.

However, her newfound power as a witch with a familiar gives her social capital and allows her to engage in the comical matchmaking plot of Cuddy Banks’ self-devised plan to make Katherine Carter fall in love with him. Cuddy comes upon Sawyer as she is cursing him in Latin (“What’s that she mumbles? The devil’s paternoster?” [2.1.184]). While Cuddy initially

⁶ I will elaborate further on malevolent nursing and witchcraft in my discussion of *Lady Macbeth*.

seems to believe and understand that though his father has painted Sawyer as a witch, she is not a true one, Sawyer disputes his assumption, claiming the title of “witch” for herself. Though Cuddy still seems unsure of Sawyer’s true status, he makes an important distinction when asking for her assistance. “But, witch or no witch,” he says, “you are a motherly woman” (2.1.195-196). Here, we can see Cuddy appealing to Sawyer’s status as “Mother” Sawyer—the old wise-woman figure of her community that she has previously been barred from inhabiting. In this way, Cuddy envisions Sawyer’s supposed status as witch as an extension of this community mother role. He seems to perceive her as a “white witch,” witches that Deborah Willis defines as “magical practitioners [who] might employ a wide range of techniques, chiefly for benign ends, and were normally contrasted with the witch who practiced *maleficium*” (27). These witches were able to practice magic that could, among other things, cure illness, allow them to see the future, and protect people from harm. In return, these practitioners received respect from their community and were occasionally paid for their efforts (27). In exchange for her assistance in making Kate fall in love with him, Cuddy pays Mother Sawyer, saying “there’s money to buy thee a plaster...and a small courtesy I would require at thy hands” (2.1.203-204).

Suddenly, Sawyer’s seeming embodiment of her label as “witch” has made her a figure that is at once socially relevant and female-bodied. Her new power makes her worthy of interaction, payment, and perhaps even respect. Although we may not take Cuddy seriously in his initial beliefs in Sawyer’s powers, this of course changes when he sees Dog for himself, and while Sawyer rejects being a maternal figure to Cuddy, tricking him in the name of revenge against his father, it perhaps follows that if Sawyer had successfully aided Cuddy, she may have found social significance as a ‘white witch’ within her community. We can, however, still view

this as Sawyer's first interaction within her community that is not wholly characterized as negative.

Mother Sawyer's newfound social relevance meets its inevitable dark end when she commands Dog to "touch" Ann Ratcliffe, the wife of a man who scorned her. After Dog touches the woman, she begins to speak in mad terms and eventually, and shockingly, beats her own brains out. It is this effective destruction of a fertile, and therefore socially relevant, female body—Ratcliffe refers to his wife's dead body as a "miserable trunk" (4.1.206-207)—that pushes community fear of Sawyer over the edge. Suddenly, she is being blamed for all sorts of perverse perceived disruptions of female bodies within the community. A countryman tells of his wife and a serving-man "thrashing in [his] barn together" (4.1.6). When the woman is asked why she did this, she claims to be bewitched by Sawyer. Another countryman expresses fear that with Sawyer present "all our wives will do nothing else but dance about other country maypoles" (4.1.10-11). A third darkly prophesizes: "Our cattle fall, our wives fall, our daughters fall, and maid-servants fall; and we ourselves shall not be able to stand, if this beast be suffered to graze amongst us" (4.1.12-14). Once more, Sawyer embodies the "sink" of the community, this time for the voicings of male fears about the lustful unruliness of the female body.

Sawyer's own body becomes a site of feminine sexual transgression due to her status as a witch. Witchcraft was often equated with whoredom—a transgressing woman was, as Sawyer herself points out, categorized as either a "bawd or witch" (4.1.126), oftentimes both. Dog and Sawyer's relationship conflates the sexual with the maternal, further characterizing it as grotesque and turning Sawyer into a much less sympathetic figure than when she first enters the play. After a run-in with male neighbors, Dog appears and demands Sawyer to nurse him. Sawyer tells him she is unable to, saying "I am dried up / With cursing and with madness, and

have yet / No blood to moisten these sweet lips of thine” (4.1.156-158). In addition to deepening further established parallels between the men of the community and the familiar, Sawyer’s “dried up” state represents a certain dysfunction in hers and Dog’s mother-child relationship.

Their relationship is perverted further in her suggested solution to her lack of blood to nurse him with: “Stand on thy hind-legs up. Kiss me, my Tommy, / And rub away some wrinkles on my brow / By making my old ribs shrug for joy...” (4.1.159-161). Sawyer indicates that her physical relationship with Dog, characterized as blatantly sexual with the introduction of kissing and rubbing, actually reverses the process of aging on her body. Dog’s touches have the power to remove wrinkles, to make her ribs shrug for joy. In this way, the sexual relationship informs the maternal one—it is only through Dog’s sexual touches that Sawyer can feel physically young enough to perform her maternal role as his wet-nurse.

The conflation of the sexual and maternal makes Sawyer’s character much less apt for audience pity and sympathy. Despite this, however, sympathy for Mother Sawyer is reintroduced when we see just how much the loss of her relationship with Dog at the end of the play emotionally affects her. When Dog abandons her, Sawyer cites her primary dissatisfaction with his betrayal in her inability to enact her revenge any further. However, we see a hyper-fixation in her speech on the loss of Dog’s companionship rather than on the power he brought her. Reminiscent of Juliet’s “Come Romeo. Come thou day in night, / For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night / Whiter than new snow upon a raven’s back” (3.1.17-20), Mother Sawyer laments “Thou art my raven, on whose coal-black wings/Revenge comes flying to me” (5.1.8-9). This perversion of romantic loss and longing continues on when she says “O, my best love! / I am on fire, even in the midst of ice, / Raking my blood up, till my shrunk knees feel / Thy curled head leaning on them” (5.1.9-12). Here again we see Sawyer’s real emotional and physical

dependency on Dog expressed. Likewise, when Dog appears to her with his fur color changed from black to white, she equates him with “the ghost of [her] dear love” (5.1.34). Sawyer’s authentic feelings of loss towards her sexual and maternal relationship to Dog, which Sarah Johnson calls “haunting and sad,” sets the play up to be a critical examination of “the extent to which economic hardship, social constructions, and prejudices create witches” (70).

This sentiment is reinforced in the play’s ending, where Winnifred, the now-widowed pregnant wife of the bigamist Frank, gets the last word. Her final lines ring with self-awareness of her new social position:

I am a widow still, and must not sort
 A second choice without a good report;
 Which though some widows find, and few deserve,
 Yet I dare not presume, but will not swerve
 From modest hopes. All noble tongues are free;
 The gentle may speak one kind word for me (Epilogue, 172-177).

Winnifred recognizes that she now joins the ranks of women such as Mother Sawyer—single, impoverished females dependent on community charity for survival. However, unlike Sawyer, there is hope for Winnifred. With Old Carter willing to adopt her back into the structure of patriarchal control as his second daughter, she is able to stay with her child and will not accrue the dangerous title of “bastard bearer” (Crawford and Mendelson 148). Likewise, Winnifred is characterized as having a blatantly fertile body. The demonstration of her reproductive capacity, and thus her ability to contribute properly to her community, gives her a chance to seek out “a second choice” in a husband, as many young widows did in order to establish security and their own significance within the community. Unlike Mother Sawyer, who constantly questioned and resisted patriarchal control over her aged feminine body, both Winnifred and the community who adopts her tacitly understand how imperative it is for her to quickly remarry and reestablish

herself in the realm of husbandly patriarchal control, thus avoiding a situation in which she herself would become the next witch of Edmonton.

How Many Spirits Had Lady Macbeth?

Around the beginning of 1618, Joan Flower and her daughters Margaret and Phillip were arrested under suspicion of witchcraft. They had been accused of cursing the family of Francis Manners, the considerably rich and powerful Earl of Rutland: five years prior to their arrest, both of Rutland's young sons sickened and died, leaving only his daughter Katherine alive. Both Joan and Margaret had been employed by the Manners family and were notably dismissed a little before the deaths. Originally suspecting nothing amiss, Rutland was said to have taken the loss of his sons "most nobly" and did not suspect the deaths to be the result of witchcraft "untill it pleased God to discover the villainous practices" (Flower).⁷ Though Joan died before she was questioned and examined, the two daughters were tried at Lincoln Castle. In their testimonies, both admitted to keeping and nursing familiars, as well as helping their mother curse Rutland's sons. Joan was said to have done so by taking stray gloves of the children. She then rubbed the gloves on the back of her familiar, a cat named Rutterkin, and then "put [them] into hot boyling water, afterward she pricked [them] often, and buried [them] in the yard, wishing the [Lords] might never thrive" (Flower). Perhaps even more interesting to this case is the addendum to the Flower women's curse on the Manners family; they were said to have cursed the couple to temporary infertility. In her account of the events, Margaret revealed that her mother "took wooll out of the said mattresse, and a pair of gloves...and put them into warme water, mingling them with some blood...and rubd them on the belly of *Rutterkin* her Cat, saying, the Lord and the Lady should have more children, but it would be long first" (Flower).

⁷ I gather my information from the printed version of the case: "*Witchcrafts, strange and wonderfull: discovering the damnable practices of seven witches, against the lives of certaine noble personages, and others of this kingdome, as shall appeare in this lamentable history.*" The text does not specifically say what lead to the "discovery" of the Flower family's deeds.

I bring this case up not to highlight the poor women accused of practicing witchcraft, but to take note of the rather curious situation of the Manners family itself. As the Earl of Rutland and his wife were part of the Catholic, elite upper-class, they possessed significant power and influence. After the death of their two sons, the Earl of Rutland was left without a male heir to inherit his titles and sizeable fortune. His title would be passed on to his brother upon his death, and Katherine, his daughter, would inherit a fortune that would come under the control of her husband. The Manners' heirless situation would have been unstable and bleak, putting added pressure on Rutland's wife to become pregnant with another male heir. When the couple found themselves unable to conceive again, their anxiety and loss would have undoubtedly deepened. The natural order of patriarchal lineage had been disrupted, and the Manners family was left, over five years later, suspicious of the devilish interference of witchcraft.

We can see these same anxieties of the Earl of Rutland and his wife addressed in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where the central worry lurking behind Macbeth's bid for political power is his lack of an heir. He is acutely aware that he is the possessor of a "barren sceptre" and "fruitless crown" (3.1.66-67). While it would have been difficult to determine whether it was Macbeth or Lady Macbeth who was infertile, traditional expectations would have placed the responsibilities of the domestic realm—and thus the failure to produce children—onto the woman.⁸ Whereas Rutland's wife identifies herself as a victim of witchcraft in order to explain her inability to become pregnant, I will suggest that Lady Macbeth calls upon spirits to pervert her body to cast herself as a witch in response to her household's infertility. While this

⁸ While an understanding of male infertility that was distinct from impotence existed in the early modern period (see Jennifer Evans' "*Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England*", p.76) primary blame for infertility, miscarriage, or any infant's deformity or inexplicable death was most likely to be placed on the woman, who was believed to have a sympathetic influence on the child through gestation and nursing. See Fissell's *Vernacular Bodies* for further discussion.

perversion of her body can be interpreted as monstrous, it can also be read as Lady Macbeth's aberrant attempt to provide reproductive aid to her husband. Since she cannot help Macbeth in the traditional mode of producing heirs, this invocation of bodily perversion instead serves as an expression of Lady Macbeth's longing and quest for an alternative yet still maternal form of power that her female body has the unique potential to supply.

Before discussing Lady Macbeth's perversion of her body in more detail, I think it is important to first address the question of Lady Macbeth's infertility itself. In a play in which the titular character's increasing anxiety stems from a lack of an heir to his prophesized throne, Lady Macbeth's famous utterance of "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.62-63) is ambiguous, shocking, and utterly confusing when juxtaposed with Macbeth's heirless status.⁹ Presupposing that a woman of Lady Macbeth's rank and status would only nurse a child if it were her own infant, this small, offhandedly bestowed tidbit regarding Lady Macbeth's past does more than portray her as a woman willing and capable of committing infanticide—it characterizes her as a woman who was once, in some capacity, a mother.¹⁰

What is the significance of this seemingly extraneous information about Lady Macbeth's past life? I argue that this detail is imperative to our understanding of Lady Macbeth because it establishes her as a woman who (at least in the past) possessed a fertile body (and, if we are to take her pronoun choice in her reference to "his boneless gums" (1.7.65) as literal rather than metaphorical), a body with the capacity to bear male heirs. In early modern England, life for most upper-class women concerned a single primary occupation: motherhood. As William

⁹ All references to *Macbeth* come from the Folger Shakespeare Library's updated edition of *Macbeth*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

¹⁰ While it is unclear and merely speculation as to whether Shakespeare intended Lady Macbeth's aforementioned son to be from a previous marriage or Macbeth's own deceased/estranged child and it would be fruitless to speculate (as critiqued in L.C. Knight's famous essay, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?"), this information nevertheless characterizes Lady Macbeth herself as a woman who, at some point, gestated, birthed, and nursed a child.

Gouge notes in his widely-read conduct manual, *Of Domesticall Duties*, a wife, “if she also be a mother and a mistress, and faithfully endeavour to doe what by vertue of those callings she is bound to doe, shall finde enough to doe” (19). After marriage, the majority of women bore children within the first year of wedlock. Upper-class women often sent their infants out to nurse in order to become pregnant sooner, meaning they were more likely to conceive and bear more children than their lower and middling-class counterparts. Women who did not conceive quickly after marriage suspected infertility, a condition that was a source of much anxiety and often perceived as a punishment for parental sin. The anxiety over childlessness was particularly true for women of the upper class like Lady Macbeth and the earl of Rutland’s wife. As Crawford and Mendelson have noted, “the higher the social level, the greater the importance attached to child-bearing, so that wives longed not just for children, but for sons” (126, 149-150). Given Macbeth’s prophesized rise to king and the acknowledgement that “he has no children” (4.3.255) and is the possessor of a “fruitless crown...no son of [his] succeeding” (3.1.66-69), the need for Lady Macbeth to produce an heir becomes the main focus of both her and Macbeth’s disquiet. In order for her to fulfill her role as a dutiful wife and aid Macbeth’s cementing of power, children become not just a domestic but a political necessity.

Despite her history as a mother and fertile woman, Lady Macbeth arrives on stage seemingly incapable of bearing children, be it through her own infertility or Macbeth’s. Whatever child she once nursed is absent—Lady Macbeth enters the stage alone. This initial physical isolation further emphasizes her domestic alienation from her socially prescribed position as a “good” upper-class wife, one who bears and rears sons. Likewise, Lady Macbeth is removed from any sort of enjoyment and emotional connection that the act of mothering would have provided for her. When she recalls to Macbeth how “tender” it was “to love the babe that

milks me” (1.7.63), we can see under her frightful threat of infanticide an admission that performing the maternal role was something she enjoyed and had a strong emotional connection to. Whatever she is categorized as now, it is undeniable that she was once a “good,” nurturing mother. This loss of enjoyment further emphasizes the isolated position that Lady Macbeth now finds herself in.

The wifely position was one of expected, constant subordination to the husband. Gouge begins his discussion on the wife’s submission to the husband with this quote from Ephesians: “Wives submit your selves vnto your owne husbands, as vnto the Lord” (26). One of the many repeated quips in his manual also pulls from a later Ephesians verse: “For the husband is the head of the wife, euen as Christ is the head of the Church” (267, 326, 341). We see Lady Macbeth deftly play the part of both obedient wife and gracious hostess when she welcomes Macbeth and his party back to their castle in Inverness—she, at the very least outwardly, displays the naturally expected supplication to her husband and the other male figures of the play. However, as Deborah Willis notes, there is an inherent tension between the expectation of complete wifely supplication and the expectation of the wife to manage the domestic realm, most notably, the children. Motherhood represented the most traditional role available for the early modern woman, particularly the elite woman who was not expected nor generally allowed to take on an economic occupation, to exercise some modicum of power within the patriarchal system of the home (Wayne 69). Willis says that “sons in this culture had an extended period of dependence on the mother and thus an identification with her” (70). This dependence of children on a distinctly feminine body for physical and psychological nurturing naturally creates tension between the wife’s submission to the husband and her expected duty as a maternal being.

While Willis' discussion of the interplay between wifely submission and maternal power emphasizes that this conflict would often produce "slippages" in negotiations of power between husband and wife,¹¹ I think it is also important to acknowledge that motherhood and household management served as a sort of pressure valve for this pious expectation of submission. The letters and journal entries of elite woman in unhappy marriages often underscore their lack of power within the maternal realm. The upper class wife Lettice Kynnersly, whose husband had taken command of the house and relegated her to her chamber, expressed mourning of her loss of domestic power in a letter to her brother: "Good brother be good unto me: and either write, or get my brother Anthony to come and talk with him: if I may but have the rule of my children: and somewhat to maintain them and myself, I would desire no more" (Crawford and Mendelson 144). With the precarious balance of wifely servitude and maternal agency disrupted, Lettice finds herself utterly displaced and disempowered. Likewise, by nature of Macbeth's infertility, Lady Macbeth joins the ranks of elite woman who were alienated and marginalized from their appropriate society.

Despite an implied anxiety towards the Macbeths' lack of reproductive success, audiences are presented with seemingly contradictory sentiments from Lady Macbeth herself. Upon receiving the letter from Macbeth that informs her of the Weird Sister's prophecy, Lady Macbeth utters her initial soliloquy:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,

¹¹ "Slippages were bound to occur, and the husband might find himself being spoken to and treated as if he were a child...The wife who asserted herself too vigorously brought the mother back into the masculine domain, challenging her husband's masculinity and even his adulthood" (Willis 70-71). Many critics of *Macbeth* have noted that the play can be read as an exemplar of overreaching maternal power and the infantilized husband; see Adelman's "*Born of Woman*": *Fantasies of Maternal Power in Macbeth* and Frye's "*Macbeth's Usurping Wife*."

That no compunctious visitings of nature
 Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
 Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
 And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
 Wherever in your sightless substances
 You wait on nature's mischief (1.5.47-57).

Rather than embody the “good wife” and pray to God for Macbeth’s sexual or political success, Lady Macbeth willingly invokes nefarious spirits to pervert her healthy and presumed fertile body into one that is infertile, amenorrhoeic, and poisonous. While many critics have interpreted Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy and her desire to be “unsexed” as a rejection of her feminine and maternal nature,¹² I believe that this invocation of bodily perversion instead serves as an expression of Lady Macbeth’s desires to repurpose her body’s maternal capacity into an alternative form of wifely power. Just as a woman’s fertile body would be expected to physically change and adopt newfound purposes with pregnancy, Lady Macbeth seeks a corporeal transformation and utilization of her fertile body. We can read this perversion of her reproductive system as an attempt to acquire alternative power outside of simple procreation, which will allow her childless self to reproductively “aid” her husband in his quest for kingship.

Lady Macbeth’s initial desire to be “unsexed” represents a desire to escape the physiological expectations and power her feminine body has over her being. “To unsex,” as the OED defines it, is “to deprive or divest (a person) of the characteristics, attributes, or qualities traditionally or popularly associated with his or her sex” (OED Online). To be unsexed is to have sexual characteristics removed, though not necessarily supplanted by characteristics of the opposite sex. This is an important distinction to make; it clarifies that Lady Macbeth is not

¹² See La Belle’s “*A Strange Infirmary*”: *Lady Macbeth’s Amenorrhea*, Frye’s “*Macbeth’s Usurping Wife*,” or Kimbrough’s “*Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender*” for alternative interpretations of Lady Macbeth’s desire to be ‘unsexed.’

asking to be made masculine. Rather, she desires to be divested of her feminine sex characteristics, thus imploring the demonic spirits for further alienation from the physiological body that ascribes her to the social role of wife and mother.

This desire to be unsexed extends to the womb, which she commands the spirits to “stop up” so that “no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose” (1.5.51-53). The womb, considered a powerful yet temperamental organ, was thought to possess the capacity to wander about women’s bodies, bear both infants and monsters, and even sicken the owner, as we will see in our later discussion of the womb in *King Lear*. The womb was often cited as the reason why women were allegedly more susceptible to illness and hysteria, also known as “fits of the Mother” (MacDonald, 5), and it became a battleground for physicians to argue as to whether these womb illnesses could be naturally or preternaturally explained. Many women were said to have fallen ill with the sickness of the Mother when they possessed some sort of psychological imbalance, whether due to excessive humors, invisible vapors, or emotions—Petrus Forrestus, for example, became sick with fits of the Mother at the same time she fell in love with a young man (4). Physician and chemist Edward Jorden, responsible for cataloguing in detail the nature and origins of womb sickness, views the womb primarily as an “emunctory” that expels “divers superfluties which do abound in [women]” (7). He writes that these mental and physiological upsets cause the womb to attempt to expel whatever upset plagued the body, thus afflicting its owner with womb sickness. Like Jorden, Lady Macbeth associates the activity of her own womb with her emotional faculties. She characterizes the leaky, mutable womb of the fertile woman as a “passage to remorse,” suggesting that the womb could expel her murderous intentions and plant feelings of regret in their place.

Interestingly, Lady Macbeth calls upon the spirits as an unnatural solution to “natural visitings,” a solution that is juxtaposed with a natural cause for cessation of menstruation: pregnancy. Images of fertility abound in Lady Macbeth’s invocation; she asks to be “fill[ed]” with “direst cruelty.” “To fill,” as the OED defines it, could refer to the early modern meaning of “to impregnate.” By commanding the spirits to impregnate her with cruelty, Lady Macbeth warps her body’s natural capacity to bear and nurture children into a solution for engendering domestic and political power and securing Macbeth’s future status as king. However, as Stephanie Chamberlain notes regarding Lady Macbeth’s later imagined infanticide, “she [Lady Macbeth] would readily kill Macbeth’s progeny to secure her husband’s succession, but in killing the progeny she must likewise destroy his patrilineage, rendering his short-lived reign a barren one” (82). This same idea applies to Lady Macbeth’s invocation of spirits to corrupt her reproductive body. By cursing herself to sterility, she chooses to gestate cruelty rather than children, forgoing the engendering of Macbeth’s “patrilineal future” (82), as well as any future maternal power and benefits she would possess.

Lady Macbeth’s rhetoric of corrupt maternity continues when she asks the spirits to “come to [her] woman’s breasts/And take [her] milk for gall” (1.5.54-55). Notably, this passage encourages audiences to imagine Lady Macbeth as a lactating woman, a status that complicates Lady Macbeth’s supposed fertility: it was common knowledge that prolonged lactation could be used as a form of semi-dependable birth control, explaining why wet-nurses often bore fewer children than their upper-class counterparts (Evans 15). If we are to interpret her as a lactating woman literally, this casts further blame on Lady Macbeth for the Macbeths’ infertility. This invocation also suggests that Lady Macbeth wishes to breastfeed the spirits, as would a wet-

nurse or mother, with the expectation that they would either transubstantiate her milk for gall, or perhaps take her milk as bile.¹³

The conflation of breastmilk with gall, the life-sustaining nourishment of an infant with a demon suckling poison, plays upon common early modern anxieties towards breastfeeding. Breastmilk was assumed to have material effects on the child; presumably, a mother or wet-nurse could inflict either harm or good on the infants they fed depending on the qualities and attitudes they possessed when nursing them (Paster 195). Thus, breastfeeding was a source of anxiety for both fathers and those mothers who sent their children out to nurse. In his marriage sermon, *A Bride-Bush*, William Whately comments on the subject, “Hereof it comes that we say, *he suckt evill from the dug*, that is, as the nurse is affected in her body or in her mind, commonly the child draweth the like infirmitie from her” (Matz 98). The potential to inherit negative characteristics or illness from a bad mother or a wet-nurse resulted in an intrinsic distrust of the maternal body. Lady Macbeth seems to confirm this fear by embodying all that is mistrustful when she equates her breastmilk to gall. In doing so, Lady Macbeth suggests that she herself may be humorally imbalanced and imbued with an overabundance of gall, which Helkiah Crooke’s anatomical text identifies as “being a mad and hare-brain’d humour, had neede at the first generation of it be sent away, least it should set all the body uprore” (qtd. in Paster 11). Lady Macbeth welcomes unnatural illness into her body, seeking to poison both herself and any spirit or being that nurses from her, thus embodying the very fears of the malevolent maternal body that plagued so many early modern men and women.¹⁴

¹³ This image of Lady Macbeth breastfeeding nefarious spirits with poison readily calls to mind other demonic figures associated with monstrous breastfeeding and motherhood, particularly Error of *The Faerie Queen* and her “poisonous dug” (qtd. in Paster, 206).

¹⁴ Many critics interpret this idea of perverse nursing as a continuing infantilization of Macbeth. While that is not the focus of my discussion, I think there is some validity to this idea.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, perversions of maternity and breastfeeding were the most commonplace ways to conceive of a witch figure. Deborah Willis notes that the “good” mother of the early modern period was one that “was the nurturing mother, often one who confined herself to the care of infants and very *young* children” (67). It then follows that the bad mother was one who lavishes attention on, and spoils, older children, and the witch, who devotes her maternal attentions to demonic spirits, was the inverse of motherhood entirely. Witchcraft pamphlets often portrayed witches as perversely maternal; they nurtured their familiars with bread, blood, and milk. Their familiars often sucked directly from a bite mark or supernumerary nipple used exclusively by the demonic spirits. We saw our first example of demonic nursing played out earlier between Mother Sawyer and Dog, though they certainly are not a unique case. The aptly named Mother Devell of Windesore had a familiar that came to the shape of her in a black cat. Every day, she fed the spirit milk mixed with her own blood (Gibson 36). In Bedfordshire, Mother Sutton and her daughter, who each possessed a familiar, “[gave] them sucke at their two Teats which they had on their thighs” before ordering them to attack a small child (273). Henry Goodcole’s pamphlet, *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch*, on which *The Witch of Edmonton* is based, provides a most specific account of Elizabeth Sawyer’s supposed supernumerary nipple, which was “a little above the Fundiment...like a Teate the bignesse of the little finger, and the length of halfe a finger...and seemed as though one had suckt it, and the bottome thereof was blew, and the top of it was redde” (306-307).

These accounts of old widow women misusing their bodies were commonplace, highlighting the generalized anxiety towards inappropriate and improper application of a women’s “natural” maternal powers. All of these images trade on anxieties towards misappropriation of the feminine body and the subsequent power and agency women received

from it. Witches traditionally operated outside of the bounds of patriarchal control; they were not Gouge's dutifully submissive wives, and thus the power of their bodies became a very real threat to the patriarchal structure. While Mother Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton* seems initially wary and unwitting of her contractual obligation to nurse the devil with her own blood, Lady Macbeth utters her speech act as a fully self-aware invitation to these spirits. She seems to believe that by nursing these spirits, she herself will gain some power. Though Lady Macbeth is radically different in class, age, and social status from Mother Sawyer and the old widow women of cheap print pamphlets, it is this undercurrent of reproductive disempowerment and marginalization from their respective social communities that link the two women. The economically unproductive widow and the barren wife both fail to meet early modern English expectations for women as submissive wife and nurturing mother. Both women, alone and disempowered at the start of their respective plays, attempt to negotiate power by intentionally perverting their body and appropriating it to nurture malevolent, preternatural beings.

Likewise, Lady Macbeth's wish for sterility would bring her physiologically closer to the imagined witches of the period. As discussed earlier, those women most often accused of witchcraft were old "Mothers" of their villages, women well past the useful age of reproduction. While tales of murderous women of reproductive age existed in cheap print, these women were not often called witches; they were called things like "barbarous murderess" and "lascivious young Damsel" and were often characterized as whores (Walker 148-9). While considered monstrous, they were not often aligned with the figure of the witch since they had fertile bodies. As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, the witch and whore/bad mother classification was somewhat dichotomous, the reproductive status of the bad woman determining which label her feminine transgressions received. Bad and infanticidal mothers' evil was contingent upon their

body's capacity to reproduce; they did not verbally curse other mothers or their children. Rather, they physically neglected or murdered their own children, as is the case with the "birth-strangled babe, / Ditch-delivered by a drab" (4.1.31-32) whose finger the Weird Sisters use in their brew.

While Lady Macbeth's threat to "[dash] the brains out" (1.7.66) of an imagined infant might be appear closer to the infanticidal mother figure, we must consider the very nature of this act as fantasy rather than reality. Lady Macbeth cannot inhabit this role as anything but fantasy since she has no children in the play. In contrast, Lady Macbeth's speech act on her barren body likens her more to the figure of the witch. The *Malleus Maleficarum* warns readers that "sorcery is practiced...when a woman is prevented from conceiving or to cause her to miscarry" (190). Additionally, it clarifies that any witch who impedes conception is "considered a murderer" (190), putting it in the same category as abortion and the offering of children to devils, positioning Lady Macbeth as a potentially devilish, homicidal figure even before the murder of Duncan. Through her speech act, Lady Macbeth inhabits the role of both the Earl of Rutland's barren wife and the Flowers women accused of witchcraft; she imagines herself as both a victim of infertility magic and the witch who cursed her to it. While this feels inherently incongruous, I would like to suggest that both of these elite women are using witchcraft as a mode for contextualizing, understanding, and reconstructing the infertility that puts extreme pressure and anxiety on each of them. For the earl's wife, we can consider witchcraft perhaps as a convenient scapegoat for both the deaths of her sons and her fertility issues. For Lady Macbeth, resorting to witchcraft allows her to explain and re-infuse power into her barren reproductive system. Thus, even while heirless, she is assisting Macbeth and embodying the wifely role as his "helpe meet" (Gouge 185).

While the intention of Lady Macbeth's curse against her own body can be reasoned out as an inversion of the traditional nurturing, child-bearing role of the 'good' wife she cannot embody, the efficacy and consequences of her curse are strictly speculation. There is no way to know whether or not the spirits Lady Macbeth intended to summon actually came to her aid, nor whether she was truly physiologically changed. Can we interpret Lady Macbeth's curse as that of a woman successfully propositioning a gain in power through the aid of spirits, or should she be viewed as a delusional woman who the devil has tempted into sin through the utterance of her speech act?

The argument over the efficacy of Lady Macbeth's speech act would have been a well-disputed subject amongst contemporary scholars, physicians, and religious peoples. As I briefly outlined in the introduction, early modern thinkers often debated as to whether or not the witch herself possessed any true power within her body, power that was not contingent upon the Devil or preternatural spirits. As witches were most often the old, ill, and poor women of the community, there is a certain assumption that the witches themselves were foolish sinners, desperate enough to be tempted by the Devil. They, themselves, were viewed as completely powerless without his help. However, the women themselves often insisted that they possessed a kind of bodily power independent from the Devil himself—Queen Margaret of *Richard III*, for example, believes that any woman can curse as long as she “Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days, / Compare dead happiness with living woe” (4.4.121-122) and stresses that “Bettering thy loss makes the bad causer worse. / Resolving this will teach thee how to curse” (4.4.125-126).

Certainly, evidence would suggest that Lady Macbeth, as well as her more traditional counterpart in Mother Sawyer, does not possess any innate powers. Lady Macbeth calls upon the

spirits to garner a strength that she otherwise believes herself to be lacking. Her maternal language and call for bodily perversion suggest that she believes her corrupt physical form, when changed, would possess a power of its own. Conversely, Mother Sawyer is only ever able to truly retaliate against the wrongs done to her by her community after Tom, her familiar, forces her into a blood pact with him. Each represents a variation of the witch as a figure alienated from participating in society, and thus forced to search for power outside of their own bodies and situations, power that the Devil willingly supplies. Reginald Scot would perhaps have been particularly convinced of Lady Macbeth's ineffectiveness. It would be apparent that she was suffering from a melancholic humor, which caused some sufferers to think "that they can transforme their owne bodies, which neverthelesse remaineth in the former shape," much in the same way Lady Macbeth imagines her body's physiological transformation (42). Similarly incriminating would have been Lady Macbeth's allusions to amenorrhea—as the womb was viewed as an organ of expulsion, women were prone to becoming melancholic "upon the stopping of their monethlie melancholike flux or issue of blood" (42). Though she is not the "poor, aged, deformed, ignorant" (1) in the way that Scot renders the stereotypical old woman who believes she possesses preternatural power, her melancholic nature could characterize her as one.

If Lady Macbeth and Mother Sawyer bear similarities to the accounts of the trials of actual women accused of witchcraft in early modern England, then Weird Sisters—the true witches of *Macbeth*—seem utterly defiant of this categorization as a marginalized, powerless women clinging to the outskirts of society. While the Sisters initially show characteristics commonly associated with the traditional village witch, such as the possession of familiars and the domestic squabble with the sailor's wife who would not share her chestnuts, they also

represent a darker, more preternatural kind of witch. The Weird Sisters possess an otherworldly immaterialism; they are able to “Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.13) and are “Posters of the sea and land” (1.2.34). Especially when compared to Lady Macbeth, who never once herself leaves the domestic realm of the home, they appear physically unbound to any location, able to move around Scotland and the surrounding seas with no effort. This power that seems to disregard the rules of corporeality and extend the Weird Sisters’ powers beyond the conventional debate that a witch is empowered either by the devil or has no abilities. The Weird Sisters appear as independent operators, coming and going as they please.

Likewise, while they possess familiars that they seem beholden to, they also consort with the goddess Hecate rather than the Devil. The Sisters’ direct interaction with the goddess figure complicates reading them as traditional pamphlet-style witches—the interactions between Hecate and the Sisters is a more equal power dynamic than those traditional interactions between the Devil and pamphlet witches. Hecate is “the mistress of [their] charms” (3.5.6) rather than the possessor of their souls. This consorting with a goddess figure further complicates reading the Weird Sisters as damned, human women like Lady Macbeth and Mother Sawyer. Their otherworldliness aligns them more with Lady Macbeth’s called-upon spirits, or the familiars of traditional witches rather than the witches themselves. Macbeth confirms this shift in perception. Initially, he refers to the Sisters as “hags,” then changes his address towards the end of his life, calling them “the spirits that know / All mortal consequences” (5.3.4-5), suggesting that Macbeth himself believes these witches to be otherworldly and innately nefarious.

While larger contemporary academic discussion of witchcraft insisted that women were not independently capable of *maleficium* without the aid of the Devil, women were popularly characterized as “the inferiour, in sex the weaker, in condition subiect to more infirmities, in her

affections lesse moderate, in power lesse able to reward, or to punish” (Gouge 487), thus making them more susceptible to sin. As I have previously noted, the story of Genesis, with Eve committing original sin, encouraged an idea of an inherent feminine sinfulness as well. Rooting witch-like evil within the feminine condition thus complicates reading the Weird Sisters as true witches, as even their physical appearance plays with gender ambiguity. Upon first encountering them, Banquo muses, “You *should* be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3.47-49).¹⁵ The emphasis on Banquo’s subverted expectation—an expectation that these witch-figures should possess a wholly feminine physicality—stresses the perception of the time that the female body itself was, in fact, rooted in the demonic. It follows then that the Weird Sisters, who maintain a certain gender ambiguity and lack of corporeality, *cannot* be true witches because their evilness is not rooted in the feminine body. By the same logic, Lady Macbeth *is* a witch because of her intense desire to identify with the inner workings of her reproductive system and the subversion of her femininity, all that which is inherently evil within the female body “gone wrong.”

Throughout my analysis of Lady Macbeth’s maternal perversion of her own body, I have referred to her body in seemingly contradictory terms, sometimes terming it “fertile,” other times as “barren” and “infertile.” My introduction to this chapter qualifies this notion by stressing that the actual status of her fertility is ambiguous: while she could be infertile, I would like to suggest that Shakespeare’s almost comically off-handed reference to her previous child casts the Macbeth’s reproductive disfunction not on Lady Macbeth, as would have been traditionally assumed during the period, but directly upon Macbeth himself. However, even with this conviction coloring my discussion of the play, I found myself identifying her body (even before

¹⁵ It is my emphasis here on the word choice of ‘should.’

her cursing of it) as infertile because this is what Lady Macbeth's contemporaries would have assumed as the reason for their lack of an heir. I make this distinction much for the same reason I discuss Mother Sawyer's marginalization as a result of the failure of her community to support her; it further locates witchcraft not as a female problem, but as a symptom of social and domestic dysfunction. In both the case of Mother Sawyer and Lady Macbeth, the need for bodily perversion arises from male dysfunction. However, while Mother Sawyer attempts to pervert her body and repurpose her reproductive system in order to gain power over her enemies, Lady Macbeth seems to do the same in an attempt to reimagine her status as a "good" wife to Macbeth, one who can help him achieve power not through the mothering of heirs but the anti-mothering of spirits.

I would like to briefly return to the strange case of the Manners family and address its outcome. As was inevitable, Margaret and Phillip Flower were found guilty of witchcraft against the Earl of Rutland and his family in the spring of 1619. Shortly after, the sisters were hanged at Lincoln Castle. Their deaths did nothing to lift the curse of allegedly temporary infertility that they had cast on the Manners; the earldom was passed onto Manners' brother, and their daughter Katherine became the inheritor of their fortunes. I go back to the Manners case in order to emphasize that Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits is, like the Manners' accusations of witchcraft, ultimately futile. At the end of the play Macbeth remains infertile, his political power is untenable. Likewise, Lady Macbeth's status as a helpful, good wife to Macbeth is so diminished that she, marginalized and alienated from the social and domestic realm, is ultimately relegated to an ignoble demise off-stage.

The Evil Effeminacy of Richard the Third

In his initial soliloquy, Richard makes the claim that in post-war England, his physical deformities leave him no role to play but the villain. In this “weak piping time for peace” (1.1.24) when “[the devil] capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber” (1.1.12), Richard characterizes himself as “unfashionable” and physically barred from “sportive tricks.” The devil, with his graceful dancing and appetite for women, has become the courtier. It was a common early modern conception that men returning from war were ripe for effeminacy, as their newfound idle status encouraged them to be lascivious and slothful. In his antitheatrical tract, Stephen Gosson seems to bemoan the loss of wartime masculinity as much as Richard: “Oh what a woonderfull change is this? Our wrestling at armes, is turned to wallowyng in Ladies laps” (16).¹⁶ The image of the gentlemanly, idle courtier was one that intrinsically clashed with that of the rugged soldier—and yet both were confusingly considered proper performances of English manhood. This tension inevitably sparked anxiety towards the masculinity of the courtly man: Castiglione, in his manual *Book of the Courtier*, takes great pains to make distinctions between the overly effeminate “bad” courtier and the gracefully masculine “good” one. A courtier should be “not so soft and womanishe as manye procure to haue, [who] do not onely couerle the hear, and picke the browes, but also paumpre themselues...[like] the most wanton and unchaste woman in the world.” He goes on to critique their posture, gait, and manner of speech, equating them with “common Harlottes” (n.p.).

Like Gosson and Castiglione, Richard censures the effeminate and lustful courtier and this loss of wartime masculinity. However, this sentiment has the added emotional charge of

¹⁶ I owe this connection to Ian Frederick Moulton, who discusses Richard as an unruly masculine figure in his essay “A Monster Great Deformed”

being motivated by his own potential lack of success in England's current political climate. In a society in which war is no longer an outlet for the flaunting of proper manhood, the only avenue for masculine expression becomes the gentle, appearance-based masculinity of courtier. While Richard perhaps was a competent soldier and thus appropriately masculine in wartime, his physical deformity leaves him at a disadvantage in terms of embodying the gentle masculinity of courtier, one that defines success through appearances, gracefulness, and sexual conquest. Thus, Richard must find another effeminate means by which to manipulate the royal court—the tongue.

Notably, we can locate Richard as the origin of the witchcraft anxieties in the court, as it is Richard himself who first alludes to witchcraft in the play. “Foul, wrinkled witch,” he says, responding to Queen Margaret’s entrance before anyone else can react, “what mak’st thou in my sight?” (1.3.169). As Shirley Carr Mason notes in her analysis of Queen Margaret, “It is Richard who persists in a game of superstition, introducing the idea that curses are efficacious, by claiming his father’s curse has been fulfilled in the fate which has befallen Margaret” (29). While Queen Margaret dismisses the idea that York’s curse could be justified, she then undermines her own assertion when she wonders aloud, “Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?” and quickly follows this question with a self-confirmation and action, “Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses!” (1.3.204-5). With the mere suggestion that cursing is efficacious and that Margaret’s status as an old, marginalized woman characterizes her as a witch, Richard has encouraged Queen Margaret to further destroy her own reputation amongst the courtiers, while also indirectly disseminating suspicion and fear amongst Elizabeth, her family, and the other courtiers, which later proves to be beneficial for his rise. As he remarks gleefully afterwards, “I do the wrong and first begin the brawl. / The secret mischiefs that I set abroad / I lay unto the grievous charge of others” (1.3.344-346). Due to Margaret’s violent, loose tongue,

the courtiers do not blame Richard near as much as they blame Margaret's witchcraft, their last words often prove some variation of Hastings' "O Margaret, Margaret, now thy heavy curse / Is lighted on poor Hastings' wretched head!" (3.4.93-94). Richard understands that Margaret's physical perversions and their subsequent speech acts do nothing but reroute all evil back to her, just as Lady Anne, another victim of Richard's discursive trap, recognizes belatedly what she has done to herself when she later bemoans how she has "proved the subject of her own soul's curse" (4.1.85).

I suggest that one of the reasons Richard is able to manipulate these women via witchcraft discourse so successfully is because he is, in some fashion, a witch figure himself. His physiological deformity, which both predicts and predisposes his performative effeminacy and sociopolitical marginalization, allows Richard to understand and perhaps even temporarily identify with the poor, aged widow women who were most often condemned to the label of witch. By examining the ways in which Richard's physiology and its origins are characterized, we can see not only how Richard deploys assumptions about witches to his political advantage, but also how he seems to derive his uncanny power to inflict harm from birth, by way of the monstrous tendencies of the womb, the same source routinely associated with *maleficium* in the period.

Although Richard cites his primary anxiety in his soliloquy as his inability to "prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days" (1.1.28-29), I argue that this anxiety stems primarily from Richard's sense of social marginalization. If he cannot fully participate in the society of the gentle courtier because he is too ugly "to court an amorous looking-glass," (1.1.15) then he risks both social and subsequently political marginalization. If we look forward to Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's play *The Witch of Edmonton*, we can see a figure who similarly

identifies her physical deformities with social exclusion. As we saw in the first chapter, the lead character who bemoans her deformity is not a masculine courtier vying for the English crown, but a poor widow woman banished to the outskirts of her community. “And why on me?” she asks in her own opening soliloquy. “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” (2.1.1-5). Richard’s assessment of his being as “deformed, unfinished, set before [his] time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up” (1.1.20-21) anticipates Mother Sawyer’s claim that her deformity is the reason for her marginalization. As we noted earlier, Sawyer’s marginalization is intrinsically rooted in the feminine—she is shunned by her community due to her inability to contribute to it as a woman traditionally would through marriage and childbearing. Her “deformity,” to some extent, is not only her physical appearance, but also her body’s inability to reproduce in its old age. Likewise, her marginalization circularly informs her physical deformities: she claims that Old Banks “brokest [her] back with beating [her]” (4.1.49) suggesting that her witch-like, hunchbacked appearance did not preclude her marginalization. She is then cast as a “witch” by male community members in order to further justify and qualify her marginalization. As Richard’s deformity seemingly precludes him from sexual success and thus the proper fulfillment of the role of the peacetime courtier, we can also see his deformity as a sort of sexual dysfunction that has the potential to lead to marginalization at the hands of male community members. Therefore, while Richard’s role may not make him *effeminate*, it can perhaps be characterized as *feminine*—if he were a woman, his physical deformities and marginalized position could earn him the title of “witch.” Richard, I suggest, is able to understand and even identify with the feminine condition of marginalization due to

communally perceived uselessness and deformity as he is, at least at the beginning of the play, embodying this experience.

As I noted in the first chapter, Rowley, Dekker, and Ford intentionally include scenes of Mother Sawyer's victimization and abuse to garner sympathy for her character from the audience. Even when she is cast in a questionable light, we are made aware that the origins of her evil nature are rooted in society's treatment of her rather than some initial, innate evilness. After being subjected to verbal and physical abuse, Sawyer notes that she is "shunn'd / And hated like a sickness; made a scorn / To all degrees and sexes" (2.1.98-99). It is this rejection by society that leads her to justify seeking out a familiar to become a true witch rather than continue as just an old woman perceived by society to be one. By employing the sole power that she has left—her voice—she communicates the injustices done against her, even if it is only us, the invisible audience, who accept and internalize her words.

Richard, too, attempts to gather sympathy within his own in-play audience of the courtiers by capitalizing upon his marginalization. He begins his impassioned speech with:

They do me wrong, and I will not endure it!...
Because I cannot flatter and look fair,
Smile in men's faces, smooth, deceive and cog,
Duck with French nods and apish courtesy,
I must be held a rancorous enemy. (1.3.43-51)

Richard, like Mother Sawyer, uses the power of his speech to call out perceived social injustices. He cites his inability to function as the gentle courtier as the reason behind his victimization at the hands of the courtiers. The use of the traditionally feminine weapon of the tongue is intentional here: Richard both wields power and casts himself as femininely weak, becomes a villain while proclaiming the other courtiers as villainous. Richard, perhaps due to his deformed physiognomy, recognizes the power in inhabiting the role of marginalized victim, even if it is

just a facsimile of the actual marginalization that women like Mother Sawyer would experience. Likewise, we, as the secondary audience to his performance, are not deceived, and his speech has the dual effect of casting him as even more duplicitous.

Richard further co-opts the role of marginalized witch figure when he lashes out at Lord Grey, who questions whom Richard is calling out. “A plague upon you all!” he shouts at Elizabeth and her kin (1.3.60). While the curse itself is vague and fairly benign—he does not go into extreme detail as Queen Margaret does when she curses—it has the social function of weaponizing his manufactured marginalization. He uses the role of the witch to directly attack his enemies, the same way old widow women such as Mother Sawyer do. His call for a plague parallels a later erratic curse that Sawyer deploys against her community members when they burn the roof of their house: “Diseases, plagues, the curse of an old woman / Follow and fall upon you!” (4.1.22-23). We can see the way in which Richard manipulates his possession of a deformed body and its potentiality for marginalization into a weapon, deploying against his enemies “the curse of an old woman” that his tongue and physicality lend themselves to. Even without being directly called a witch, as Mother Sawyer and countless real poor widows in early modern England were, he is able to tap into the power of speech that is the witch’s weapon. However, Richard, unlike Mother Sawyer, is not truly marginalized despite his expressed fears in his initial soliloquy; he ultimately does succeed in his sexual conquests and the embodiment of the effeminate courtier, first through the wooing of Lady Anne and then later through his wooing by proxy of Queen Elizabeth’s daughter.¹⁷

¹⁷ The efficacy of Richard’s wooing of Queen Elizabeth in her daughter’s stead is arguable and a point of contention among critics. See Shirley Carr Mason’s “Foul Wrinkled Witch” for an argument that Elizabeth was not tricked by Richard’s persuasiveness.

Richard's wooing of Lady Anne seems to subvert entirely his initial assertions in his soliloquy that he is "not shaped for sportive tricks" (1.1.15). He proves to be just as adept as any effeminate courtier at wooing, even to the extent of absurdity, as he chooses to woo her within the sight of her father-in-law's corpse. As we saw with his manipulation of Queen Margaret, part of the reason why Richard is so successful in his wooing of Lady Anne is his almost preternatural ability to manipulate and weaponize witch-like discourse, playing upon Lady Anne's cursing and converting it from a feminine expression of power to a display of improper weakness.

Lady Anne, like almost all the women of *Richard III*, enters the play in a position of newfound powerlessness. With her husband and father-in-law dead, she is not only left in a vulnerable, grief-stricken state, but also socially and politically adrift. Her title and security are tied up in her marriage, her position in the home rests upon being Edward's wife. With the loss of her husband and father-in-law comes a loss of power and identity. Queen Elizabeth voices this anxiety aloud most aptly when she wonders, shortly before King Edward dies, "If he were dead, what would betide on me?" (1.3.7). Without these men, she is left in a politically and socially ambiguous position.

As is the pattern with marginalized, displaced women, Anne turns to her words for power when she "obsequiously lament[s]" (1.2.3) as she kneels over her father-in-law's tomb. What results is a strange confluence of grief with cursing, for the lament becomes a rhetorical vehicle that expresses a verbal desire for revenge. The lament, in one seamless, fluid soliloquy, turns into a curse on Richard after she implores Henry to hear her lamentation: "O, cursed be the hand that made these holes; / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it; / Cursed the blood that let this

blood from hence” (1.2.19-21). She goes on to curse Richard’s future wife and children, inevitably turning the curse onto her future self.

It is no surprise then that Richard appears the exact moment Anne’s lament becomes a curse. Like *Dr. Faustus*’ Mephistopheles, who appears to Faustus when the doctor appears to abjure God, Richard seems to have an almost preternatural aptitude for locating Anne at her most susceptible to demonic persuasion. Likewise, Richard’s joyful marveling of his successful wooing (“To take her in her heart’s extremest hate, / With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,...And yet to win her, all the world to nothing! Ha!” (1.2.251-259)) strongly parallels the diction of *The Witch of Edmonton*’s demonic familiar character, Dog’s, celebration upon finding Elizabeth Sawyer susceptible to a devilish contract (“Ho! I have found thee cursing? Now thou art Mine own” (2.1.118-119)). While comparisons of Richard to the devil and antichrist are well-established,¹⁸ what I find most interesting about Richard’s timing is the implication that he recognizes Lady Anne’s lament is actually functioning as a curse, something that Lady Anne herself seems to be somewhat unaware of. “What black magician conjures up this fiend[?]” she asks upon Richard’s appearance, not recognizing that she herself is the magician to blame (1.2.35). She is, as Mephistopheles tells Faustus, “in danger to be damn’d” (1.3.53) due to her loose tongue, a weakness that Richard recognizes.

Richard further capitalizes upon his intrusion by making her aware of the social impropriety of her speech act. When she calls him a devil and attempts to verbally cast him out, he shames her speech with “Sweet saint, for charity, be not so curst” (1.2.50) and “Lady, you know no rules of charity” (1.2.72). Later, he admonishes her for spitting upon him. By pointing

¹⁸ See Wolfgang Clemen, *A Commentary on Shakespeare’s Richard III*, 35 and the Arden edition of *Richard III*, edited by Antony Hammond, 102 for references to Richard as the antichrist.

out the extreme inappropriateness of her speech due to her status as a highborn woman, he is able to shame her out of cursing. Likewise, he himself performs a most overt display of effeminacy in order to further confuse and seduce her. As Phyllis Rackin points out, he appropriates the woman's part, commanding "the female power of erotic seduction" (54) when he blames her beauty itself as the reason he murdered her husband and father-in-law:

Your beauty was the cause of that effect—
 Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep
 To undertake the death of all the world
 So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom (1.2.130-133)

The effeminate motivations of a woman's beauty intentionally cast Richard as the gentle, shallow courtier. His displays of effeminacy directly undercut Anne's expectations of unruly, callous masculinity, and the appropriateness of her own emboldened speech acts. She is unable to keep up her series of linguistic inversions of Richard's speech because he himself is subverting her expectations of aggressive masculinity with his aggressive effeminacy.¹⁹ He inverts Anne's expectations of the dynamic when he claims that his heart is "figured in my tongue" and instead places the role of masculine actor on her when he offers her his sword to kill him with. It is at this pivotal moment that Anne is forced to give up her attempts to grab power through her speech—Richard is left to verbally triumph over her, gaining the promise of her hand.

By giving in to Richard's effeminate tongue, Anne's curse rebounds on her, and she must suffer twofold for her tongue. This very same occurrence becomes the thesis of Goodcole's pamphlet *the wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch*, the original story that Dekker,

¹⁹ Their dialogue initially plays off and inverts one another ("Richard: Fairer than tongue can name thee, let me have/Some patient leisure to excuse myself. Anne: Fouler than heart can think thee, thou canst make/No excuse current but to hang thyself" (1.2.85-88)) but ultimately Lady Anne is unable to keep up her wordplay ("Richard: Then bid me kill myself, and I will do it. Anne: I have already." (1.2.204-205)).

Rowley, and Ford's *Witch of Edmonton* play is based on. Goodcole writes, "Thus God did wonderfully overtake her in her owne wickednesse, to make her tongue to be the meanes of her owne destruction, which had destroyed many before" (Gibson 304). Goodcole stresses at the end that his Christian readers should be careful about cursing, swearing, and blaspheming, as this is what truly calls the Devil. Like Mother Sawyer's call for "vengeance, shame [and] ruin" (2.1.17) against her neighbors that ends with her own shame and ruin, Anne's curse against Richard and his imagined wife turns on its head and makes her susceptible to Richard's seductive tongue.

While Richard can perhaps cite Lady Anne's beauty as bringing him to murder convincingly due to his unfortunate appearance, it is important to note that Richard is never made powerless or treated poorly for his physical appearance by the male characters of the play. He is never physically abused, castigated by male community members, or imprisoned for his crimes. Within the context of early modern perceptions of physiognomical theory, Richard's relative popularity amongst his community seems incongruous. The art of physiognomy, as Thomas Hill defines it in his treatise *A Pleasant History*, is "a knowledge which leadeth a man to the understand and knowing both of the natural motions, and conditions of the spirite: and the good or evill fortune, by the outward notes and lines of the face and bodie" (ch. 1). Early modern natural philosophers thought the body and the mind had a sympathetic connection; one continually informed the other. This connection was expressed particularly in the relationship between outward appearance and inward character—people with fine features were thought to be good, while deformed or monstrous appearances were associated with villainous persons. Hill warns readers that "the crookednesse of the back, doth intimate the wickednesse of conditions" (ch. 41). Richard's features—the hunched back, crooked shoulders, and withered arm—all mark him as a man of evil character, one worthy of community fear. However, as Michael Torrey

notes in his discussion of *Richard III* under the lens of early modern physiognomical theory, part of Richard's triumph is that "despite the obvious signs of his wickedness, he repeatedly ensnares his victims, using lies and histrionics to mask his seemingly obvious villainy" (126).

It is important to note just *how* Richard is doing this, as he does more than subvert the signs of his bad physiognomy—he capitalizes upon them, citing his deformed body as proof that he is a victim of witchcraft specifically. Early modern witch trials were highly focused on finding physiological proof upon the bodies of both the perpetrator and the victim. The witchcraft victim Mary Glover's throat visibly swelled; she was pricked with a hot needle to prove she was senseless, while evidence of a witch's mark was found upon the body of Elizabeth Jackson, the old woman accused of cursing her. A woman tried for witchcraft named Elizabeth Device was described in Thomas Potts' pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie* as being branded with "a preposterous marke in Nature, even from her birth, which was her left eye, standing lower than the other" (Gibson 202). Potts later describes a victim named John Law who, "by this Devilish art of *Witch-craft*" had "his head drawne awerie, his Eyes and face deformed...his Armes lame especially the left side, his handes lame and turned out of their curse" (246). For both the witches and their victims, bodily proof was both a monstrous and necessary sign of witchcraft.

Richard subverts his own foreboding physiognomy by cleverly blaming his deformity on witchcraft with this pointed declaration:

I pray you all, tell me what they deserve
That do conspire my death with devilish plots
Of damned witchcraft, and that have prevailed
Upon my body with their hellish charms? ...
Be your eyes witness of their evil.

[He shows his arm]

Look how I am bewitched! Behold mine arm
Is like a blasted sapling withered up;

And this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch,
 Consorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore,
 That by their witchcraft thus have marked me. (3.4.60-73)

Through his accusation, Richard's bad physiognomy now becomes beneficial. Much like the palsied arm of the witchcraft victim John Law, Richard's withered arm presents physical proof that something is preternaturally amiss in the court. By recognizing that playing the position of victim transforms the significance of his own body, he no longer embodies Mother Sawyer's role of decrepit witch, instead appropriating the discourse to cast himself as a community member who has been victimized by female witchcraft.

It is also important to note that Richard's accusations of witchcraft upon his body come after Margaret's public cursing of the court, where Richard himself goaded the courtiers and, to an extent, Margaret herself, into believing in the efficacy of her curses and status as a "foul wrinkled witch." The courtiers might believe Richard here to be initially speaking about Margaret's curse against him as coming to fruition, which makes it even more impactful when he reveals that it is in fact "that monstrous witch" Queen Elizabeth and "that harlot" Jane Shore who are the witches he refers to. Most importantly, this interaction conveys Richard's understanding of the nature of witchcraft accusations. Just as the community members in *The Witch of Edmonton* blame Mother Sawyer for all sorts of physical and communal ills, be they caused by her or completely fabricated, Richard too scapegoats his deformity onto the likely location of feminine evil. Cleverly, he does not embody the traditionally masculine position of witchcraft accuser, such as *The Witch of Edmonton's* physically abusive Old Banks, but instead plays the role of the weak, effeminate witchcraft victim—a position most often held by women and children. By positioning himself this way, he takes on a new position of subtle feminine power, one that Rackin characterizes as "aggressive passivity" (54), in order to garner more sympathy

and trust from the courtiers while further masking his political intentions. He scapegoats himself by playing on the common anxieties towards feminine unruliness: we can take his inclusion of the name of Jane Shore as calculated. Associating Elizabeth with “that harlot” further condemns her as being femininely unruly, as the witch and the whore were often one and the same (Newman 56-57).²⁰

Of course, his accusation seems rather ridiculous and histrionic due to the fact that Richard’s deformity has been present since his birth. It is incongruous to use it as proof of Elizabeth’s evilness, which is of course the point. However, Richard’s claim perhaps becomes more plausible—or at least digestible—when we consider the fact that his deformity has been cited as a product of feminine evil by the very nature of its being present since birth. Characters repeatedly attribute the evil to the Duchess of York’s womb, which she herself characterizes as “accursed” and “the bed of death” (4.1.57).

In Elizabethan England, the creation of cheap print resulted in an uptick of interest in monstrous births, for even when it might not be possible to see a monster in real life, one could read about them in the widely circulated pamphlets. Pamphleteers often linked the occasion of the monstrous birth to sexual sins or the greater sins of the community, thus turning them into part grotesque interest piece, part morality tale. The monsters became omens and portents, representations of God’s disapproval. The details of Richard’s birth we are given—born early, deformed, and able to “gnaw a crust at two hours old.” (2.4.30-31)—are certainly monstrous, which leaves the question: who is responsible for this monstrous birth?

While Richard’s birth could certainly have portentous political associations, the play itself most often cites the womb as responsible for monstrosity. Likewise, in cheap print, even

²⁰ In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Old Banks refers to old Mother Sawyer as a “hot whore” (4.1.25).

when there is some larger sin at play, the mother's body is often condemned for its hand in the production of the monster. Ambroise Paré, in his 1573 encyclopedia of monstrous births, cites the most common reason for monstrous birth as inappropriate copulation by the parents, "like brutish beasts, in which their appetite guides them, without respecting the time, or other laws ordained by God and Nature." This was particularly true for children conceived during menstruation, as they were bound to be nourished on blood that is "contaminated, dirty, and corrupt" (5). Thus, the womb itself was most often at blame for the production of monstrous children, the woman whom it belonged to just as much a "brutish beast" as the monster she produced. Once more depicted as a dirty, volatile organ, the womb had the most potential to ruin the very children it produced and proved to be a common scapegoat for physiological deformity.

The Duchess of York herself blames her womb for Richard's monstrosity. She admonishes it often for producing Richard, with laments such as: "O ill-dispersing wind of misery! / O my accursed womb, the bed of death! / A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world" (4.1.56-58). She abjects this part of her body, speaking of her womb as something separate from her body—or, if it is part of her, as having some mind of its own. The idea of the womb having a sort of independence and autonomy of its own was common in the early modern period, as it was viewed as an "active" organ, one able to influence, often in negative ways, the other organs of the body. The volatility of the womb suggests that women were not in control of their own bodies. And yet, they were held responsible for their negative wombs and the monsters they produced, for as Mary Fissell notes "the womb was a synecdoche for motherhood itself" (83). Bad wombs meant bad mothers, and if the Duchess is to take ownership of her monster-producing womb, she is also taking on the responsibility of being a bad mother and, extrapolated out, a bad woman. Indeed, other figures in the play seem to implicitly understand this; Queen

Margaret condemns the Duchess for her bad womb with: “From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept / A hellhound that doth hunt us all to death” (4.4.48-50) and “That foul defacer of God’s handiwork / Thy womb let loose to chase us to our graves” (4.4.55-56). Her condemnations directly blame the Duchess’ womb, imbuing it with agency as something that “let loose” Richard and is thus acutely responsible for his current evils. I suggest that these continual accusations against the female body leave the primary blame for Richard’s bad physiognomy, and subsequently his bad character, on feminine wrongdoing.

We see this same anxiety towards the power and unruliness of women’s bodies mirrored in contemporary conceptions of the body of the witch. Witches were identified by a witch’s mark of a supernumerary nipple—they were often stripped naked and examined by other women at their trials in attempts to find them. As noted in the previous chapters, as an obscene facsimile of maternity, the Devil or familiar sucked blood or milk from these deformities. Queen Margaret herself, when teaching the other women of the play the nature of formulating the efficacious curse, recommends her own brand of aberrant maternity and bodily perversion:

Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days,
Compare dead happiness with living woe;
Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,
And he that slew them fouler than he is.
Bettering thy loss makes the bad causer worse.
Resolving this will teach thee how to curse (4.4.121-126).

Like the witch who perverted her body for the devil and the bad mother who let her unruly womb create monsters, Queen Margaret suggests that the perversion of the female form is necessary for harnessing its power. She indicates that her own power depends first on physical abnegation (she forces herself to fast and neglect sleep)²¹ and on her status as a perverse mother (her children are

²¹ This practice was called “black-fasting.” In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas notes that “There was ritual fasting, which, particularly before the Reformation, was sometimes perverted into a maleficent activity designed to secure the death of some specified victim” (512).

dead, and yet she thinks them “sweeter than they were”). Queen Margaret suggests that there is a real power in distorting the feminine body and role of mother, echoing Keith Thomas’ assertion that “the more justified the curser’s anger, the more likely that his imprecation would take effect” (505). Queen Margaret also anticipates Lady Macbeth’s later desire to be “unsexed” at the hands of the spirits and “fill’d” with cruelty rather than children. Her advice underscores the association between the womb and witchcraft, but further characterizes her speech acts as a uniquely feminine brand of evil, a distinction that Richard preys upon.

If Richard is able to manipulate Margaret and Anne’s witch-like discourse into a mode of scapegoating his own wrongdoings, we can read Richard’s deformity and its association with monstrous birth as his first act of scapegoating the bodily unruliness of the women of the play. He capitalizes on the idea that women’s bodies possess some innate power, turning this perception against them the same way his deformities informed his own birth as an act of monstrous femininity. Richard, since his deformity and subsequent imperative to “play the villain” are rooted in feminine transgression, has a preternatural aptitude for manipulating the bodies and discourse of women. While Richard is justifiably often compared to the devil as well as the later demonic Shakespearean villains Edmund and Iago, he is unique in that he climbs his way to patriarchal control not through more traditionally masculine modes of warfare and political manipulation, but through the harnessing of the self-destructive power of marginalized women who believe that their power lies in witchcraft. He understands implicitly how to use his own speech to invert witchcraft discourse and lead them to “prove the subject of [their] own soul’s curse” (4.1.85). Ultimately, Richard is not successful, as the ghosts of the play, who perhaps wield the truest preternatural power, curse him with the repeated litany of “Despair and die” (5.3.134) Yet still, he does fulfill the dark portent of his own monstrous birth by embodying

both the persona of the seductive devil, who feeds and manipulates the delusions of the women, and the marginalized, delusional witch figure that the devil himself preys upon.

The Witch, the Victim, the Hysteric: King Lear's Co-Optation of Feminine Performance

While Richard's hysterical performance of a marginalized witch is a purely manufactured act, Shakespeare's *King Lear* profiles a man who performs the feminine roles of witch and witch-victim not in calculated jest, but in earnest. In this chapter, I will argue that King Lear is Shakespeare's most convincing figure of male witchcraft. Perverted matriarchal structures in conjunction with a character whose body is characterized as aged and highly dysfunctional create an almost perfect gender inverse of the social conditions that create witches. I will discuss and analyze the ways in which Lear co-opts and subsequently inverts feminine roles—particularly that of the witch and her victim—as a response to his loss of patriarchal and political power.

The tragedy begins with a significant act in Lear's life: the abdication of his throne in his old age. He plans to split the kingdom into thirds, one section for each of his daughters, and then "Unburdened crawl toward death" (1.1.44). However, within the dissolution of kingdom comes the hidden implication that Lear is dissolving the patriarchal structure in favor of a matriarchal one. Unwittingly, he is handing over power to two women who are characterized later as "Tigers, not daughters" (4.2.49), women who embody more masculine personas and who are not afraid to forego customary relinquishing of the control of their assets and wealth to their husbands. The masculine power that Lear enjoys as both king and father is supplanted by the feminine power of his daughters, Goneril and Regan.

Lear's lack of understanding of his eldest daughters' masculine natures also causes him to make his largest blunder in terms of negotiating the newfound matriarchal structure; he banishes Cordelia, renouncing her as his daughter because she will not "mend [her] speech"

(1.1.103) to profess an unnatural, quasi-maternal love for him. At the time *Lear* was written, Elizabethan statute maintained that children were responsible for the care of their elderly parents (Crawford and Mendelson 191), something that *Lear* reflects upon after the disownment when he muses, “I loved her most and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery” (1.1.137-138).

It is highly significant that at the moment of *Lear*’s disavowal of Cordelia, he swears “By the sacred radiance of the sun, / The mysteries of Hecate and the night, / By all the operation of the orbs” (1.1.121-123).²² Although it is important note that *King Lear* is set in a pre-Christian society, thus normalizing the invocation of gods and goddesses, one must wonder: why is the name of Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and the moon, central to *Lear*’s proclamation? Why does *Lear*, a king supposedly imbued with divine power and favor, find it necessary to draw upon a power source that the audience would immediately connect with witchcraft? I ask these questions because in *Lear*’s invocation and subsequent disownment of Cordelia I see a pattern that has woven itself through our discussions of both *The Witch of Edmonton* and *Macbeth*—the union of social and domestic marginalization with the implementation of witchspeak. *Lear*’s disownment of Cordelia marks a departure from any sort of loving familial care in old age that *Lear* could have expected from his daughters. If we are to think of *Lear*’s situation as akin to a village witch’s, I would argue that Goneril and Regan embody much more the role of a community forced to care for a dependent than the loving, filial daughters that *Lear* envisioned as his caretakers. Goneril’s line of “Sister, it is not little I have to say of what most nearly appertains to us both...” (1.1.329) followed by Regan’s acknowledgement of “He [*Lear*] always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgement he hath now cast her off appears too grossly” (1.1.336-338) imply that both had tacitly understood that it would be Cordelia solely

²² All quotes are taken from Folger Shakespeare Library’s *King Lear*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine.

who cared for Lear in his old age. Thus, Lear loses further comfort and status within the microcosmic community of his daughters and their husbands. As Deborah Willis explains, "*King Lear* provides an aristocratic example of a situation common among the lower classes, except that then, as now, women tended to live longer; widowed mothers were thus more likely to end up dependent on the "kind nursery" of their children" (75). I would take this even further by suggesting that Lear's situation is akin more to a childless widow rather than those widowed mothers Willis describes. Partially because of Lear's overinflated expectations for his care, but also partially by the very nature of Goneril and Regan's dislike of their duty, Lear becomes an elite male analog to a Mother Sawyer type: that is, he is totally dependent upon a community for aid that they are unwilling to give him aid.

Lear expects to enjoy an almost indulgent maternal experience from his daughters in which they house, feed, and put up with his large party of knights, denying him nothing. I would argue that this expectation likely comes from Lear's association of his daughters with the feminine and thus the maternal. Perhaps because they have no children, he expects them to imbue all of their "natural" maternal energies into his care. If he had sons and a male heir to the throne, there would be less of an expectation for such intensely dotting, maternal care on Lear's part. A male heir would mean a unified kingdom, and a male ruler would counter the power struggles that inevitably arise from Lear's splitting of the kingdom. Moreover, Lear himself would expect less parental dotting from a male heir, for he would instead identify that heir with the political realm rather than the maternal. Thus, as we saw in our discussion of *Macbeth*, the lack of a male successor presents a serious problem to the power and security of the central male figure of the play.

As I have noted, the masculine power that Lear enjoyed as both king and father is supplanted by the feminine power of his daughters, Goneril and Regan. They become primarily occupied with acting as the political rulers of his land, abjuring their roles as quasi-mother figures to Lear. This power dynamic becomes more apparent as the play progresses onward and Regan and Goneril become less accommodating of their father's large party of attendants. During an argument with Goneril, Lear comes to the ultimate realization that he, in fact, does not have the same authority over his offspring as he used to possess. Lear, when he finds himself effectively marginalized in a society where he once exercised complete patriarchal control, utters his first curse against his daughter:

Hear, Nature, hear; dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase;
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her! (1.4.288-294)

I use the word “curse” deliberately here—as Kirilka Stavreva has explained, “though lacking in authentic creative power, witch-speak [cursing] nonetheless possessed the power to induce fear and wonder, to make believe” (310). Through his curse, we can see Lear's anxieties as he seeks to gain purchase in a new power dynamic in which he is at the bottom of the hierarchy. Robbed of his patriarchal power, he is left only with the force of his words to scare Goneril into submission.

However, we can read in Lear's curse, in the same way we read Lady Macbeth's call for sterility, the utterance of a curse against the self. We have already seen with Lady Anne in *Richard III* that curses may to backfire onto their speaker. For Lear, the absence of a male heir has caused irresolvable discord and anxiety in both the political and domestic sphere. His curse

on Goneril is a reaction that can be read as an expression of this hierarchical chaos. However, we can also see in Lear's curse a paradoxical focus on fertility in a curse that invokes sterility. He begins by invoking Nature, a force largely associated with fertility and new life. He goes on to use words such as "fruitful" and "increase," "babe" and "spring," coloring his curse with language that is reminiscent of childbirth even while it calls for female infertility.

I contend that with this reconfigured curse, Lear aims to exterminate the very root of his daughter's femininity and the source of her threateningly feminine power: the womb. The decision to call for the "dry[ing] up" of Goneril's reproductive system connotes a desire for the erasure of the womb itself, a cancellation entirely of the organ that early modern physicians considered to be the most volatile and disease-ridden part of the female body.²³ This denigration of the functioning womb contrasts to those witches who cursed the womb to swell and suffocate, or else produce infants that were unviable or that possessed physically monstrous qualities. Conversely, Lear seems to envision the womb not as a foe against the female body, but as the greatest asset of woman, the "organ of increase," the one part of the body that has the ability to produce loving, filially obedient heirs. In this way Lear's attack seems to be revenge-based: rather than playing upon anxieties about female reproduction, he seeks to cancel out Goneril's ability to successfully mother in any capacity, suggesting further that Lear believes his daughter's identity as a woman and a potentially "good" mother threatens his masculine role. In this contradictory thinking, we can see the inherent tension in the vengeance that Lear superficially desires and the male heir that he seems to subconsciously desire.

Caught up in the vengeance of cursing Goneril to the same fate of proving heirless, Lear seems to neglect entirely the notion that if his daughter is infertile, he has no chance of obtaining

²³ See Culpeper and Jorden.

a male lineage through her and the Duke of Albany. Just as Lady Macbeth destabilizes Macbeth's lineage in a call for her own infertility, so Lear destabilizes his position as the patriarch of the next generation. In this way, his initial declaration to Cordelia rebounds on him as well:

...The barbarous Scythian,
 Or he that makes his generation messes
 To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
 Be as well neighbour'd, pitied, and relieved,
 As thou my sometime daughter. (1.1.129-133).

By adopting the role vengeful witch, Lear has inadvertently also embodied the role of the "barbarous Scythian" by cursing the one place where "his generation" could be realized through Goneril's children. Notably as well, as the eldest daughter, Goneril's children would have been first in line for the throne if the kingdom went undivided.

Though Lear co-opts this feminine power of the witch, he inverts the traditional notion of the witch-figure through the curse itself. "Blasts and fogs upon thee!" Lear shouts to Goneril, "Th'untented woundings of a father's curse/Pierce every sense about thee!" (1.4.315-317). It is this distinction of the "father's curse" that distinguishes Lear's cursing from that of the traditional early modern witch. As Keith Thomas notes, "the parent's curse" was a sort of malevolent inversion of the concept of "the parent's blessing," a magic that early modern individuals believed had efficacy (506). Richard Whytforde, an early modern authority on child-rearing, once defined this inversion: "The blessing of the parents doth firm and make stable the possessions and the kindred of the children. And contrary, the curse of the parents doth eradicate and...utterly destroy both" (qtd. in Thomas 506). Notably, it is the "kindred of the children"—the children's children—who are harmed the by the wrath of the curse, not the children themselves. In this way the curse becomes appropriate when children are adults and have

“outgrown normal means of parental control,” making the only attempt to regain power available through “the dreadful weapon of the father’s curse” (Thomas 509). By using witchspeak to curse Goneril to sterility, Lear not only seeks to reestablish his parental control over her, but also the patriarchal control he once enjoyed as king. But he does so at the expense of his lineage. Just as he further isolated himself from the matriarchal power structures via Cordelia’s banishment, he eradicates any hope of patriarchal reestablishment through his “father’s curse.”

Ironically, Lear believes himself to be the victim of an unruly, overactive womb. In a moment of emotion, he exclaims to Kent: “O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!/*Hysterica passio*, down, though climbing sorrow!/*Thy element’s below*” (2.4.62-64). Here, Lear speaks of womb sickness, also known as the “suffocation of the mother.” This illness, according to Nicholas Culpeper’s *Directory for Midwives*, occurred when the menses or “seed” of a woman, usually a menstruating one, became corrupted. This caused “vapor malignant and venomous” to rise up from the womb and infect the rest of the woman’s body (108). In some cases, such as the one Lear describes here, the sickness involved the womb itself being physically displaced, wandering about the body and harming the other organs in the process.

The most surprising component of Lear’s self-diagnosis is that pre-Freudian understandings of hysteria paint it solely as a women’s disease. As Jordan notes, men, not possessing a womb, were thought to be free from the various and frightening maladies that plagued women, who were “subject to more diseases and of other sortes and natures than men are” due to their possession of a womb (MacDonald n.p.). It seems like a surprising and ill-thought-out diagnosis on Lear’s part: why would he, who has such an intense fear of all forms of femininity, fashion himself as the owner of a malignant womb? I will argue that Lear does this for two main reasons. First, to harness the power that comes from being a victim of illness

caused by witchcraft, a power traditionally only available to the marginalized female. Second, as a psychological reaction to his daughter Goneril's refusal to embody a maternal role for Lear, and the subsequent sterility of her own womb that Lear has foolishly cursed her to.

The most well-documented and well-known case of womb sickness by witchcraft occurred in London in 1602.²⁴ Mary Glover, daughter of a London shopkeeper, grew ill after an elderly woman named Elizabeth Jackson allegedly cursed her. This happened after the two had publicly fought; they had an argument in which Glover accused her of fraud.²⁵ Three days after their fight, Jackson came into the shop while Glover was drinking posset, demanding to see her mother. When Glover refused, Jackson left in anger. Glover, attempting to drink her posset again, found she could not; her throat had swollen shut. Soon after, her throat and neck swelled further, she became dumb and blind, and she began to suffer terrifying fits. The Glovers brought a physician named Robert Shereman in to examine their daughter, who attempted to treat her for hysteria. When none of the usual treatments aided Mary Glover, he began to suspect that witchcraft was behind the girl's illness.

Rumors of her illness and its probable cause of witchcraft began to circulate around the community. Through a series of tests, physicians sought to figure out whether or not Jackson was the true culprit of Glover's illness. Such tests included pricking Glover with hot pins to see if she would react (she gave no indications of feeling any pain), bringing Jackson into the room to note Glover's reaction (she would commence having terrible fits, and would almost inaudibly whisper the phrase "Hang her! Hang her!" through her nostrils), and giving Glover an orange which Jackson had previously touched (this too, brought on another series of fits). At this time,

²⁴ All references to the Glover case, as well as to Jorden and Bradwell's pamphlets, come from Michael Macdonald's *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London*, which covers the Glover case and contemporary responses most extensively.

²⁵ "My daughter shall have clothes when thou art dead and rotten," she cursed.

physicians observing Glover found themselves divided: while some became convinced of Jackson's culpability, physicians like Edward Jorden and John Argent attempted to defend Jackson, persuaded that Glover's illness was due to completely natural explanations. Though Jorden and Argent were unsuccessful in their defense of Jackson at her trial, Jackson was soon released and Jorden, under the probable influence of the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, went on to write *A Briefe Discoverse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*, a pamphlet that labored to show readers that the origins of Glover's illness—and womb sickness as a whole—had entirely natural explanations.

Choosing to label his madness as hysteria aligns Lear with contemporary witch-victims, young women such as Mary Glover. Indeed, Glover is not the only documented case of a witch bringing upon symptoms that align with a diagnosis of suffocation of the mother—Mother Staunton, a suspected witch of Essex, cursed the wife of Robert Cornell to “swell from tyme to tyme, as if she had been with child, by whiche swellyng she came so greate in bodie, as she feared she should burste: and to this daie is not restored to healte” (Gibson 47). Likewise, many victims of witchcraft—often women—experienced strange fits and convulsions at the hands of their witches. Like these women, Lear's victimhood becomes his proof of the wrongdoings and evilness of his daughters and therefore a potential weapon. Despite being the only figure in the play to actually utter curses against women, Lear is able to dismiss his own utilization of witch-speak and demonize his daughters by claiming victimhood—in his own mind, to his supporters, and even the audience of the play itself—further by acting out his illness as a direct consequence of their cruelty towards him.

In terms of the Glover case, we must remember that while Elizabeth Jackson was an unlikeable widow figure within her community, she still had status over Glover, who was only

fourteen at the time of their altercation. It is also important to remember that Jackson was perhaps considered well within her right to admonish Glover because she was an adult and therefore socially superior. The case of her illness and supposed bewitchment gave Mary Glover power over Jackson that she otherwise would not have possessed. As MacDonald explains, “The belief that they [the fits] had supernatural cause enabled Mary Glover to reverse the normal relations of authority and to exert her power over her adversary” (xli). Just as Mary Glover’s illness gives her occasion and allowance to whisper “Hang her, hang her” from her nostrils in Jackson’s presence, Lear’s imagined wandering womb and “rising heart” (2.4.135) fashion him as a victim of “unnatural hags” rather than a demanding old man with unindulgent daughters. Operating outside the matriarchal structure, Lear’s victimhood allows him to critique and cast blame upon the system.

Like Glover, Lear believes himself to be suffering from *hysterica passio* due to the wickedness of another woman. (In Lear’s case, this role falls primarily on his daughter Goneril). While Lear himself does not explicitly blame his hysteria on Goneril, his laments suggest that he does hold her responsible for his self-prescribed sickness. “Where is this daughter?” (2.4.64) he demands of Kent right after he bemoans his rising womb. More advanced in his madness, he cries out, “O Regan, Goneril! / Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all! / O, that way madness lies” (3.4.23-24). Notably, he that his “wicked creatures” of daughters are not only what drives him to illness, but in his madness, he also indicates that they *are* his illness. He identifies Goneril as physical affliction and the cause of his madness when he warns,

I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.
I will not trouble thee, my child; farewell.
We'll no more meet, no more see one another.
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,

A plague sore, an embossed carbuncle
In my corrupted blood...(2.4.251-258).

Lear likens Goneril to a disease embodied inside of his “corrupted blood,” suggesting that it is in his thwarted lineage that he sees himself most harmed by her. He embodies her alleged evilness (“which I must needs call mine”) of her socially improper transgressions, perhaps anticipating Prospero’s later claims to Caliban (“This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (5.1.330-331)).

While Lear attempts to cast himself as the victim of his daughter’s influence, he is really his own victim. By cursing his daughter’s womb and abdicating his throne, Lear has removed himself entirely from the possibility of producing a male heir. Therefore, we can read Lear’s madness as having brought on an imagined womb sickness due to his newfound helplessness and anxiety over his male lineage. Because he has been denied access to a healthy, productive womb in the women around him, he imagines himself as possessing a uniquely feminine reproductive dysfunction, identifying his tenuous heirless status with the possession of a malignant, unruly womb.

We can see Lear’s anxieties towards femininity reach their apex when he makes an impassioned speech against his daughters towards the end of his life, describing them as “down from the waist...Centaurs, Though women all above. But to the girdle do the god’s inherit; beneath is all the fiend’s. There’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit: burning, scalding, stench, consumption!” (4.6.142-144). Just as women accused of witchcraft, including Elizabeth Jackson, were characterized as physically monstrous and said to have “divers strange marks at which...the Devil sucks their blood” (MacDonald 28), so too does Lear fashion an image of femininity as something perverse and deviant. In particular, his envisioning of the womb as owned by “the fiend” and his characterization of it as a “sulphurous pit” suggest natural

associations between the devil and the womb and together with the ‘natural’ status of women as witches. By attacking the womb so directly, he condemns not only his daughter’s femininity but also his own fantasized femininity, as demonstrated by his supposed possession of a wandering womb.

The heart of the debate surrounding Mary Glover’s case lay primarily in the cause of her illness. Physicians and citizens of London alike questioned and debated as to whether or not her illness was brought on by natural or preternatural means. While there is, of course, the possibility that Glover herself was faking the entire illness (as was the case with some alleged witchcraft victims) physicians observing Glover, including the skeptic Jorden, were hesitant to believe that Glover herself had fabricated the illness. Instead, Jorden posited a unique theory to explain Glover’s intense reactions to Jackson’s presence without accusing her of fakery: he argues that the fits Glover had in Jackson’s presence were produced by the brain. Sick with hysteria, Jorden claims that a hysteric’s “Imagination, Reason, and Memory” are affected, and that “if it bee hurt either by dimminution or depravation or total abolishment, then the inferior functions doe necessarily participate with the offence” (12). The womb poisons the brain and, in turn, the brain affects the ‘animal functions’ when it is upset or averse to a certain person or thing (and in Glover’s case, Elizabeth Jackson herself).

This is an important distinction to make in our discussion of Lear, for it categorizes Lear’s hysteria as a mental illness rather than a physical one. It perhaps helps explain why Lear would diagnose himself with “womb sickness” rather than with the more masculine diagnosis of “melancholy.” If we are to apply Jorden’s logic to *King Lear*, we are left with a story about a man who believes in the efficacy of witchcraft, both as a practitioner and victim of it, despite the fact that he exists in a situation in which his imaginings of preternatural power are implied to be

nothing but the madness of an old man. Jorden himself alleges those physicians who believe in witchcraft are unlearned and negligent (Epistle Dedicatorie section), suggesting that he perhaps views all claims of witchcraft improbable. If we are to believe Jorden and see Lear's hysteria as a mental illness rather evidence of his daughter's preternatural malevolence, Lear is left as the sole character attempting to embody a witch role in the play. Rather than becoming the Mary Glover of his community, Lear inadvertently casts himself as Elizabeth Jackson: old, dependent, and willing to curse young women's wombs in the name of revenge. Both Lear and Jackson fall under the umbrella of Bradwell's account of the Glover case, in which he calls Elizabeth Jackson (and subsequently others of her kind) "full of Cursings, she threatens and prophesies, and still it takes effect...Their malice is great, their practices devilish" (29).

Because of this, we can perhaps read *King Lear* as a thought-experiment in gender hierarchy reversal, one that ends in an organic formulation of a sort of prototype of a male witch. Lear, once stripped of his kingly power, discovers power in both the negative speech acts and the performed role of the witchcraft victim. Considering that the play ends in Lear's ultimate dissolution into madness and untimely death, *King Lear* depicts a bleak outcome for those oppressed by hierarchical systems, suggesting that Lear and the old widow witches he imitates are doomed for nothing but madness and further rejection by early modern society.

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