

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



A Performance History of *The Witch of Edmonton*

Rowland Wymer

Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

Rowland.Wymer@anglia.ac.uk

List of Known Performances of *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621–2014)¹

- 1621 Summer (?). Performed by Prince Charles's Men at the Phoenix (Cockpit) Theatre. The cast probably included William Rowley (Cuddy Banks).
- 1621 29 December. Performed by Prince Charles's Men at Court. The cast probably included William Rowley (Cuddy Banks).
- 1634 Summer (?). Performed by Queen Henrietta's Men at the Phoenix (Cockpit) Theatre. The cast included Theophilus Bird (Prologue) and Ezekiel Fenn (Winnifride and Epilogue).
- 1921 24 and 26 April (Amateur). Produced by the Phoenix Society at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, London, directed by the Rev. Montague Summers. The cast included: Ion Swinley (Frank Thorney); Sybil Thorndike (Elizabeth Sawyer); Russell Thorndike (Dog); Frank Cochrane (Cuddy Banks); Joseph A. Dodd (Old Carter); Marjorie Gordon (Winnifride); Mary Barton (Susan); Clare Harris (Katherine); Herbert Bunston (Old Thorney); Howard Rose (Sir Arthur Clarington), George Skillan (Warbeck), Tristan Hawson (Somerton), and Edith Evans (Anne Ratcliffe).
- 1936 From 8 December for four weeks. Produced at the Old Vic, London, directed by Michel Saint-Denis. The cast included: Marius Goring (Frank Thorney); Edith Evans (Elizabeth Sawyer); Hedley Briggs (Dog); Ian Mackenzie (Cuddy Banks); Ernest Hare (Old Carter); Beatrix Lehmann (Winnifride); Anna Konstam (Susan); Alec Guinness (Old Thorney); George Hayes (Sir Arthur Clarington);

¹ I am grateful to Lisa Hopkins, Martin Wiggins, Anne Hicks, and Rosemary Hay for help in compiling this list. I have normalized and harmonized character designations and spellings except where there is a specific reason not to do so.

- Michael Redgrave (Warbeck), Leonard Sachs (Somerton), Betty Potter (Anne Ratcliffe), and John Abbott (Justice).
- 1962 From 21 November. Produced at the Mermaid Theatre, London, directed by Bernard Miles. The cast included: William Lucas (Frank Thorney); Ruby Head (Elizabeth Sawyer); Melvyn Hayes (Dog); Timothy Bateson (Cuddy Banks); Morris Sweden (Old Carter); Ann Lynn (Winnifride); Olive McFarland (Susan); Mary Denison (Katherine); Edward Jewesbury (Sir Arthur Clarington); William Holmes (Warbeck); John Pickles (Somerton); John McKelvey (Old Thorney); Erik Chitty (Old Banks); David Battley (Old Ratcliffe); Patricia Connolly (Anne Ratcliffe); John Gay (Justice); and Paul Harris (Constable).
- 1976 7–10 December (Amateur). Produced by the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School at The Vandyck Theatre, Bristol, directed by Nat Brenner.
- 1981 From 16 September. Produced by The Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford, directed by Barry Kyle. Later transferred to the Gulbenkian Studio, Newcastle (from 24 March, 1982) and the Pit, the Barbican, London (from 28 September, 1982). The cast included: Gerard Murphy (Frank Thorney); Miriam Karlin (Elizabeth Sawyer); Miles Anderson (Dog); Tony O'Donnell (Cuddy Banks); George Raistrick (Old Carter); Harriet Walter (Winnifride); Juliet Stevenson (Susan); Clare Travers-Deacon (Katherine); Peter Ellis (Sir Arthur Clarington); Simon Templeman (Warbeck); James Fleet (Somerton); Robert Eddison (Old Thorney); John Burgess (Old Banks); and Julia Hills (Anne Ratcliffe).
- 1984 5–9 June (Amateur). Produced by the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School at the new Vic, Bristol, directed by Peter Symonds.
- 1987 29 September–22 November. Produced by The Shakespeare Theatre Company at the Lansburgh Theatre, Washington DC, directed by Barry Kyle. The cast included: Derek D. Smith (Frank Thorney); Mary Lou Rosato (Elizabeth Sawyer); Wendell Pierce (Dog); Joel Miller (Cuddy Banks); Ralston Hill (Old Carter); Kim Staunton (Winnifride); Leslie Geraci (Susan); Melissa Gallagher (Katherine); Edward Gero (Sir Arthur Clarington); Edward Conery (Old Thorney); Philip Goodwin (Warbeck); Anthony Powell (Somerton); George Riddle (Old Banks); and Laura Brutsman (Anne Ratcliffe).
- 1992 2–19 September. Produced at the Hen and Chickens, London, directed by Helen Fry. The cast included: Christopher Helmsdale (Frank Thorney); Joan Marlow (Elizabeth Sawyer); and Charlotte Knight (Dog).
- 1993 Produced by Equity Showcase Theatre at the Harbourfront, Toronto, directed by Peter Hinton. The cast included: Greg Kramer (Dog); Sandra Oh (Cuddy

- Banks); Dragana Varagic (Ann Ratcliffe); Lauren Piech; Elysse Katz; and Eva Prager.
- 1999 September. Produced by REV Theater Company at Expanded Arts, New York City, adapted and directed by Rosemary Hay and Rudy Caporaso. Later transferred to Expanded Arts' new venue (March 2000), The International Festival of Arts and Ideas, Stamford, Connecticut (June 2000), the Brick Playhouse, Philadelphia (May 1-12, 2001), and Chashama, New York City (October 2001). The cast included: Jeffrey Thaiss (Frank Thorney); Susan Moses (Elizabeth Sawyer); Rudy Caporaso (Dog); Nicole Marsh ('Jane' [Winnifride]); Christiana Cobean (Susan); Claire Golden Drake (Katherine); Gene D'Alessandro (Sir Arthur Clarington).
- 2000 7 November–2 December. Produced by Enter The Spirit Productions at the Southwark Playhouse, London, directed by Simon Cox. The cast included: Tom Foster (Frank Thorney); Deirdre Doone (Elizabeth Sawyer); Paul Panting (Dog); Chris Garner (Cuddy Banks/Justice); Brian Poyser (Old Carter/Old Banks/Sawgut the fiddler); Claire Lichie (Winnifride); Naomie Harris (Susan); Lara Marland (Katherine/Anne Ratcliffe); Keith Woodason (Sir Arthur Clarington/Old Thorney/Old Ratcliffe); Morgan James (Warbeck/Countryman); and Vernon Douglas (Somerton/Countryman).
- 2004 5–8 May (Amateur). Produced by the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School at the Redgrave Theatre, Bristol, directed by Andrew Normington. Subsequently toured to the Tacchi-Morris Arts Centre, Taunton (13 May), the Roses Theatre, Tewkesbury (26 May), the Taliesin Arts Centre, Swansea (1 July), and Brewery Arts, Cirencester (3 July).
- 2006 (Amateur). Produced by the Arden School of Theatre at the Waterside Theatre, Manchester, directed by David O'Shea. The cast included: Hazel Earle (Elizabeth Sawyer); and Jennifer Kay (Susan).
- 2008 15–18 October (Amateur). Produced by Dalhousie Theatre Productions at the Dalhousie Arts Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia, directed by Roberta Barker. The cast included Charise Mancini (Frank Thorney); Chrissi Forte (Elizabeth Sawyer); Kimberley Cody (Dog); Nick MacInnes (Cuddy Banks); Stephanie Folkins ('Widow Carter'); Nessa Trenton (Winnifride); Heather Wadsworth (Susan); Caili Steel (Katherine); Antony Dobrzensky (Old Thorney); Leete Stentson (Sir Arthur Clarington); Ryan Jewkes (Warbeck); Mark Neufeld (Somerton); Old Banks (Ken MacAlpine); and Caitlin Kennedy (Anne Ratcliffe/Morris Dancer).
- 2009 20 October–15 November. Produced by Periwig and Monkey at The Courtyard Theatre, Shoreditch, London, adapted and directed by Natasha Dawn. The cast

included: Mark Hawkins (Frank Thorney); Leonie Hill (Elizabeth Sawyer); Tom Hunter (Dog); Alexander Barnes (Cuddy Banks); Dafydd Gwyn Howells (Old Carter); Naima Stevenson (Winnifride); Lucy Grainger (Susan); Julie Gilby (Katherine); Samantha Aspinall ('Widow Thorney'); Simon Mathis (Sir Arthur Clarington); Bisera Winters ('Lady Clarington'); Sam Kermer (Warbeck); Milan Alexander (Somerton); Hester Ruoff ('Jane Banks'); and Philippa Flynn (Anne Ratcliffe).

- 2010 2–6, 9–12 June. Produced by REV Theater Company at The Caplan Studio Theatre, Philadelphia, adapted and directed by Rosemary Hay. The cast included: Ted Powell (Frank Thorney); D'Arcy Webb (Elizabeth Sawyer); Rudy Caporaso (Dog); Ryan Walker (Cuddy Banks); Darin J. Dunston (Old Carter); Haley McCormick ('Jane' [Winnifride]); Angela Smith (Susan); Alyssa DiPalma (Katherine); Tom Juarez (Old Thorney); Nicholas Muni (Sir Arthur Clarington); David Wrigley (Warbeck); Daniel O'Neil (Somerton); Jennifer MacMillan (Anne Ratcliffe); and Ryan Touhey (Old Ratcliffe).
- 2010 5–14 August. Produced by The Red Light District at Trinity Bellwoods Park, Toronto, directed by Ted Witzel & Catherine Dunn. The cast included: Jonah Hundert (Frank Thorney); Mina James (Elizabeth Sawyer); Ted Witzel (Dog); Reid Linforth (Cuddy Banks); Old Carter (Eve Wylden); Jess Moss (Winnifride); Kat Letwin (Susan); Val Cina (Katherine); Marcel Dragonieri (Old Thorney); Michael-David Blostein (Sir Arthur Clarington); Ron Kelly (Warbeck); and Lauren Gillis (Somerton).
- 2011 25 January–20 February. Produced by Red Bull Theater at The Theater at St Clement's, New York City, adapted and directed by Jesse Berger. The cast included: Justin Blanchard (Frank Thorney); Charlayne Woodard (Elizabeth Sawyer); Derek Smith (Dog); Adam Green (Cuddy Banks); Sam Tsoutsouvas (Old Carter); Miriam Silverman (Winnifride); Christina Pumariega (Susan); Amanda Quaid (Katherine); Christopher McCann (Old Thorney); Christopher Innvar (Sir Arthur Clarington); Craig Baldwin (Warbeck); Carman Lacivita (Somerton); André de Shields (Old Banks); and Everett Quinton (Old Ratcliffe/Anne Ratcliffe).
- 2011 15–17 March (Amateur). Produced at the City of London School, the Winterflood Theatre, directed by Jonathan Keates. The cast included: Neel Sood (Frank Thorney); Sarah O'Keefe (Elizabeth Sawyer); Noah Carvajal (Dog); Jared Rood (Cuddy Banks); Max Davey (Old Carter); Sarah King (Winnifride); Jessica Curtis (Susan); Sally Patterson (Katherine); Alex Schulte (Old Thorney); Joe Caplin (Sir Arthur Clarington); James Waddell (Warbeck); Sean Thompson (Somerton); Tom Barry (Old Banks); and Mia Georgis (Anne Ratcliffe).

- 2011 20–26 March (Amateur). Produced by York University, Toronto, Canada, directed by Anita La Selva. The cast included: Tom Soares (Frank Thorney); Laurel Thomson (Elizabeth Sawyer); Tosha Doiron (Dog); and Katie McCulloch (Winnifride).
- 2011 20–29 October. Adapted by Theatre Daedalus at the Van Fleet Theatre, Columbus, Ohio, directed by Sonda Staley Lewis.
- 2012 From 10 February. Produced at the Disk Theatre, Prague, directed by Aleksí Barrière. Czech translation by Julek Neumann. Dramaturgy by Markéta Machačíková. The cast included: Vuk G. Čelebič (Frank Thorney); Anna Čisařovská (Elizabeth Sawyer); Nina Horáková (Dog); Michal Švarc (Cuddy Banks); Václav Šanda (Old Carter); Pavla Dostálová (Winnifride); Zuzana Volavá (Susan); Kamila Šmejkalová (Katherine); Petr Besta j.h. (Old Thorney); Tomáš Vaněk (Sir Arthur Clarington); Patrik Děrgel (Warbeck); Matěj Anděl (Somerton); and Anna Losová (Anne Ratcliffe).
- 2014 23 October–29 November. Produced by The Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre, Stratford, directed by Gregory Doran. The cast included: Ian Bonar (Frank Thorney); Eileen Atkins (Elizabeth Sawyer); Jay Simpson (Dog); Dafydd Llyr Thomas (Cuddy Banks); Ian Redford (Old Carter); Shvorne Marks (Winnifride); Faye Castelow (Susan); Elspeth Brodie (Katherine); Geoffrey Freshwater (Old Thorney); David Rintoul (Sir Arthur Clarington); Joseph Arkley (Warbeck); Joe Bannister (Somerton); Christopher Middleton (Old Banks); Liz Crowther (Anne Ratcliffe); Michael Moreland (Old Ratcliffe/Constable); Timothy Spey (Justice/Sawgut the fiddler); Oliver Dench (Hamluc/Officer).

Commentary

The title page of the 1658 Quarto, the only early edition of *The Witch of Edmonton*, claims that it was written ‘By divers well-esteemed Poets; *William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, &c*’.² Although often dismissed as a hasty attempt by three or four dramatists to cobble together a play which could quickly exploit the news value of the

² William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford &c, *The Witch of Edmonton: A Known True Story* (London: 1658), R2097 (Wing), Sig. A1. The normal scholarly view is that Dekker was responsible for the scenes with Elizabeth Sawyer and for the overall co-ordination of the whole project, Ford for the Frank Thorney plot, and Rowley for the scenes involving Cuddy Banks. If a fourth dramatist was involved, it was most likely Webster or Middleton. A more detailed investigation of the respective shares of the dramatists, using the results of rare trigram analysis, will be given in volume 2 of *The Collected Works of John Ford*, gen. ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2015). The sections of the present essay dealing with the seventeenth-century performances of the play are closely based on the Introduction I have written for the play in this volume.

trial and execution of Elizabeth Sawyer for witchcraft in April 1621, it is in fact a surprisingly carefully-written piece with a proven theatrical appeal which has outlasted its initial topicality. As the long list of known productions given above indicates, it has become the most frequently performed play in which any of the three named dramatists was ever involved, apart from *The Shoemaker's Holiday* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. At the time of writing, there have been twenty-three known productions since the seventeenth century, thirteen of them since the year 2000.

Although the play's close reliance in some of its scenes on Henry Goodcole's pamphlet *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch* gives it a more realistic and documentary appearance than any other Elizabethan or Jacobean witchcraft play, its mixture of sexual intrigue, bigamy, diabolism, murder, pathos, comedy, morris dancing, and the innovative use of a talking animal (the witch's familiar), is never less than highly theatrical. The play makes explicit or implicit allusions to *Doctor Faustus*, *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, *Mother Bombie*, *The Roaring Girl*, and the lost play *The Black Dog of Newgate*, and asks to be appreciated in the light of these examples of popular theatre.

The first absolutely certain recorded performance of *The Witch of Edmonton* was on 29 December, 1621, when it was played at Court by Prince Charles's Men.³ Seen in that context, it seems remarkably well adapted to the known interests and opinions of James I. It accepts the reality of witchcraft and the pacts with the devil allegedly made by witches, as James had done in his *Daemonologie* (1597), but it also shows considerable scepticism about the validity of particular accusations, as James had frequently done in his later years. In the character of the investigating Justice, it shows the authorities proceeding cautiously and responsibly in the face of wild accusations from the witch's neighbours. By making a morris dance one of its primary symbols of community, it also supports the King's defence of rural customs and pastimes made three years before in *The Kings Majesties Declaration to His Subjects* (usually referred to as *The Book of Sports*).

However, there is no reason to suppose that the play was specially written for Court performance. The Master of the Revels normally picked out plays which had already been successful in the commercial theatres and the title page of the 1658 Quarto declares that the play was 'Acted by the Princes Servants, often at the Cock-Pit in *Drury-Lane*, once at Court, with singular Applause'. We can be virtually certain that, by

³ Gerard Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941–68), I, p. 213.

the time the play was performed at Court, there had been a number of previous performances at the indoor Phoenix Theatre, which was situated in Cockpit Alley between Drury Lane and Wild Street, and used by the Prince's Men between 1619 and 1622. Converted from a cockpit by Christopher Beeston in 1616, it was still often referred to as 'the Cockpit', confirming that there is a metatheatrical allusion in the line 'the witch must be beaten out of her cockpit' (5.1.49–50).⁴

Henry Goodcole's pamphlet, the play's main source, was entered in the Stationers' Register on April 27, 1621, eight days after Elizabeth Sawyer had been hanged at Tyburn. When Dekker, Rowley, Ford, and Webster in *The Late Murder in Whitechapel, or Keep the Widow Waking* (1624) made a similar attempt to create a play quickly from recent sensational happenings, the play was licensed for performance within weeks of the latest of the events it dramatized. The pressures to get *The Witch of Edmonton* onto the stage quickly would have been similar and it is highly probable that the play's first performance at the Phoenix would have been at some time between mid-June and late July, 1621. It is likely that Rowley, who specialized in playing plump clownish figures, wrote the part of Cuddy Banks for himself and was a member of the original cast.

However, the surviving text of the play dates from a later revival, to which a Prologue (spoken by the actor Theophilus Bird) and an Epilogue (spoken by Ezekiel Fenn, the actor who played Winnifride) have been added. Since both actors were members of Queen Henrietta's Men in the late 1630s, Bentley conjectured the date of this revival as 1635 or 1636.⁵ However, it is possible to be more precise than that, and Etta Soiref Onat's suggestion of 1634 is much more likely to be correct.⁶

In the spring of 1634, a number of witches who had been convicted at Lancaster were brought to London for further examination before sentence was passed. They were still being investigated in August when the King's Men performed a play by Heywood and Brome called *The Witches of Lancashire* (which was subsequently printed, and more commonly known, as *The Late Lancashire Witches*). The arrival in London of the Lancashire witches seems to have provoked a surge of popular interest which the theatre tried to exploit. The King's Men attempted, with limited success, to protect their new play by petitioning the Lord Chamberlain and 'complayning of intermingling some passages of witches in old playes to y^e pr[e]judice of their designed Comedy of the

⁴ Quotations from the play are from William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*, ed. by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

⁵ Bentley, I, p. 251.

⁶ Etta Soiref Onat, ed., *The Witch of Edmonton: A Critical Edition* (New York: Garland, 1980), p. 162.

Lancashire witches, & desiring a prohibition of any other till theirs bee allowed & Acted'.⁷

In fact, on August 16, within days of the first performance of *The Witches of Lancashire*, Sir Henry Herbert was happy to grant a licence to 'An ould play, with some new scenes, Doctor Lambe and the Witches',⁸ and it was also surely during the summer of 1634, at the height of popular interest in the Lancashire witches, that *The Witch of Edmonton* was revived by Queen Henrietta's Men, who were now themselves occupying the Phoenix. It is probable that the names of the 'two countrymen' given in the list of characters, W. Mago and W. Hamluc, are the names of actors (Mago appears in the cast list of Massinger's *Believe as You List*), but there is no consensus among scholars and editors as to whether they were members of the original cast or that of the revival.

This revival was the last known seventeenth-century performance. Like many Jacobean plays, *The Witch of Edmonton* remained unperformed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but was rediscovered as a powerful and engaging theatrical experience in the twentieth century and is now rapidly becoming one of the most frequently performed of all non-Shakespearean seventeenth-century plays. The total of ten known productions during the twentieth century has already been comfortably exceeded in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first, even without counting such phenomena as the incorporation of material from the play into a devised theatre piece by Patrick Young, *Witches and Bitches*, which was directed by Kelly Straughan at the University of Toronto (21–29 January, 2011) or the week-long workshop with National Theatre actors led by Chris Goode and Wendy Hubbard in April 2013.⁹

The first two twentieth-century revivals, at the Lyric Theatre in 1921 and the Old Vic in 1936, inevitably had something of the air of conscious experiments and the tendency of reviewers was to be negative about the play while finding some positive things to say about the acting. Ivor Brown, in the *Guardian* review of the 1921 Phoenix Society production, thought that the play was 'more a curio than a classic, and more interesting for the ideas it suggests than for any abiding virtues of its own', being 'not much more than Webster watered down'.¹⁰ However, he thought that Sybil Thorndike 'made the witch a ramping fiend of hell; on her reading of the part it was a marvellous study of

⁷ Bentley, I, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹ See Bridget Escolme, 'Putting it on the Floor: Naturalism and the *Verfremdungseffekt* in *The Tempest* and *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31.4 (2013), 689–707.

¹⁰ Ivor Brown, 'The Witch of Edmonton', *The Manchester Guardian*, 27th April 1921, p. 6.

crippled ferocity’, though some of the role’s pathos had been ‘burned away in the furnace’ of her acting.¹¹ This strong but unsympathetic reading of the role of Mother Sawyer probably owed as much to the director as it did to the actress.

The Rev. Montague Summers was a religiously motivated researcher into the history of witchcraft and demonology, who was ‘obsessed by thoughts of the devil and convinced that the devil’s agents were at large in the world’ and showed little sympathy for historical witches in his published works.¹² Despite the strength of the director’s personal convictions and the intensity of Sybil Thorndike’s performance, this production failed to challenge the comfortable post-Enlightenment assurance of the *Times* reviewer, who wrote that ‘to enjoy *The Witch of Edmonton* one must be simple-minded — or have an historic interest in the simple-mindedness of the populace in a past age’.¹³ However, in singling out Joseph A. Dodd’s performance as Old Carter as ‘the best thing in the play’, he gave an early indication of one of the great theatrical strengths of *The Witch of Edmonton* — the large number of parts it contains which can give scope to a good actor.¹⁴

The Old Vic production of 1936 was directed by Michel Saint-Denis at the invitation of Tyrone Guthrie and the play was listed in the programme notes as being solely by Dekker. The French director, influenced by his uncle Jacques Copeau who had directed a pioneering production of *A Woman Killed with Kindness* in 1913, said he had long been attracted by the ‘Elizabethan surrealism’ of *The Witch of Edmonton*¹⁵ and achieved what the *Guardian* called ‘an extraordinary mixture of realism and stylisation’.¹⁶ This production also had a famous actress in the lead role, Edith Evans, who had taken the part of Anne Ratcliffe in the 1921 revival. She was praised by the *Times* reviewer for having ‘the subtlety to discover Dekker’s compassion for the witch’ and he thought that ‘The revival was an experiment worth making’ but also that its main value was chiefly as an experiment.¹⁷ The *Guardian* reviewer continued the practice of dismissing the play while praising the production and the acting. He thought that modern audiences would not ‘easily be impressed by a play that has no poetry, little craft, and only an

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), p. 7.

¹³ Anon., ‘*The Witch of Edmonton*: Production by The Phoenix’, *The Times*, 27th April 1921, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Jane Baldwin, *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), pp. 69–70.

¹⁶ A. D., ‘*The Witch of Edmonton*’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 9th December 1936, p. 10. There is an interestingly grotesque photograph of Dog, wearing a large and realistic dog’s head, inciting Frank to murder Susan, which is printed facing page 48 of Michel Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Rediscovery of Style* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

¹⁷ Anon., ‘Old Vic: *The Witch of Edmonton*’, *The Times*, 9th December 1936, p. 12.

esoteric demonological appeal to recommend it' but that playgoers 'will like this production for its deftness and for the acting it provides'.¹⁸ The rather lukewarm response of this and other reviewers distressed Edward Sackville West, who was much more responsive both to the play and to the particular production: 'It is, indeed, profoundly saddening that such a masterly performance as that given last year at the Old Vic, under a producer of genius, should have aroused in the majority of critics an impression that the play was something merely quaint — a period piece — a minor hotch-potch by a number of very minor Jacobean poets'.¹⁹

The 1960s were something of a turning point for major professional revivals of Jacobean plays, with the Royal Shakespeare Company performing *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1960 and *The Revenger's Tragedy* in 1966. The third twentieth-century performance of *The Witch of Edmonton*, directed by Bernard Miles in 1962 at the Mermaid Theatre (the first new theatre built within the original boundaries of the City of London since the seventeenth century), was much less ambiguously praised by most critics.²⁰ All three plot strands were seen by the *Times* reviewer as working well theatrically in a 'relaxed, intelligent, and expressive' treatment of the play, which he deemed an 'unqualified' success.²¹ This success could undoubtedly be traced partly to the variety of opportunities the play offered to the actors:

As the murderous bigamist, Mr. William Lucas adopts a vein of low-keyed realism which comes over with brutal impact, and Timothy Bateson, in the Bottom-like part of Cuddy, plays with explosive comedy. But it is the scenes between the old woman and her familiar, locked together in a sad mockery of passion, that stuck deepest in the mind.²²

The fullest appreciation of this production was by Martin Esslin in *Plays and Players*. He saw the play itself not as a curio or period piece but as offering a wonderful example and inspiration to modern dramatists:

More than any of Shakespeare's plays, surrounded as they are with almost sacred awe, unpretentious Elizabethan or Jacobean plays like this one can show us what a glorious, truly *popular* theatre this country could proudly call its own

¹⁸ A. D., p. 10.

¹⁹ Edward Sackville West, 'The Significance of *The Witch of Edmonton*', *The Criterion* 17 (1937), 23–32 (p. 23).

²⁰ Kenneth Tynan was an exception; see his 'When a Genius Trusts a Troll', *The Observer*, 25th November 1962, p. 25.

²¹ Anon., 'Fascinating Rag-Bag of Dramatic Idioms', *The Times*, 22nd November 1962, p. 15.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

at that time. All the ideals of the Brechtian left were fulfilled there: this was a topical, hard-hitting theatre of the masses, supported by ordinary people, combining reportage with poetry. . . . Surely there is a lesson in the exhilaration of this performance for the Mermaid! The popular theatre of Elizabethan and Jacobean times is a vast treasure house barely tapped by our stage. The Mermaid is ideally suited to revive these treasures and to show contemporary dramatists the way to a truly popular theatre of our own time: direct, simple and dealing with the infinite richness of life as it is lived today . . . ²³

The play's conclusive emancipation from the status of 'period piece' was the Royal Shakespeare Company production at the Other Place, directed by Barry Kyle in 1981, before being transferred to Newcastle and London in 1982, and subsequently redesigned for the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. in 1987. This has been the most extensively studied and commented on performance of the play, partly because a reference video of it, along with the original prompt book, can be consulted at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon. Some reviewers reverted to the practice of mixing praise for the production with reservations about the actual play: 'it is heartening to see a muddled play being given theatrical coherence';²⁴ Miriam Karlin (Elizabeth Sawyer) and Juliet Stevenson (Susan) 'give substance and interest to an otherwise confused narrative'.²⁵ Others were more straightforwardly positive: 'a quite obviously splendid, vigorous revival';²⁶ 'This is a straight, energetic and sensitive rendering of the play, sustained by powerful performances in all the major roles';²⁷ 'The excellent production under Barry Kyle reeks of evil'.²⁸

The distinctiveness of this performance lay in its strong sense of an historically-situated rural community, bound together by religion, work, festivity, and the ability to exclude those who do not fit in.

Seizing upon the hints in Mother Sawyer's first speech that the accusations of witchcraft represent a bigoted, primitive community's need to find a scapegoat for its daily ills, Barry Kyle sought to unify the three plots by emphasizing this rural community at every opportunity. Since the Other Place is a makeshift theatre inside a corrugated iron hut, it was easy to give the audience the impression of being inside a huge barn. The rural world was created by

²³ Martin Esslin, 'The Witch of Edmonton', *Plays and Players* (January 1963), 56-7 (p. 56).

²⁴ Michael Billington, 'The Witch of Edmonton', *The Guardian*, 17th September 1981, p. 10.

²⁵ R. S., 'A Witch in Time', *Sunday Telegraph*, 20th September 1981, p. 16.

²⁶ D. J. Hart, *Birmingham Post*, 17th September 1981, n.p.

²⁷ R. V. Holdsworth, 'Vices and Victims', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25th September 1981, p. 1099.

²⁸ B. A. Young, 'The Witch of Edmonton', *Financial Times*, 17th September 1981, p. 21.

agricultural implements, sheaves, sacks, a five-bar gate with a stile, and a maypole, but most of all by having the cast preface each half of the performance with rural activities — thatching, creosoting hurdles, churning butter, even tending bees. The play began and ended with hymns, and there was a strong sense of intolerant Puritanism in the final Tyburn sequence.²⁹

Into this community erupted the cruel and sinister Dog (played by Miles Anderson), at once its enemy and a projection of its own worst impulses. ‘On his first appearance he writhed suddenly out of a burlap sack that had long lain inert on a cart like a newborn animal breaking the amniotic envelope; the effect was of a blandly ordinary sack of potatoes suddenly giving birth to an uncanny offspring’.³⁰

This Dog was nothing like the naturalistic water-spaniel of the frontispiece to the first edition of the play, but a human figure, naked apart from a leather harness which fitted round his neck and loins, and which dangled down behind his back like a tail. He wore dark make-up all over his body, with long black curly hair and busy eyebrows that managed to suggest both a dog and a ferociously grinning fiend.³¹

Dog took a particularly active part in the action, providing the ‘unarmed’ Frank with the knife to kill Susan in 3.3 and later, in 4.2, putting the bloodstained knife into Frank’s pocket, where Katherine finds it, two pieces of business which have been imitated in several subsequent productions. According to Corbin and Sedge, ‘The effect of playing the Dog as a kind of internal dramatist was to provide a strong link between the three plots of the play and to underline the vulnerability of the whole community to the force of evil’.³² It also foregrounded the problem of agency which the play continually poses. ‘The devil did not prompt me’, Frank says as he prepares to murder Susan, but the visible stage action told a different story.

By finding ways of successfully combining the socially realistic aspects of the play with the more sensational and theatrical elements, Barry Kyle’s RSC production gave other directors the confidence that the play could be made to work for a modern audience. Although different critics will always find different things to praise or blame, none of

²⁹ Roger Warren, ‘Ford in Performance’, in *John Ford: Critical Revisions*, ed. by Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 11–30 (pp. 24–5).

³⁰ Roberta Barker, ‘“An honest dog yet”: Performing *The Witch of Edmonton*’, *Early Theatre*, 12.2 (2009), 163–82 (p. 173).

³¹ Warren, p. 25.

³² Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, ‘Introduction’, in Rowley, Dekker and Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*, p. 20.

the subsequent professional productions and hardly any of the amateur ones have been judged to be failures and, as we have become more familiar with the play in the theatre, some of the reasons for this consistency of appeal have become clearer. *The Witch of Edmonton* has a large number of very strong acting parts (particularly Frank Thorney, Elizabeth Sawyer, Dog, Cuddy Banks, and Old Carter) which include an unusually large number of substantial roles for women (Elizabeth Sawyer, Winnifride, Susan, and Katherine). The play can survive a mediocre performance in the title role in a way that *Doctor Faustus* or *Macbeth* cannot. It is, furthermore, a play with a very wide emotional range, from the furious cursing of Mother Sawyer to the pathos of her abandonment by Dog, from the mercenary callousness of Frank to the painful stirrings of his conscience and heartfelt repentance, from the cheerful and amusing bluntness of Old Carter to his Lear-like response to the death of his daughter ('Susan, girl, child! Not speak to thy father?' (3.3.78)). And it is also a play which gives a good deal of scope for theatrical inventiveness, particularly in the crucial role of Dog. This is not to deny that, as a piece of entertainment based on an actual witchcraft case, it can also be an 'uncomfortable' play for a modern audience; one of Chris Goode's motivations for the workshop exercises he conducted with National Theatre actors in 2013 was to engage critically with 'a play that he had found in many ways disturbing and unpleasant — "to hurt the play back", as he put it'.³³

There are very full published accounts of some of the more recent productions and I have been fortunate to see some of those which have been less well documented. Rather than describe each performance in turn, I will use details drawn from personal knowledge or published reviews to address a number of recurring issues in modern performances of this play. Some of these are also addressed very effectively by Roberta Barker in a fine essay which culminates in a detailed account of the Dalhousie University production which she directed in 2008. For her, the key to a successful realization of the play in the modern theatre is to take both the naturalistic and the more sensational demonic aspects seriously and find ways of making a putatively secular audience do so too. An audience which will respond well to a 'realistic' representation of social class and social conflict within a particular community also needs to believe that, for this community, the devil is a real and present threat and perhaps represents something which is a threat to them too.

A tradition has developed, initiated by Kyle, of literally 'grounding' the play naturalistically in a rural setting by covering the stage floor with organic material. The RSC used hay in 1981, the Southwark Playhouse bark in 2000, the Dalhousie stage in

³³ Escolme, p. 694.

2008 ‘was spread inches thick with finely-ground mulch that stuck to the rough woolen clothing of Edmonton’s citizens’,³⁴ and Red Bull Theater in 2011 had the centre of their stage ‘filled with dirt and mulch’.³⁵ This kind of effect suggests there should also be some realism in the costuming, which was indeed the case with Dalhousie and Red Bull Theater. The cast in the latter all wore very faded seventeenth-century costumes, as if the people of this community had been wearing the same clothes for generations and everything was on the point of unravelling. By contrast, in the *Enter the Spirit* production at the Southwark Playhouse, ‘the costumes were timeless’ which turned the play into something more resembling ‘an enjoyable fairy tale’.³⁶

Periwig and Monkey at the Courtyard Theatre in 2009 were quite explicit about their decision to eschew Jacobean realism in order to create the atmosphere of a fairy tale. According to the programme notes, ‘the costumes, props and other design elements of this production reflect what our true folk tales, morality stories and witchcraft have become for a modern audience — fairy tales, whose settings flit from the medieval age of knights and peasants all the way to the fops and princesses of pre-Revolutionary France’. Rather than being littered with agricultural implements and sacks of vegetables, their set was dominated by a grotesque tree which looked like a living thing howling in agony, its two long branches like arms and its lopped trunk like an open mouth. Katherine’s role was symbolically expanded by giving her a red dress and having her flit about like Little Red Riding Hood (the programme notes quoted an extract from Perrault’s version of the story).

The ‘timeless fairy tale’ approach might seem to make it easier to bring in the supernatural element of the play, with Dog as a kind of Big Bad Wolf (in REV Theater’s productions from 1999-2001, Dog’s first entrance was in disguise as Little Red Riding Hood). However, it risks losing the play’s distinctive double focus, its ability to treat evil both sociologically and theologically, both naturalistically and symbolically. The role of Dog is central to this doubleness and directors and actors have to make interesting decisions about how much he resembles a real animal, how much a human being, and how much a devil. For *Enter the Spirit*, Paul Panting wore a simple black costume ‘[e]schewing anything overtly dog-like’ and relied entirely on his acting

³⁴ Barker, p. 174.

³⁵ Bethany Packard, ‘Review of *The Witch of Edmonton*, presented by Red Bull Theater at the Theater at St. Clements, New York City, January 29’, *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 15.3 (2011), 15, para. 3. <<http://purl.org/emls/15-3/revwitch.htm>> [accessed 25th September 2014]

³⁶ David Nicol, ‘Review of *The Witch of Edmonton*, *Enter the Spirit* Production at the Southward Playhouse, London, 7th November–2nd December, 2000’, *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 7.1/Special Issue 8 (2001), 19, para. 10. <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/07-1/revnicol.htm>> [accessed 25th September 2014]

ability to handle the abrupt shifts in Dog's behaviour 'from innocent charm to cruel cynicism'.³⁷

Tom Hunter, for Periwig and Monkey, was also far more human than doglike in appearance. He had previously played the notorious Restoration courtier John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, for the company and brought something of the air of an aristocratic seducer to his role as Dog. Sinuous and sinister, with reddened vampiric lips, he first bit Mother Sawyer in the neck before sucking her arm. The youth and good looks of the whole cast in this performance had the effect of increasing the sexual tension of various interactions, including those between Dog and Mother Sawyer, whilst rather oddly skewing the demographics of the Edmonton community. This was also what happened, inevitably, in the very competent City of London School production, directed by Jonathan Keates at the Winterflood Theatre in 2011, in which Dog, played by Noah Carvajal, was a young punk with spiky hair, make-up, and a leather jacket open to the waist.

For Red Bull Theater, Derek Smith was somewhere between a man and a Dog in appearance. He 'was kitted out in a black tricorne hat that recalled a disturbing dog's face — with pointed nose, furrowed brow, and widely spaced ears — and black spats that created the illusion of hocks on his legs'.³⁸ He also had sticks attached to his arms with which he could make directive gestures while he manipulated the other characters but which he could also use to simulate walking on all fours. This was disturbingly grotesque but made it difficult for him to behave at times like a normal dog with Cuddy.

A great deal of thought went into the appearance of Dog in the Dalhousie University production:

Our central aim was to communicate the notion of the Dog as a demonic figure of terrifying, earthy reality whose jocose animal disguise was penetrable by the theatre audience if not always by the play's dramatis personae. We chose to transform Kimberley Cody into the Dog not by decking her in such accoutrements as Miles Anderson's harness and tail but by masking her. In their fashioning of the mask, Katherine Jenkins and props mistress Melinda Robb took inspiration from a range of folk art forms including morris hobby animals. The resulting creation boasted disturbingly blank eyes and a toothy grin that appeared eager and friendly from some angles but revealed itself as leering and

³⁷ Nicol, para. 3.

³⁸ Packard, para. 6.

vicious from others. The mask covered Cody's head, eyes, and nose but left her human mouth and chin fully visible. We hoped that this approach would encourage the audience to glimpse the quasi-human face of the devil under the dog.³⁹

'A demonic figure of terrifying earthy reality' is indeed what Dog is and the fact that the illusion is necessarily incomplete (as it was on the Jacobean stage) is not a disadvantage because it reminds us that 'the devil's doggy appearance is as much a costume for him as it is for the human actor who plays the role' and that the devil, in the last analysis, has a human face.⁴⁰ The reference to 'morrish hobby animals' is obviously significant and, in this production, 'The stuffed, roughly shaped head of Cuddy Banks's beribboned hobby-horse deliberately recalled the totemic mask worn by the Dog', further complicating the symbolic role of the morris dance in the play.⁴¹

The use of a female actor, Kimberley Cody, to play Dog was rather unusual and raised a number of questions about casting and gender. The play is very clearly structured to show the betrayal and abandonment of its three main female characters, and the obvious parallelism between Frank and Dog would suggest a male actor was appropriate for the latter role. In the Dalhousie production 'Dog's relationship to Chrissi Forte's defiant and lonely Mother Sawyer was that of an abusive and manipulative lover to a frightened but love-starved partner' which confirms the apparent oddity of the casting.⁴² Most modern productions suggest a sexual component in the relationship between the witch and the devil-dog, something which is hinted at in the play's source material without being developed at all.

The idea of Dog as a sexual predator was particularly emphasized in REV Theater's productions in 1999-2001 and 2010. Rosemary Hay and Rudy Caporaso fulfilled their company's policy of 'revving up' classical theatre by making a number of changes to the original script (such as incorporating material from Goodcole's account of the trial of Elizabeth Sawyer) and by exploiting Dog's potential as a star role. 'Nearly naked, blackened, matted, prancing with grotesque sexuality',⁴³ Rudy Caporaso as Dog gave a series of electrifying performances. He and Susan Moses, as the witch, 'crossed into a form of shamanism through their boldly original interpretations of the unconscious

³⁹ Barker, p. 175.

⁴⁰ Barker, p. 169.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴² Barker, 176.

⁴³ Toby Zinman, 'A Very Good Witch: The Witch of Edmonton, REV Theatre Co. at The Brick Playhouse, May 11 and 12', *Philadelphia City Paper*, 10th-17th May 2001, n. p.

energies forming the archetypal roles of hag and devil'⁴⁴ Most reviewers were deeply impressed, but the dangers of such a performance for the balance of the play were highlighted by one critic of the 2010 revival, the online reviewer 'Phillyist', who thought that the play had been made to revolve too much round Caporaso's particular style of sexual charisma:

From Caporaso's first appearance as the devil, dressed only in padded y-fronts, he had all the best lines, all the best hip-gyrations, and all the dance numbers. Rather than work on making Frank and the other townsfolk three dimensional, the play instead seemed to have spent its energy designing ways for Caporaso [to] show off his undeniable stage presence and his character's provocative omni-sexuality (he kisses Frank, threatens another character with a red strap-on, mates with the preacher's insane wife, and, in dog form, goes down on the witch). During the intermission he approached several members of the audience and mock-mounted them. It felt like a testament to ego rather than play making.⁴⁵

Dog was also a sexual predator in the Equity Showcase Theatre production of 1993, directed by Peter Hinton, which employed an entirely female cast, with the exception of Dog, who was played by Greg Kramer.

Periwig and Monkey had a company policy of finding good roles for women and Natasha Dawn made a number of adaptations to the text and cast of *The Witch of Edmonton* to help fulfil this. Sir Arthur was given a wife, who took some of his lines, Old Thorney became 'Widow Thorney', and Old Banks became 'Jane Banks', Cuddy's sister. It could not honestly be said that these changes improved the play's very careful representation of gender and class conflict, but a 'historical' justification offered in the programme notes was that 'Most accusations of witchcraft were brought by women against each other'.⁴⁶ No modern production has yet, to my knowledge, attempted to recreate the all-male casting of the seventeenth century, but the experiment would be worth making. Although not bearded, like the witches in *Macbeth*, Elizabeth Sawyer seems to have a good deal of stubble in the play's title-page woodcut and would presumably have been played by an adult male actor rather than a boy. The Red Bull

⁴⁴ L. P. Streitfeld, "'Witch of Edmonton' breaks ground', *Stamford Advocate*, 27th June 2000, n. p.

⁴⁵ Daniel Wallace, 'Phillyist Reviews ... *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Phillyist*, 8th June 2010 <http://phillyist.com/2010/06/08/phillyist_reviews_the_witch_of_edmo.php> [accessed 25th September 2014]

⁴⁶ In fact, although a gradually increasing proportion of women acted as witnesses in witchcraft cases, to the point where, in some areas, they formed a majority by the second half of the seventeenth century, the crucial step of moving from informal suspicions to a formal legal accusation was usually initiated by a man. See Clive Holmes, 'Women: Witnesses and Witches', *Past and Present*, 140 (1993), 45–78.

Theater did something interesting along these lines when they used the gay male actor Everett Quinton to play both Anne Ratcliffe and her husband, creating ‘a whirlwind of activity and riotous uproar that simultaneously confused and titillated the audience’.⁴⁷

Even when modern productions make minimal alterations to the text and cast, one place in which directorial inventiveness is particularly evident is the play’s ending. The challenge is to respect the formal closure of a tragicomedy in renewed social harmony whilst remaining aware of the harsh means used to bring it about and the continuing threats to the community, and perhaps the audience itself, in the future. The hymn singing at the end of the 1981 RSC production was followed by Dalhousie, though without such a strong undertow of irony. Periwig and Monkey gave a role to Dog in the final scene by having him as the masked executioner bringing on Frank and Mother Sawyer, putting nooses round their necks and black bags over their heads (perhaps glancing at Old Carter’s line ‘There have worse faces looked out of black bags, man’ (1.2.26–7)). Kyle had also given Dog a role in the final scene, causing him to reach out a black paw towards Winnifride and her newly born child, confirming the view of several critics that she is the most likely future outcast from the community.

The threat to Winnifride was also there in the conclusion to Jesse Berger’s Red Bull Theater production which continued after the Epilogue by showing us the executions of Frank and Mother Sawyer, the latter by the unhistorical method of burning:

All of the characters remained on stage as immobile witnesses as Frank silently, passively submitted to his hanging on one side of the stage. Then, Mother Sawyer screamed as she burned in flames on the other. As her cries died away and the lights faded to black a single spotlight remained tightly focused on Winifred’s upturned face, which was the last thing the audience saw. As Berger explained in a brief question and answer session following the performance, this emphasis on Winifred reflects his sense of her vulnerability as the female character left in the play whose social position is uncertain and potentially transgressive.⁴⁸

But what about the threat to the audience itself? In Simon Cox’s Enter the Spirit production Dog’s exit in 5.1 took an interesting form: ‘the Dog kicked open the fire exit and stepped out onto the courtyard outside the Playhouse. He had left the bounds, not only of Edmonton, but also of the theatre itself, and was now standing in our world —

⁴⁷ Dawn Saliba, ‘*The Witch of Edmonton*’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 29.3 (2011), 422–25 (p. 424).

⁴⁸ Packard, para. 1.

the den of iniquity that is London'.⁴⁹ The Dalhousie performance concluded with a similar piece of business:

In the last moment of the show the Dog turned toward the theatrical audience as the house lights came up on them. He gazed at them appraisingly as if assessing their capacity for corruption. Then, very deliberately, he climbed the steps of the risers on which they sat and seated himself among them. Their space — *our* space — was his space now.⁵⁰

The idea was 'to break down the "fourth wall" protecting spectators from the action onstage and thereby encourage contemporary subjects [assumed to be largely secular] to consider the possibility that the devil, or at least the potential for evil he represented, remained immanent within their own everyday realities'.⁵¹ When REV Theater took their production to the International Festival of Arts and Ideas at Stamford, Connecticut, in June 2000, they used a Gothic Unitarian Church as their playing space and achieved a similar effect: 'Full dramatic advantage was taken of the unique setting — the stage was nowhere and everywhere, effectively erasing boundaries between performers and audience'.⁵²

The original London audiences at the Cockpit and Court in 1621, despite having no 'fourth wall' to protect them, might also have initially experienced some sense of distance from the supernatural events in rural Edmonton. Elizabeth Sawyer's great speeches of generalized social criticism, aimed at both court and city, functioned to break down that sense of distance and it seems entirely legitimate for modern directors to find additional ways to convince modern audiences that 'the devil has been abroad amongst us today', and not only in Edmonton.

Coda

This essay had already been completed when a major new Royal Shakespeare Company production, directed this time by Gregory Doran, opened at the Swan Theatre in Stratford, as the concluding play in their 2014 'Roaring Girls' season. Mother Sawyer was positioned alongside Moll Cutpurse, Alice Arden, and Vittoria Corombona as a woman of spirit and the advance publicity tended to present the play as something of a

⁴⁹ Nicol, para. 11.

⁵⁰ Barker, p. 178.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 178.

⁵² Streitfeld, n. p.

star vehicle for Eileen Atkins. Atkins was indeed superb and made ‘the role utterly her own’,⁵³ leaving most reviewers wishing that the part had been a bigger one:

I’d love to have seen more of Atkins: stooped and shuffling, vulnerable and sinister, with wild grey hair, she’s withering in her looks and drolly entertaining in her curses, delivered in a moaning cockney-meets-rustic accent. The interplay between her and Jay Simpson’s grinning, sardonic and almost balletic Dog — naked but for a codpiece and sporting deformed ears and an external spine that turns into a quivering tail — is superb.⁵⁴

Atkins was defiant and contemptuous rather than tearful and self-pitying but the pathos of her abandonment by Dog still registered strongly. Her striking entrance at the start of Act 5, with her grey hair now unloosed and spread wide like a ghostly bride’s, was a reminder of the earlier marital betrayals of Winnifride and Susan by Frank. Like Susan, Elizabeth Sawyer will find her only true husband in Death.

Good as Atkins was, this production was very much a collective achievement and there were strong performances in all the major roles. Different reviewers picked out different actors for special commendation. For Patrick Marmion in *The Daily Mail*, Jay Simpson’s ‘canine fiend’ was ‘the undoubted star’.⁵⁵ Kate Kellaway in *The Observer* was equally impressed by Frank Thorney and his two wives:

Both wives are superlatively played. As Winnifride, Shvorne Marks is wonderfully unforced and convincing, especially in the scene where she jealously faces her rival. Faye Castelow is a star in the making. Her ability to embody love, happiness and virtue (all of which can easily give an actor the slip) is exceptional. And tormented Frank (Ian Bonar) is a match, in every sense, for both of them.⁵⁶

The third plot strand, involving Cuddy Banks and his morris team, is probably the most difficult to make engaging for a modern audience but Christopher Hart in *The Sunday Times* thought that Dafydd Llyr-Thomas was ‘particularly good as Cuddy Banks, a

⁵³ Christopher Hart, ‘Every witch way’, *The Sunday Times*, 2nd November 2014, Culture section, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Dominic Cavendish, ‘A talking dog and Eileen’s eyes are compelling — but not quite enough’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 31st October 2014, p. 36.

⁵⁵ Patrick Marmion, ‘Hellish hound, but the play’s a dog’s breakfast’, *The Daily Mail*, 31st October 2014, p. 63.

⁵⁶ Kate Kellaway, ‘The witch report, 1611 [sic]’, *The Observer*, 2nd November 2014, The New Review section, p. 29.

plump rosy-cheeked fellow straight out of a Brueghel peasant painting, all beefy buttocks and bulging codpiece'.⁵⁷

The universal praise for most of the acting and for the production in general was often accompanied, in an echo of some of the early-twentieth-century reviews, by reservations about the play's quality and coherence. For Michael Billington, two things stood out 'in this rare [*sic*] revival': 'One is the sombre beauty of Gregory Doran's production, which anchors the play firmly in its original period. The other is the brooding presence of Eileen Atkins as the titular witch. My only doubts concern the quality of the play itself.'⁵⁸ The title of the *Daily Mail* review was 'Hellish hound, but the play's a dog's breakfast' and Kate Kellaway thought that: 'This lively, unruly play offers proof . . . that too many playwrights spoil the plot . . . The playwrights seem not to have agreed on whether they were writing a comedy or a tragedy.'⁵⁹

The three or more authors, under Dekker's supervision, were in fact quite deliberately writing a tragicomedy and it is the play's abrupt shifts of tone which seem to have caused the problem for some reviewers, though this 'problem' exists in most Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, including Shakespeare, and is one of the sources of the continuing appeal of the plays. Given that this was undoubtedly an enjoyable and engaging theatrical experience, 'a strange but spellbinding evening' according to Dominic Maxwell in the *Times*,⁶⁰ I feel more credit might have been given by reviewers to the quality of the original writing. Even good actors need something substantial to work with and this is a play, as I have already noted, with a surprisingly large number of good parts. There was some judicious cutting of the more obscure passages (such as Cuddy's cryptic exit line 'I'll go near to make at eaglet else' (2.1.287)), but generally this was a production which held to the principle, followed by Deborah Warner in her groundbreaking *Titus Andronicus* at the Swan in 1987, of trusting the text of a 'minor' play and working with it rather than against it.

The set design by Niki Turner was simple but very effective. The stage was covered with dirt, as in some of the productions previously noted, but instead of the 'agricultural implements, sheaves, sacks, a five-bar gate with a stile, and a maypole'⁶¹ with which Barry Kyle created a rural world at the Other Place in 1981, there were only dense

⁵⁷ Hart, p. 25.

⁵⁸ Michael Billington, 'Hypocrisy, hangings and a masterfully played outcast in a Jacobean reckoning', *The Guardian*, 31st October 2014, p. 44.

⁵⁹ Kellaway, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Dominic Maxwell, 'You put a spell on me', *The Times*, 31st October 2014, Arts section, p. 13.

⁶¹ Warren, p. 24.

clumps of eight-foot-high reeds at the rear of the stage. Both Mother Sawyer and Dog made their entrances from among these reeds and Dog lurked there, only partially visible, during the murder of Susan. The costuming was consistently in period but notably drab and workaday, with Warbeck's 'satin doublet white' and 'cloak of scarlet' standing out as markedly as his artificial attempts at gallantry.

The commitment to grounding the play in its period did not preclude some very creative touches. The morris dance in 3.4 bore little resemblance to the dancers shown in the 1621 painting of 'The Thames at Richmond', which was reproduced in the programme notes. Apart from the 'Maid Marian' figure, who was a tall man wearing a wig with long flaxen pigtails, the other dancers had their faces concealed by masses of long coloured ribbons, which gave them an inhuman and slightly sinister appearance. Cuddy's hobby horse was not the wicker frame covered with cloth which we see the dancer wearing in 'The Thames at Richmond' but a broomstick with a horse's skull on the end of it, which he used to jump through, or over, obstacles created by the sticks of the other dancers. The moment when Dog took over the fiddle and made the dancers leap to the devil's tune was a thrilling one. The sticks now became weapons and a demonic frenzy seemed to possess the dancers as well as the onstage spectators, a frenzy which ended only with the entry of the Constable to arrest Warbeck and Somerton. I was sorry to see that Cuddy's earlier desire that there should be a witch in the morris was not fulfilled (the line about getting 'Poldavis, the barber's boy' to play the part had been cut) but nevertheless this was a marvellous piece of theatre.

As somebody who has been working on an edition of the play for several years, I was struck by the care taken throughout over small details. The three brief examples which follow could be multiplied easily. When Anne Ratcliffe runs mad in 4.1, the hysterical cry 'The witch, Mother Sawyer! The witch, the devil!' (212–3) was reassigned (as I have argued it should be) from Cuddy Banks to Anne herself, making much better dramatic sense. Despite the general atmosphere of forgiveness and reconciliation at the end (the embrace of Old Thorney and Old Carter was particularly moving), Frank significantly did *not* take the proffered hand of Sir Arthur in response to the latter's wish to 'part friendly'. At the conclusion of the final scene, Winnifride, played by the black actress Shvorne Marks, was left alone on stage, looking very pregnant and extremely vulnerable, perhaps (as several previous productions have implied) about to replace Mother Sawyer in the role of social outcast. From the first entrance to the last exit, every important moment in this play had been thought through carefully by Gregory Doran and his team.

Dominic Maxwell wrote in the *Times*: ‘I’ve seen hundreds of plays about a man caught between two women; plenty featuring Faustian pacts; quite a few about witchcraft. But I’ve never seen anything quite like *The Witch of Edmonton*.’⁶² This was the thirteenth production of the play since the year 2000 and I want to conclude by asking: How many successful modern performances of an Elizabethan or Jacobean play do there have to be before it ceases to be labelled ‘minor’?

⁶² Maxwell, p. 13.