

## **Witches in Space Seminar Abstracts**

**Courtney Parker**

**SAA 2022 Seminar – Witches in Space**

“Where are the Witches?: Gender, Space, and Governance in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*”  
At the beginning of *The Tempest*, Prospero explains to Ariel how lucky he is that the evil witch Sycorax is no longer in control of the island. Comparing his benevolence to Sycorax’s tyranny, Prospero reminds Ariel of his debt to the sorcerer as a means of continuing to enforce the spirit’s service. Sycorax, with her “mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible,” represents an ungovernable force – one that Prospero, with his educated status and spiritual powers, sees himself in direct opposition to. Exiled for wrongly prioritizing his magical learning over his mundane duty to govern, Prospero seeks to regain his seat of power in Milan by proving that he is worthy of the job. To do that, he claims to renounce his magic, thereby clearly separating his supernatural concerns from the earthly business of ruling. But he never follows through on that promise to abjure his magic. He says that he will break his staff and drown his books, but the action is not made explicit in the text; rather, those iconic performance moments are exactly that – moments that only exist in performance. Observing that the island itself conflates domestic and civic space, this essay addresses the ambiguity surrounding Prospero’s rejection of his magic by considering it in the context of his self-imposed role as governor of the island and in contrast to the supposedly tyrannical witchcraft Sycorax ruled with before his arrival.

**Emily George**

**SAA 2022—Witches in Space**

### **The Devil in the Margins: The Space of Authority in *The Witch of Edmonton* and The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Sawyer**

In 1621, Henry Goodcole published the confession he obtained from convicted witch Elizabeth Sawyer, hoping he could establish a definitive narrative to counter rumors and ballads. Shortly thereafter, his pamphlet was used by Rowley, Dekker, and Ford (and “&c.”) as a source for their successful tragicomedy *The Witch of Edmonton*. The play’s Sawyer is unusually sympathetic, a justifiably bitter, impoverished old woman, and when she goes to her execution at the end of the play, she leaves the people of Edmonton—and audiences—uncertain of her agency in the violent crimes that have just occurred. Goodcole’s pamphlet is more straightforward in its portrayal of Sawyer and general condemnation of her actions, and lacks the play’s explicit narrative of social and economic injustice. The account credits her with all the typical acts of an English witch: bewitching cattle, bewitching children, exacting revenge on neighbors over petty domestic squabbles, and suckling demons on her mysterious hidden teats. However, as a source for the play’s complex and uncertain presentation of Sawyer’s agency, the pamphlet is worth studying for more than the facts of the case that led to the play. Goodcole attempts to represent his conversation with Sawyer as a simple, accurate account of what he asks and how she replies, yet the pamphlet’s printed features undermine that attempt, creating an unstable and shifting sense of authority that is reflected in the play, not invented by it.

This essay explores how problems of agency, control, and violence manifest and move between printed pamphlet and stage performance. I argue that the play's portrayal of witchcraft adapts aspects of the materiality as well as the plot of its source material by looking to the margins: the paratexts of the pamphlet, where Goodcole uses his proximity to Sawyer to establish the truthfulness of his work, yet also struggles to assert his own authority over her narrative; and the edges of the play's action, where the demonic Dog lurks, intruding on every plot with malevolent but ambiguous influence. The playwrights are more assertive about giving Sawyer sympathetic lines, and the ambiguities in *The Witch of Edmonton* are more direct, but both texts present a witch whose agency is difficult to pin down.

**Molly Hand**

**SAA 2022 – Witches in Space**

**Domestic Hecate: Witchcraft, domestic production, and wicked consumption in Middleton's *The Witch***

Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* is a play both understudied and much maligned. As Inga-Stina Ewbank writes in her introduction to the "genetic text" of *Macbeth* in the Oxford edition of *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, "Twentieth-century distaste for the Hecate scenes is part of a more general purism, the theatrical equivalent of the scholarly search for authenticity, for the 'original' play."<sup>1</sup> Yet, contemporary distaste does not accord with early modern representations of witchcraft – neither in drama nor in the pamphlets that inspired the plays. While inclusion of Middleton's witch scenes (sometimes regarded as comic scenes) in *Macbeth* may unsettle, Marion Gibson notes, "comedy and sublime horror are not mutually exclusive, and witches often evoke both in their speech and acts."<sup>2</sup>

This essay attends to not only those witch scenes that made their way into *Macbeth* but the entirety of their source text. A tragicomedy, *The Witch* might also be categorized as domestic drama, and domesticity itself is a central theme of the play. If, as Stephen Orgel suggests, witchcraft makes good theater, the subject of witchcraft is uniquely well suited to domestic drama: after all, the site of early modern witchcraft was the household; the targets of maleficia, domestic members, processes, and products – brewing, butter, crops, livestock, spouses, children. Food is a particular concern in fears of witchcraft: witches were thought to ruin foodstuffs and to injure or lame the animals whose whitemeats (milk, cheese, butter) were a

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<sup>1</sup> Ewbank, Introduction, *The Tragedy of Macbeth: A Genetic Text*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1165. Along similar lines, Celia Daileader writes, "My hunch . . . is that Hecate's erasure from *Macbeth's* modern production history is not just a measure of the distaste for generic mixture, musical interludes, and/or talking animals on stage . . . For the Hecate dances are weirdly subversive – even feminist – in a way three witches . . . hunched over a cauldron most decidedly are not"; "Weird Brothers: What Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* Can Tell Us about Race, Sex, and Gender in *Macbeth*," in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, ed. Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Gibson, *Recovering Renaissance Witchcraft: Witchcraft in Early Modernity and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 32.

critical source of calories and nutrition in the average household. Along these lines, this essay reflects on the various ways in which food production and consumption connects the plots and characters of Middleton's play. Food and drink – along with the vessels in which they are prepared and served and their key ingredients – feature prominently in the play. I suggest that *The Witch* explores the practice of witchcraft as women's work, highlighting Hecate's labor in production as well as her knowledge of efficacious herbs and other ingredients. In contrast to the witches' efforts to procure ingredients and cook them in the cauldron, the play emphasizes wicked types of consumption and fetishized foods and ingredients at court. References to spices, sweets, and wine abound in the Ducal palace at Ravenna, and all are linked to vice – from the Duke's "healths in a strange cup" made of the Duchess's father's skull, to the spiced desserts and wines by which Aberzanes has tempted and seduced Francisca, resulting in her pregnancy. While events at court emphasize wicked consumption, Hecate's arena focuses on labor over the cauldron. She and the witches are "sweating at the vessel" and their effortful work is highlighted repeatedly throughout the play. The witches' work, Hecate's knowledge of ingredients' virtues, her cookery practices have striking parallels in the knowledge and practices of the industrious housewife. While some of the sensational and unsavory ingredients in Hecate's receipts may shock (three ounces of red-haired wench, the dead baby whose mouth and nose are stuffed with herbs, a tangle of serpents), as Wendy Wall and others have shown, early modern kitchens were places of murder and bloodshed, dismemberment, and other kinds of horror. This essay, then, reads "domestic Hecate" in light of early modern cookery books and herbals, as well as demonological texts and witchcraft pamphlets – Middleton's known source texts – to contextualize Hecate's knowledge and practices and illuminate the play's critique of wicked consumption of exotic goods produced or sourced elsewhere in comparison to Hecate's domestic ingredients and effortful labor around the cauldron.

**Erin E. Kelly**

**"What I see / And is to me apparent" in *The Late Lancashire Witches***

The prologue of *Late Lancashire Witches* (1633/34) apologizes for focusing on a domestic subject that "can neither yield much matter, nor great show." This essay investigates how the play relentlessly links witches with phenomena that don't make a great show to demonstrate how it problematizes for its audience performances of religious identity in the physical realm. A number of key scenes centre around actions not shown to a community, such as the moment of a child's conception or an experience of erectile dysfunction. Others generate for the play's audience a sense of being shown events that don't get presented visually, including a vanishing hare, Robin turning into a horse, and witches transforming into cats. Such moments repeatedly establish a gap between seeing and proper understanding. But the incident that most starkly connects faith and witchcraft as invisible until manifested in beneficial or harmful actions – actions that might be true or feigned – is the false penitence of Mistress Generous (4.2). There is no reason for an audience not to believe the character when she replies to her husband's horrified plea after discovering she is a witch, "Tell me, are those tears / As full of true-hearted penitence / As mine of sorrow to behold what state, / What desperate state, th'art fallen in?" by declaring "Sir, they are" – that is, until she later tells her coven-mate Mall how she escaped

punishment: "Some passionate words mixed with forced tears / Did so enchant his eyes and ears, / I made my peace, with promise never / To do the like; but once and ever / A witch, thou know'st" (4.4). Even as the play shows witches it simultaneously confronts its audience with what cannot be readily seen, and in the process carves out the theatre as an exceptional space for exploring the day-to-day experience of existing within a faith-suffused society.

**Andrew Loeb**

**SAA 2022: Witches in Space**

**"Can you play that?": Witchcraft in the City in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*.**

When we imagine the figure of the witch in the early modern English theatre, we tend to picture her as a rustic figure in a rural locale: the weird sisters on the blasted heath, Hecate and her coven in the wilds beyond the walls of Ravenna, Mother Sawyer in Edmonton, the women of Lancashire, Jonson's unruly dancers in the spectacle of an antimasque. This essay seeks to complicate this picture by examining an overlooked figure in the history of the theatrical witch in England: Dekker and Middleton's Moll Cutpurse. While not actually a witch, Moll is regularly subjected to direct accusations of being one by Sir Alexander Wengrave and is characterized more obliquely by others as a disturbingly unruly figure. Exploring the migration of the language of witchcraft from the rural environs in which we typically find it to the urban space of early modern London, I argue that this language seeks to fix Moll in place in response to her unruly movement within the social, spatial, and acoustic horizons of the city and marginalize her from it by reimagining her as a figure that only makes sense in the rural environs beyond its walls. At the same time, however, I suggest it is pertinent to attend to how Moll might well be a kind of witch in order to recognize how she casts a spell over several of the play's characters and redefines and reconfigures Sir Alexander's slander against her reputation.

**Elisa Oh**

**"Posters of the sea and land": Early Modern Stage Witches' Uses of Ritual and Geographical Space**

In this essay, I will contend that kinetic patterns or "choreographies" of dance, ritual, and travel produce and sustain early modern ideologies of hierarchy based on race, gender, servitude, and other forms of alterity. By "choreography," I mean repeated patterns of physical movement that create and carry culturally specific meanings. Consequently, the way early modern English witches move through space in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*, and Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* race the witches as somatically and spiritually different and inferior to other humans. The witches' repeated patterns of physical movement create legible religious and cultural otherness in the ways they traverse ritual and geographical spaces: 1.) the choreography of religious ritual conversion constructs the witches' spiritual alterity through the inversion and parody of the Catholic liturgy for baptism and communion; 2.) the choreography of "strange" foreign travel, including supernatural speed and flight, imbricates the witches' interventions in English maritime trade with their colonial commodification and consumption of African and Asian bodies; and 3.) the choreography of servitude and enslavement creates descending tiers of subordinated individuals serving their "rightful"

superiors, from Satan to the seducing demon spirits to the witches to the manipulated humans. A kinesic analysis of English witches' movement around 1600 reveals a discourse of racialization that opportunistically merges with preexisting modes of claiming natural distinctions between groups of people.

**Sharon Vogel**

**“Heaven guide him to thy husband’s cudgel”: The Male Witch and Community Space in The Merry Wives of Windsor**

In Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Ford beats Falstaff while the latter is disguised as the old woman of Brentford. Scholars’ opinions about this scene range from disgust at Ford’s violence to admiration for Mistress Page and Mistress Ford who orchestrate Falstaff’s punishment (Grinnell, Cotton, Uszcalo). Though many have seen Falstaff’s disguise as part of the humiliation he undergoes, I argue that the merry wives, rather than foisting a false identity on the man who has been harassing them, reveal and give shape to his true identity which the inept authorities of Windsor have been either unable to see or unwilling to acknowledge. Falstaff’s behaviour matches the social disruption of the male witch almost perfectly. E.J. Kent argues that male witches were not typically feminized men, but men who disrupted the smooth running of a community (73). Falstaff certainly disrupts the hierarchy of Windsor, and exhibits, if not witchcraft, witch-like behaviour. However, Falstaff’s position as a new and unestablished member of a community (Sharpe), his gender (Millar, Gaskill, Perkins, Gasser), and the fact that the authorities of Windsor are inept, would make it difficult for the merry wives to successfully accuse him. Dressing Falstaff as a recognizable community member with an established reputation for committing a crime which demands no proof (Briggs) allows the merry wives to give shape to his real character in a kind of visual shorthand and force the men of Windsor to punish him for his crimes without opening themselves to abuse and slander.