VANISHING ACTS

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VANISHING ACTS: ABSENCE, GENDER, AND MAGIC IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA, 1558-1642

By JESSICA DELL, (Hons) B.A., M.A.

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AUTHOR: Jessica Dell, (Hons) B.A. (University of Toronto), M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Helen Ostovich

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how early modern English playwrights employ absence to enrich their representations of the unknown, including witchcraft and the supernatural. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries magical themes were often dramatized through visual and linguistic excess. Whether this excess was manifested through the use of vibrant costumes, farcical caricatures, or exaggerated dialogue, magic was often synonymous with theatricality. Playwrights such as William Rowley, Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare, however, challenge stereotypical depictions of magic by contrasting excessive magic with the subtler power of restrained or off-stage magic. Embedded in the fantastical events and elaborate plots of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, absence, whether as an unstaged thing or person or an absent ideology, becomes a crucial element in understanding how playwrights represented and understood occult issues during the early modern period. Further, when gendered feminine, magical absences serve to combat oppressive silences within scripts and provide female subjects with an unimpeded and inherently magical space from which to challenge pre-established patriarchal systems of control. Each chapter in this dissertation, therefore, appraises the magical possibilities that theatrical absences provide to women as a platform from which to develop their narrative voice.

Partnered with a complementary discussion of Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* and two thematically linked witchcraft cases, my first chapter argues that Mistress Ford uses the complete stage absence of both a witch and a queen in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to reform her community and critique her society's unjust categorization of women. In chapter two, I examine a series of "vanishing acts" in *The Birth of Merlin* and argue that Rowley's female characters use their final moments on stage to contextualize their impending absences for audiences as moments of magical defiance rather than defeat in the face of male tyranny. In my final chapter, I look at how magical objects, such as the handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello* or the belt in Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd* resist the absence of their female creators and continue to provide physically absent or dead women with magical agency.

By structuring my dissertation on these three specific gradations of absence, I provide a nuanced analysis of the purposes these dramatic omissions serve by focusing on how these shades of absence subtly alter the ways in which we interpret and define early modern magical belief.

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Introduction

> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
> Such tricks hath strong imagination,
> That if it would but apprehend some joy,
> It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
> Or in the night, imagining some fear,
> How easy is a bush supposed a bear! (5.1.15-22)[1]

The "bush" and the "bear" Theseus imagines, after he dismisses the more fantastical elements of the four lovers' tale in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595), point to the thin degree of separation that exists between the known and the unknown in our world. Popularly conceived of as a "renaissance" of human enlightenment, the early modern period was a time of discovery and for those who wished to use their imaginations to push boundaries and bring a "local habitation and a name" to "airy nothing" the prospect of venturing out into the unknown could be a daunting task. Politicians, scientists, explorers, clergy, and even everyday individuals during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries faced new uncharted territory daily, whether political, scientific, geographic, religious, or personal in nature. Although such territories

[1] All quoted material from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes from Peter Holland's edition of the play: William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, (Oxford, 1998).

could represent a non-regulated space ideal for self-discovery, they could also become sites of oppression, as human frailty in the face of the unknown transformed it into something terrifying – the moment captured in Theseus's speech when the "bush" metaphorically becomes the "bear." For writers who wish to challenge our everyday understanding of ordinary life creation becomes a constant balancing act between transcendence and destruction, between enlightenment and fear-mongering. When expressed through theatre, the conflicting epistemologies that on- and off-stage spaces generate create the perfect microcosm through which to explore this divide between the known and unknown, as audiences watch characters move from one space to the other through a permeable barrier.

This dissertation examines how early modern English playwrights employ absence to enrich their representations of the unknown, including witchcraft and the supernatural. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries magical themes were often dramatized through visual and linguistic excess. Whether this excess was manifested through the use of vibrant costumes, farcical caricatures, or exaggerated dialogue, magic was often synonymous with theatricality. Playwrights such as William Rowley, Ben Jonson, and Shakespeare amongst others, however, challenge and augment stereotypical depictions of magic by contrasting excessive magic with the subtler power of restrained or off-stage magic. Embedded in the fantastical events and elaborate plots of Shakespeare and

his contemporaries, absence (paradoxically speaking), whether as an unstaged thing or person or an absent ideology, becomes a crucial element in understanding how playwrights represented and understood occult issues during the early modern period. Further, when gendered feminine, magical absences serve to combat oppressive silences within scripts and provide female subjects with an unimpeded and inherently magical space from which to challenge pre-established patriarchal systems of control. Each chapter in this dissertation, therefore, appraises the magical possibilities that theatrical absences provide to women as a platform from which to develop their narrative voice as they strive to rewrite social and gender injustices in the "real world."

Discussing the Unseen: A Critical Framework

Neither of the key terms I use throughout this dissertation, namely "magic" and "absence," lend themselves to simple definitions. In *The Scythe of Saturn*, Linda Woodbridge stresses that there is no single way of understanding magic. Divination, conjuring, protective charms, witchcraft, enchantments, demonic pacts, proto-scientific discovery, and even certain religious rituals all incorporate various magical elements.[2] This list, however, only begins to scratch the surface. Early modern notions of magic ran deeper and were more prevalent in

[2] Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking* (Urbana, 1994), 31.

the everyday culture of the period than modern day scholars can perhaps ever fully appreciate. Woodbridge's list, after all, does not even begin to take into consideration the magical potential of events that appear "like" or happen "as if by" magic and that offer us a plethora of additional ways to approach the subject of early modern magical belief.[3] To view notions of magic as being separate from the daily operations of English life not only imposes a modern day skepticism toward magic onto the past, but creates boundaries where none (arguably) existed. Valerie Flint stresses a similar point when she offers readers what has become in recent years one of the most frequently cited definitions of magic in early modern studies, defining it as "the exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they are."[4] Certainly this definition falls into accordance with Augustine's views on the subject, as extrapolated by Robert Austin Markus. When studying Augustine's work, Markus argues that Augustine proposes two theories of magic, both of which still influence modern-day definitions of the term. In the first, magic becomes "dependent on a cosmology of world-harmony, or universal sympathy: you do something here, and as a consequence something happens there."[5] The potency or potential effectiveness of the "magical ritual" in question depends

[3] *OED Online*, ("magic, n").
[4] Valerie I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, 1991), 3.
[5] Robert Austin Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool, 1996), 127.

entirely upon "natural forces" and the ways in which we, as human beings, interact with them.[6] In the second view, magic becomes "dependent on collaboration with demons: forming a community with them, so that whatever happens is a consequence of demonic power brought to the aid of the magician."[7] For the purpose of this dissertation, Flint's and Augustine's complementary definitions suffice; each chapter, nonetheless, will demonstrate how the pageantry of "demonic" magic ultimately conflicts with the more evanescent quality of "natural" magic. All of the women discussed under the purview of this project face either witchcraft accusations or insinuations at some point within their respective plays, allegations that range in their degree of accuracy. True moments of magical and personal authority occur more frequently, however, when women generate authority from within themselves, as opposed to having a devil grant it to them from without.

If "magic" proves an elusive word to define, "absence," by its very nature, is even more so. At its barest essential theatre is a visual and material construct. Comprised of props, actors, and sets, early modern theatres were also "embedded in complex networks of institutions, commodities, and work."[8] The recent increase in scholarship on topics such as "thing theory" and the material culture of

[6] Ibid, 128.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Henry S. Turner, "Generalization," in *Early Modern Theatricality*, Henry S. Turner (ed.), 1-23 (Oxford, 2013), 21.

playhouses stresses this fundamental principle.[9] Yet, for all of theatre's visual splendour, Theseus' remarks on the human imagination serve to remind us that for early moderns the known was always balanced against the unknown. In religion the physical body squares off against the incorporeal soul, in science factual knowledge contends with the unreliability of human perception, and in theatre on- and off-stage worlds replicate the inherent contradictions that exist within drama itself, between the materiality of performance and the fluidity of the script. Although we compensate for this lack by focusing on theatre's physical characteristics, absence remains an omnipresent element, "a strange condition that is at once real and imaginary, immaterial and embodied, present before us and yet somehow also always inaccessible."[10]

By employing "absence," therefore (even under the most basic of definitions), I point to a multivalency of meaning, and use it to refer to either a "'counter-space' to the stage" itself, "a place of unseen fictional" potential[11] or a character who does not physically appear on stage, "an absence that indicates to

[9] For further information, see Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (eds), *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge, 2006); Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (eds), *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meanings* (Burlington VT, 2010); or Erika T. Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance* (New York, 2012).
[10] Turner, 21.
[11] Tim Fitzpatrick, *Playwright, Space and Place in Early Modern Performance: Shakespeare and Company* (Burlington VT, 2013), 101.

us the disembodied, immaterial nature of all dramatic character."[12] Although I frequently use this term in contrast to on-stage events or people, I do not mean to imply that "absence" lacks independent metaphorical significance. On the contrary, I argue that "absence" offers us a fluid lens through which to study early modern ideologies and in particular, as I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, concepts of gender and magic. From a purely linguistic standpoint, after all, to be absent

> can involve any or all of the following: to deny, reject, contradict, oppose, exclude, marginalize, denigrate, erase, separate, split, sunder, cancel, annual, destroy, criticise, and condemn. It is also present in … the hiatus, the margin, the void, the hidden, the empty, the anterior, the exterior, the excluded, the omitted, the forgotten, and the feared.[13]

How do playwrights handle the "airy nothing" that exists at the fringe of their on-stage worlds? What thematic purpose (or purposes) do unstaged characters serve? While certain scholars have addressed key absences in their individual discussions of specific plays, no one has conducted a more comprehensive survey to consider the historical and literary significance of absence in the texts of the period, a void

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[12] Although we tend to associate an actor's body with the character he or she portrays, Turner observes that "strictly speaking, bodilessness turns out to be a condition for the character's mode of existence: the experience of fiction … turns out to be a state of perpetual desire for a body that always remains absent" (20). Madhavi Menon argues a similar point: "Contrary to what we often believe, characters do not actually exist on stage in bodily form – the actor's body simply takes on the character" ("Desire," in *Early Modern Theatricality*, Henry S. Turner [ed.], 327-45 [Oxford, 2013], 330.).

[13] Alan Norrie, *Dialectic and Difference: Dialectical Critical Realism and the Grounds of Justice* (New York, 2010), 23-4.

I hope this dissertation begins to fill.

Although writing a dissertation on theatrical absence may initially seem counterintuitive, a number of scholars, among them Madhavi Menon, have already established a basis for how important the immaterial can be when it comes to understanding certain cultural ideologies. In her exploration of desire in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Menon considers the different reactions "absence" provokes in men and women respectively. Although Theseus makes his thoughts on the human imagination clear, Hippolyta's reply reveals that she does not share his opinion:

> But all the story of the night told over,
> And all their minds transfigured so together,
> More witnesseth than fancy's images
> And grows to something of great constancy;
> But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.23-7)

For Theseus the human imagination's ability to transform or "conjure" airy nothing into a "coherent entity … is mere fantasy," but for Hippolyta "the imagination … is greater than the sum of its parts" and she "bestows more credibility on its narratives, not less."[14] Drawing on these two separate philosophies, Menon uses them to analyze the play's larger conflict between Oberon and Titania over the absent Indian boy. According to Menon, Titania desires the boy because "she wants him as a remembrance of his mother."[15] She

[14] Menon, 328.
[15] Ibid, 332.

places value in his unstaged body precisely because she can re-envision that body to recall her lost friend and the former intimacy they shared. Oberon, alternatively, wants the boy not only out of jealousy, but also because he wishes to dispel the boy's inherent unknowability. He desperately wants to bring the elusive "changeling" into the fold by making him his "henchm[a]n" (2.1.120-1), an impulse modern directors of the play frequently assist Oberon in. Although Menon focuses her discussion on the question of whether or not desire can exist without a body, her work points to a number of correlating issues: an unstaged character, women who use absence to develop alternative narratives, and (at the heart of it all) an elusive magic that infiltrates everything and makes the impossible possible. These are the connections I explore throughout this dissertation, as I study how female characters use various types of absence, shades that I will define in more detail shortly, to challenge social as well as gender injustice.

The inherent challenge I faced in defining my topic was how to study a phenomenon that resists theatrical representation. Christina Luckyj's scholarship provided me with an answer. Although Luckyj does not discuss moments of physical, spacial, or temporal absence, she nonetheless develops a comparable model that I, in turn, have adapted for my own purposes. By focussing on moments of silence in early modern drama, she argues that scholars should not oversimplify this concept by reducing it to an "either / or" paradigm, with

"absence" (in the feminine sense of the word) representing one end of the spectrum and "plenitude" (in the masculine sense) the other.[16] Although Western philosophy frequently casts male silence as a deliberate act of stoic resolve, modern scholars (throughout the first half of the twentieth century and beyond) tend to view female silence as evidence of submission, the absence of action, rather than an alternative mode of communication. By conducting a historical and textual survey of this topic, however, Luckyj successfully demonstrates how reductive this singular interpretation of silence can be.

Instead, Luckyj argues, silence becomes a fluid vehicle, a type of "eloquence," that can signify several different meanings simultaneously, despite its intangible nature.[17] Although conduct books and religious tracts of the period frequently preached the importance of female silence as a mechanism of patriarchal control, heralding it as one of the three fundamental virtues that all honest women should possess, Luckyj demonstrates how both men and women, in turn, "destabilised" this "trope of silence" by transforming it into a "'moving' rhetoric" that was counter-intuitive to its original paradigm.[18] A "resonant silence," she argues, can speak "(to initiated listeners) louder than words."[19]

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[16] Christina Luckyj, *'A moving Rhetoricke': Gender and silence in early modern England* (Manchester, 2002), 3.
[17] Ibid, 9.
[18] Ibid, 1. In addition to silence, early moderns also preached the importance of obedience and chastity as being the ideal feminine virtues.
[19] Ibid, 5.

Whether we view Livinia's mutilated tongue as "monstrous" silence in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1593), Bolingbroke's seething hostility as "impotent" silence in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (c. 1595), or Macduff's incoherence after learning the grisly fate of his family as "androgynous" silence in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (c. 1605), Luckyj repeatedly demonstrates how fruitful the study of non-speech can be.[20] Luckyj's work, wherein she uses both literary and historical documents to ascertain how early modern individuals used and understood silence, provides a context for my discussion of the immaterial and a launching point for further examination of the influence of absence in early modern culture.

The Magic of Theatre

Having defined both of my key terms, I now ask why should we view them in relation to one another. Why absence *and* magic? During the early modern period the prevalent belief in magic further complicated cultural attitudes towards the theatre and how early moderns conceptualized the act of writing and producing plays. For early modern playwrights incorporating unstaged characters, elaborate pre-histories, or spaces that simply defy visual representation in their creative endeavours was simply part of the narrative process, one that they frequently cast in a magical light in order to comment on the quasi-magical or

[20] Ibid, 90-1; 82; 107.

god-given powers culturally attributed to the act of authorship itself. Although the public's demand for theatre reached an unprecedented level during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, resulting in an exponential increase in the number of theatres located in London, a mounting criticism against dramatic practices also began to arise. Besides the ethical concerns, which viewed playhouses as dens of iniquity, the process of bringing "airy nothing" to life on stage sparked a certain amount of cultural unease. Anti-theatrical writers and pamphleteers, such as Stephen Gosson, Anthony Munday, Philip Stubbes, John Northbrooke, and William Rankins (to name but a few) viewed the English stage as a subversive space that actively utilized a form of demonic magic.[21] In their opinion, actors, under the direction of playwrights, performed the devil's bidding by creating illusionary spectacles that deceived humankind and promoted sin.[22] The devil, after all, was frequently configured as a charlatan of sorts who used illusions to seduce the weak-willed and ignorant. Even King James I defined the

[21] Ironically, a number of early anti-theatrical writers, such as Anthony Munday and Stephen Gosson, shared intimate ties with London's theatre community, despite their "theological" objections to the stage. Bryan Crockett observes how "Munday, like Gosson a playwright but unlike Gosson, one who kept writing plays after his diatribe against them, claims that in a Christian land plays are 'not sufferable. My reason is because they are publike enimies to virtue and religion; allurements unto sinne ... mere brothel houses of Bauderie'" ("Theater and Opposition" in *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, Volume 2, Francis J. Bremer and Tom Webster [eds], 563-6 [Santa Barbara CA, 2006], 565). Munday's and Gosson's conflicting attitudes towards the stage reveal how complex this issue could be.

[22] Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, *Devil Theatre: Demonic Possession and Exorcism in English Renaissance Drama, 1558-1642* (Cambridge, 2007), 156.

devil as "'God's ape,' able only to imitate actions which God performs in reality."[23] For those who opposed London's theatre culture, dramatic spectacles simply shared too much in common with the devil for comfort.

As a result, anti-theatrical writers attacked playhouses by "explicitly" comparing their "illusions" with those of "the devil."[24] They viewed the stage as a type of witchcraft, one that used a form of demonic hypnosis to deceive the uneducated. Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen and Bryan Crockett have both done a thorough job of tracing this particular line of rhetoric throughout the pamphlets of the period, starting with its initial rise in the mid to late 1570s right up until 1642, when the theatres were closed by antiroyalists for a number of unrelated issues. In 1577, for example, Northbrooke claimed that

> Satan hath not a more speedy way, and fitter school to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthy lusts of wicked whoredome, than those places, and plays, and theatres are.[25]

Similarly Gosson, another anti-theatrical pioneer who wrote a number of tracts in the late 1570s and early 80s, viewed "Stage-Playes" as "the doctrine and invention of the Devill," while his compatriot, Rankins, "claimed that players 'are sent from their great captaine Sathan under whose banner they beare armes, to

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid, 157.

deceive the world, to lead the people with intising shewes to the divell.'"[26] Over the next sixty years, such criticisms grew in frequency, to which the sheer number of surviving tracts attests.

Early moderns, therefore, perceived of the stage as a quasi-magical space, a territory all of its own where playwrights (in conjunction with actors) could create imaginary spectacles to entertain audiences. It became, according to Cyrus Mulready, "a potent space for 'conjuring' both 'many places and many times' in the geographically expanded imaginations of playgoers."[27] By further incorporating immaterial elements into their productions, playwrights could create an endless cycle of illusion, as they bent and stretched the magical confines of the stage itself to demonstrate the limitless potential of the human imagination. The use of absent characters and places allowed playwrights to comment on their own narrative process, as they depicted characters who performed the very act that anti-theatrical proponents accused them of committing, namely creating illusions out of nothing. Whether we witness Prospero repeatedly invoke images of Sycorax as he attempts to assert narrative control over her memory in *The Tempest* (c. 1611) or empathetically imagine the plight of the sailor whom the

[26] Ibid. The sub-title of Rankins's 1587 pamphlet, according to Crockett, "speaks for itself: *Wherein is plainely described the manifold vices & spotted enormities, that are caused by the infectious sight of playes, with the description of the subtile slights of Sathan, making them his instruments*" (565).
[27] Cyrus Mulready, *Romance on the Early Modern Stage: English Expansion Before and After Shakespeare* (New York, 2013), 76.

three witches curse in *Macbeth* (c. 1606), early modern playwrights used the immaterial to involve their audiences in the theatrical process. The practice "of speaking of, or conceptualizing absence as if it were a presence or entity," after all, "is a metaphorical process of 'speaking of one thing,' that is, *no-thing*, 'in terms of another.'"[28] Instead of denying the witchcraft accusations levied against them, early modern playwrights (by and large) seem content to leave magical questions unresolved, even as they involve (and implicate) audiences in their creative process. In turn, this attitude shapes the way that many of their characters, as this project demonstrates, treat theatrical absences, a mind-set the title of this dissertation, *Vanishing Acts*, attempts playfully to convey.

Shades of Absence

My dissertation considers three specific variations of the conjoined use of absence and magic in early modern drama with my chapters progressing from the most extreme spatial examples of this phenomenon to the most paradoxically temporal instances of it. In chapter one, I consider how Shakespeare uses the complete stage absence of both a witch and a queen in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1599) to attack and disprove the cultural conventions that so commonly linked the two during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Partnered with a

[28] Daniel Erickson, *Ghosts, Metaphor, and History in Toni Morrison's* Beloved *and Gabriel García Márquez's* One Hundred Years of Solitude (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 40.

complementary discussion of Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* (c. 1609) and a historical overview of two thematically linked witchcraft cases that arose in the late 1570s, I begin the chapter by examining the misogynistic ways in which political discourses frequently sought to prove the illegitimacy of female monarchs by accusing them of being in league with the devil. Female authority, in any context, constituted an unnatural inversion of the "proper" gender and social hierarchy. Queen Elizabeth's Catholic opponents, therefore, used witchcraft allegations to demonstrate her general unfitness as a ruler. Although Elizabeth's Protestant subjects responded with pamphlets of their own, as they rose in defense of their queen, the entire vein of rhetoric points to the narrow degree of separation that ultimately existed in early modern culture between the image of female virtue, on the one hand, and female corruption, on the other. When three wax "poppets," alleged effigies of Queen Elizabeth and two of her privy councillors, were unearthed in a local dunghill in 1578, the cultural unease concerning female virtue and its ceaseless potential for corruption came to a climax, one that boiled over into the surrounding community of Windsor when a separate case, involving the same type of image magic, arose only a few months later. I argue that Shakespeare, writing in the wake of these events, uses both an absent witch (in the figure of Mother Pratt) and an absent queen (through allusions to Elizabeth herself) to attack and disprove this cultural connection once and for all. As Falstaff's delusions and Ford's paranoia metaphorically transform Mistress Ford

from suburban housewife to witch, she, in turn, channels both constructs in order to reform her community and, more generally, to critique her society's unjust categorization of women. By metaphorically making the absent present and by assuming narrative control over her husband's fear-induced mind, she allows Ford to see through the curtain of his destructive imagination and destroy the suspicions that linger there.

Chapter two focuses on *The Birth of Merlin* (c. 1622), a play once considered part of Shakespeare's canon but now attributed to William Rowley. While chapter one focuses on the complete stage absence of a witch and a queen to comment on the ironies such artificial stereotypes inevitably generate, chapter two examines moments of magical enclosure and the process through which present characters become (or are made to be) absent. The chapter begins with an examination of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136) to reveal the ways in which the play's four female characters (Constantia, Modestia, Joan, and Artesia) serve as partial foils to Guinevere. After establishing this connection, I argue that Rowley exposes the violence of which men are capable when women threaten their patriarchal notions of history, as demonstrated by the escalating violence by which he banishes them from the stage. Within the play, Rowley grants each of his female characters a powerful final scene before she faces a permanent, pseudo-magical enclosure off stage: Constantia and Modestia, despite their father's objections, confine themselves to a nunnery;

Merlin sentences his mother, Joan, to solitary confinement within his magic bower; and, finally, Uter condemns Artesia to a triple form of imprisonment, starvation, live burial, and being "circled in a wall" (5.2.65).[29] Despite these "vanishing acts," the women use their final moments on stage to contextualize their impending absence for audiences, characterizing it as a moment of magical defiance rather than defeat in the face of male tyranny. Although the permanence of their success is never guaranteed, the women's absences allow them to transcend their physical bodies and evade the men's attempts to control them.

Carrying this idea over into my final chapter, I look at how magical objects, such as the handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1604) or the belt in Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd* (c. 1637) resist the absence of their female creators and continue to provide physically absent or dead women with magical agency. With strong female historical traditions commonly denied to women, as discussed in chapter two, I consider the uneasy impact female "things" continue to have in plays where notions of ocular proof and accountability are vital to the stability of masculine honour. In both plays, textile creation offers women an alternative medium through which to "weave" narratives and "spin" tales and to ensure their continued presence on stage, even after death. Although the creators of the

[29] All quoted material from *The Birth of Merlin* comes from Joanna Udall's edition of the play: William Rowley, *The Birth of Merlin; or, The Childe Hath Found His Father* in *A Critical, Old-Spelling Edition of* The Birth of Merlin *(Q 1662)*, Joanna Udall (ed.), 121-81 (London, 1991).

handkerchief and the belt never appear directly on stage, their voices continue to radiate with magical authority through the material artefacts they leave behind. Desdemona's handkerchief and Maudlin's belt become sources of narrative authority in both plays, symbols that offer these women magical insight into their respective situations. For Desdemona, the handkerchief's story becomes lost in translation as Othello usurps control over this artifact and uses it to justify his growing distrust of Desdemona's virtue, but in the case of Mother Maudlin, the belt becomes a means whereby the gendered and cultural differences that exist within *The Sad Shepherd* might be rectified. Although Maudlin uses the belt predominantly to protest what Robin Hood and his company stand for, as she uses parody to expose their shortcomings, the belt nonetheless remains a symbol for potential reconciliation. Both Robin Hood and Maudlin represent extreme models of the types of culture they signify (elite and folk traditions respectively). The belt's ability to transform them into different shapes offers each character the chance to walk a mile in the other's shoes and learn from these experiences. Although we cannot be fully certain that this alternative experience is the direction Jonson planned on taking to finish his play, Robin Hood's past escapades demonstrate that he had formerly disguised himself as an old woman, leaving this final transformation a distinct possibility.

By structuring my dissertation on these three specific gradations of absence, I provide a nuanced analysis of the purposes these dramatic omissions

serve by focusing on how these shades of absence subtly alter the ways in which we interpret and define early modern magical belief. When discussing Sycorax in *The Tempest*, Diane Purkiss remarks that "Shakespeare deliberately reduced the lady from outside to a story from the past."[30] In reconstructing these absent figures, she warns, we are being "false to the play," since their invisibility and marginalization are precisely what gives these characters meaning in the first place.[31] The goal of this dissertation is not to make the absent present, as their very immateriality defies that sort of extrapolation, but to examine the symbolic effect absence (in and of itself) has on early modern notions of magic and gender. In creating an unstaged figure like Mother Pratt or by having Artesia redefine the metaphorical significance of her crypt, the site of her eventual death, playwrights not only gender absence feminine, but also define it as a form of magical protest. Through their contrasting use of on- and off-stage elements, early modern playwrights define absence as more than just a marginalized location. Instead, absent characters and spaces come to replicate the inherit power of theatre itself by relying on the same evanescent quality that gives drama its form and function. Meaning is made possible only through an examination of what absence contributes to the play, even if that leaves us grasping for ever elusive answers in the face of the unknown.

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[30] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (New York, 2002), 271.
[31] Ibid.

Chapter One: Queens and Witches, Magic and Absence in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

> A witch, a quean, an old cozening quean! Have I not forbid her my house? She comes of errands, does she? We are simple men; we do not know what's brought to pass under the profession of fortune-telling. She works by charms, by spells, by the figure, and such daubery as this is, beyond our element we know nothing. Come down, you witch, you hag, you; come down, I say![1]

Sixteenth-century political advocates frequently used witchcraft insinuations and/or accusations to attack and discredit the reputations of prominent female rulers during the period. Although all monarchs, regardless of their gender, inevitably faced some degree of criticism, women (in particular) often had to contend with this particularly degrading rhetorical theme when it came to the nature of these political and personal attacks. Across England and continental Europe the trend upheld by these women's political and religious opponents was to undermine their rule by comparing their power to that of a witch, ultimately implying that both were equally illegitimate and unnatural. By the start of the seventeenth century the roots of this political discourse were well-established. Deborah Willis, for example, notes how several prominent Protestant reformers during Queen Elizabeth's reign used witchcraft accusations to aid in

[1] All quoted material from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* comes from T.W. Craik's edition of the play: William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, T.W. Craik (ed.), 127-256 (Oxford, 1998).

their anti-Catholic propaganda. To support her claim, Willis points to John Jewel who viewed witches as "extensions" of Queen Mary I, Elizabeth's elder sister.[2] In this he was not alone. Polemicist John Stubbs also compared a female Catholic ruler (in this case Catherine de Medici) to a witch in a treatise he published in 1579.[3] Nor were Protestant queens spared these unflattering comparisons. Although in England the custom only touched on Catholic rulers, in Europe's Catholic countries the opposite was typically held to be true. When investigating the aftermath caused by Queen Elizabeth's execution of Mary Stuart, for example, Christa Jansohn comments on a tract published in Paris in 1587 by a man named Adam Blackwood who openly criticized Elizabeth for her involvement in the tragedy, calling her a "Harpy whose soul was possessed by a demon."[4] Diane Purkiss also comments on the public backlash Elizabeth faced as a result of Mary Stuart's death, writing that "Scottish Catholics saw [Elizabeth] as 'cozened by the devil' in the signing of Mary Queen of Scot's death warrant."[5] Although Elizabeth was a Protestant queen, and therefore more immune to the same home-brewed criticisms Protestant reformers aimed at her Catholic counterparts, dissenting religious groups often employed this same rhetoric in their attempts to discredit

[2] *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1995), 119.
[3] See Stubbs's *The discouerie of a gaping gulf*.
[4] *Queen Elizabeth I: Past and Present* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2004), 20-1. According to Jansohn's account, Blackwood also calls the Earl of Leicester a "familiar" which "gives an implication of witchcraft" (21).
[5] Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 185.

her. As the aforementioned examples suggest, accusations of this nature became commonplace in the political discourse of the period, leaving all future female leaders vulnerable to similar slanderous accusations.

Responding to this controversy, Queen Anna of Denmark, in collaboration with eleven of her ladies-in-waiting and a troop of professional actors, performed *The Masque of Queens* before King James and his court at Whitehall Palace on 2 February 1609. Taking Anna's instructions to heart, Jonson used his privileged position as the queen's playwright to have her confront the stigmatizing (though culturally prolific) vein of political discourse that frequently sought to compare queens to witches. Although Anna was raised a Lutheran and might therefore have been somewhat removed from the implications behind this rhetoric (at least in England), both modern scholars and her English contemporaries have separately speculated that Anna may have privately converted to Catholicism at some point during her life. When researching Anna's religious affiliations, Michael A. Beatty postulates that "stern Calvinists … found Anna's Lutheran background suspect and, when word got out that she actually had some Catholic sympathies, these suspicions were greatly compounded."[6] Leeds Barroll, who has also studied Anna's potentially Catholic inclinations, also theorizes that if Anna did indeed convert to Catholicism, she most likely did so in 1600; the same year a

[6] *The English Royal Family of America, from Jamestown to the American Revolution* (Jefferson NC, 2003), 14.

Scottish Jesuit named Father Robert Abercromby claimed to have schooled her in the Catholic faith.[7] When combined with the realm's tense political atmosphere, these hushed rumours concerning Anna's religious affiliations no doubt helped influence Jonson's choice to compose a piece that directly pitted queens against witches in 1609. In his royally-commissioned masque, therefore, Jonson has Anna publically contest this popular English stereotype. The performance opens with twelve witches who dance, cast spells, and revel in their malicious disruption of the court. The arrival of twelve corresponding queens from the House of Fame, however, quickly puts an end to the hags' unseemly antics. Introduced to the audience by the figures of Heroic Virtue and Fame, the queens first confront and then wage war upon their demonic counterparts, ultimately overpowering the hags by binding them to their royal chariots. As the masque draws to a close it offers audiences a triumphant glimpse of success, as the queens' incorruptible virtues jubilantly reign supreme over the hags' unholy sorcery.

Or does it? A closer inspection of the masque's conclusion reveals that the queen/witch relationship remains as ominously present and as ambiguously unresolved as it was at the start of the performance, despite the queens' apparent military victory over the hags. The witches, after all, still live and have become more intimately associated with the queens than ever before, as both groups (quite

[7] *Anna of Denmark, Queen of England: A Cultural Biography* (Philadelphia, 2001), 163.

literally) become linked to one another through the hags' restraints:

> *By this time imagine the masquers* [i.e., the queens] *descended, and again mounted into three triumphant chariots, ready to come forth. The first four were drawn with eagles … their four torch-bearers attending on the chariot sides, and four of the hags bound before them. Then followed the second, drawn by griffins, with their torch-bearers and four other hags. Then the last, which was drawn by lions and more eminent (wherein her majesty was), and had six torch-bearers more, peculiar to her, with the like number of hags.*[8]

Jonson's free use of the masque/antimasque format also denies his audience the possibility of making sense of the queen/witch relationship solely in terms of a strict polar binary. By having both his masque and antimasque merge into a single unified narrative, Jonson destabilizes the thematic dichotomy that separates queen from witch in the performance. As the queens effortlessly impose themselves upon the hags' antimasque the division between queen and witch likewise becomes less distinct. Although the masque's costuming preserves a degree of separation between both groups, the women's physical proximity to the witches speaks to the larger social anxieties that originally inspired this unflattering comparison to begin with. The masque visually highlights this tension for audiences by asking them to determine for themselves where the witches end and the queens begin.

Jonson's choice to further mystify (and paradoxically conflate) a relationship that he also seems bent on having Anna confront and redefine,

[8] Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Queens* in *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques*, Robert M. Adams (ed.), 321-40 (New York, 1979), 338-9.

however, is ultimately a strategic one. Instead of having her distance herself from this comparison, Jonson has Anna embrace and triumph over the very cultural stereotypes that might otherwise isolate or victimize her within the court. She not only appears alongside witches – demonstrating how immune she is to such superstitious and slanderous comparisons – but also creates a nurturing network of supportive women to stand alongside her. Although historically women were often pitted against one another in witchcraft trials (positioned as both accused and accuser), Anna and her ladies confront distorted images of themselves, twelve queens for twelve witches, rather than an external figure.[9] The hags are less real presences than they are superstitious projections created by human folly. Jonson stresses the witches' fictitious natures for both his audience and readers by specifically naming them "Ignorance, Suspicion, Credulity, etc."[10] Similarly, Anna does not confront her witch-doppelgänger alone, but appears alongside a

[9] When rebutting Christina Larner's conclusion that witch-hunting was also a form of woman-hunting, Clive Holmes establishes that women frequently assumed key roles in witchcraft trials. Not only did women frequently testify as victims of and/or eye-witnesses to witchcraft, but they were also called upon as medical experts to conduct "physical searches" of the witches' bodies ("Women, Witches and Witnesses" in *The Witchcraft Reader*, 2nd edn, Darren Oldridge (ed.), 267-86 [New York, 2008], 268). The majority of the evidence presented at the St. Osyth witchcraft trials in 1580, for example, came from women (Barbara Rosen, *Witchcraft in England, 1558-1618* [Massachusetts, 1991], 103). Brian Darcy, who was responsible for questioning and recording the women's testimonies at St. Osyth, even called on the eight-year-old daughter of one of the suspected witches to help build his case (Rosen, 112). As Darcy's evidence grew, even the condemned women started to point their figures at one another in an attempt to divert his attention elsewhere.

[10] Jonson, 321.

group of equally influential, educated, and important court ladies. The strong female homosocial bonds she creates visually reinforce Jonson's central theme. It establishes that women from all stages and walks of life are capable of helping one another overcome adversity. Anna unites a diverse group of women, from Frances Howard, Countess of Essex, and Lady Anna Clifford, both of whom were newlywed teenagers at the time, to Elizabeth de Vere, Countess of Derby, who was in her mid-thirties and was a mother multiple times over.[11] She also strengthens the implied intimacy of her circle by including multiple women from the same family in her performance, inviting two de Vere sisters, three Somerset sisters, and two Howard sisters to perform alongside her.[12] Nor does Anna limit the scope of her circle to the masque itself. During the 1609 performance, La Boderie, the French ambassador, negatively commented on the masque's long pauses, suggesting that they were "too numerous and dull."[13] What he failed to grasp, however, was the symbolic import of these pauses, as Anna used them to leave her place on stage and engage with prominent women in her audience, such as La Boderie's wife.[14] Anna's community spills off stage and overflows into the audience, which creates a powerful statement about the intrinsic power of female unity.

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[11] Kristen McDermott, *Masques of Difference by Ben Jonson* (Manchester, 2007), 208-9.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Barroll, 112-3.
[14] Ibid, 113.

In spite of their differences Anna unites all women, regardless of their age or nationality, so that they may jointly refute misogynistic assumptions concerning female virtue. The women end up involved in a common cause, as they share an inner outrage over the witches' innate ability to socially undermine their own virtuous reputations within the court. In response, Anna and her ladies assume not only queenly personas for the duration of the performance, but also military ones. Jonson has Anna and her ladies appear as famous warrior women who often assumed leadership over the governments held by weak or inept men. Each woman appears as a popular historical or mythological military heroine and Jonson stresses the vital symbolic import of each character by writing a detailed description for all twelve ladies. Valasca of Bohemia, for example, "to redeem herself and her sex from the tyranny of men … led on the women to the slaughter of their barbarous husbands and lords."[15] Similarly, he praises the role of Artemisia, who we know was performed by Lady Elizabeth Guilford, for her military might, writing that after the Persian Prince Xerxes saw her fight he supposedly declared that "My men behaved like women, but my women like men."[16] Again and again Jonson positively emphasizes the queens' military prowess: Zenobia "continued a long and brave war against several chiefs, and … at length triumphed"; Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons, "gave great proofs of

[15] Jonson, 337.
[16] Ibid, 334. McDermott provides a succinct summary of which ladies played which parts (when known) in her abridged edition of the play (208-9).

her power against the very strongest men"; Tomyris was a "heroine of a most invincible and unbroken fortitude"; and Candace was a "woman of haughty spirit against her enemies."[17] After marveling at their military feats, Jonson demonstrates how their acts, though untraditional, won them their current fame and earned them the reverence and respect of their male subjects and peers. Amalasunta, for example, projected such an image of queenly virtue that not even the criminals she punished would dare "let drop a bitter word against her."[18] Although previous queens have used similar comparisons to justify their power, this veneration of female leadership stands in stark contrast to the queen/witch comparisons that so frequently marred the reputations of Anna's immediate predecessors and contemporaries, Catholic and otherwise. To restore this proper sense of reverence, Anna must follow in the footsteps of these legendary heroines and fight for it. Anna and her ladies, therefore, become the next generation of female warriors who must attempt to re-educate their male audiences, teaching them to recognize, respect, and trust in female virtue.

In choosing to stage Anna's response as a collective military action, Jonson has Anna (and her ladies) symbolically replicate the essence of the triple Hecate in their performance. The triple Hecate is an ancient symbol of female divinity and power, one composed of three female figures whose backs and

[17] Ibid, 333-7.
[18] Ibid, 337.

dresses, as they stand creating a perfect outward facing trinity, merge together to create a single conjoined unit (see Figure 1 on the following page). Each of the triple Hecate's three faces represents a different stage of womanhood, sometimes being interpreted as the maid, the mother, and the crone, and at other times as the wronged maid, the wife, and the fury.[19] Although a number of different classical goddesses became thematically linked to the triple Hecate in early modern culture, such as Persephone (the wronged maid), Lucina (the wife), and Hecate (the fury), the triple Hecate extends beyond these limited symbolic configurations.[20] She is omnipotent and unites different classes and categories of women together in order to right wrongs. She is righteous female anger in the face of male oppression and tyranny. United on stage, Anna and her ladies symbolically fulfill this model as they bring each of the triple Hecate's three faces to life. The twelve queens proudly confront their illusionary hag doppelgängers and succeed in restoring order in the court. The twelve women overcome their differences and band together, defiantly seizing control over the very hags who have been created to destroy them through unfounded gossip and suspicion.

Even as Jonson has Anna visually gesture towards these larger cultural witchcraft stereotypes, therefore, he has her exploit them to create her own self-

[19] Helen Ostovich, "The Appropriation of Pleasure in *The Magnetic Lady*" in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (eds), 98-113 (New York, 1999), 99.
[20] Ibid.

Figure 1 Anon. *The Triple Hecate*. Reproduced by Helen Ostovich, "The Appropriation of Pleasure in *The Magnetic Lady*," in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (eds), 99. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

empowering message. The masque's closing image of military victory and domination ultimately serves as a threat aimed primarily at her audience. Anna effectively vanquishes the witchcraft she was initially associated with, exploiting and channelling its powers for her own use. With the witches (both literally and figuratively) harnessed to her, Anna and ladies ride off stage in full command of their unseemly captives, whom they have transformed into a display to showcase their military prowess. Instead of simply denying the connection, Jonson has Anna repurpose it to become a symbol of her own moral authority. As the masque closes Anna and her ladies demonstrate that women can successfully band together in order to defend one another from wrongful persecution. With the hags harnessed and bound, ready to be unleashed again at any moment, and Anna's virtue successfully reining (and reigning) supreme, she concludes the masque by painting herself as the epitome of female virtue, a ruler who demands the reverence and admiration of her subjects.

This masque is unique because it provides us with a first-hand account of how a real-life queen addressed and refuted the culturally prolific (though undeniably gender-biased) comparison that commonly linked queen to witch during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. For Jonson, the only viable solution available was to have Anna embrace this stereotype, while simultaneously forging it anew. This explanation, however, begs the question: if Jonson felt it necessary to have Anna confront this ingrained and demeaning

cultural belief when she was merely a queen consort, how was this relationship dramatically configured or explored during the independent reign of someone like Elizabeth I, James's predecessor? How did earlier dramatic treatments of this same phenomenon handle the queen/witch relationship?

Performed a number of years earlier, Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* tackles precisely these issues. While the play lacks the grand scale of Jonson's masque it nonetheless seeks to explore how women band together in order to resist socially restrictive and morally polarizing labels. *Merry Wives* is an English comedy set in the town of Windsor. The play recounts Sir John Falstaff's trials and tribulations as he attempts to first seduce and then swindle two virtuous wives out of their husbands' fortunes. The two women in question, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, are understandably incensed by Falstaff's presumptuous and transparently clumsy overtures, and decide not only to revenge themselves upon him, but also to use this happenstance to their own advantage in order to help cure Mistress Ford's husband of his debilitating jealousy. The two women orchestrate a number of humiliating punishments for Falstaff, including having him thrown into the River Thames with a pile of dirty laundry; disguising him in the likeness of a local woman suspected of being a witch; and having Mistress Quickly (disguised as the Queen of Fairies) pinch him during a communal skimmington ritual. These plots, however, also function as symbolic rituals, as the merry wives use them simultaneously to exorcize Ford of his demons and cure him of his

irrational mistrust of women. While the play's main plot depicts a married couple triumphing over both internal and external obstacles, the subplot, involving the Pages' daughter, Anne, similarly explores the often unpredictable path one must tread in the name of love. Anne Page is also a woman assailed by inappropriate suitors and by family members who seek to control rather than trust her. Navigating between the romantic suits of the dimwitted Shallow, the hot-blooded Doctor Caius, and (Anne's preferred lover) the penniless, though noble, Fenton, Anne (like Mistress Ford) must engineer a way to punish and humiliate her unworthy suitors, while simultaneously teaching her family how to respect in her ability to make her own choices.

Although *Merry Wives* principally revolves around the lives of two ordinary English housewives, as opposed to an exalted figure like Queen Anna, there is still a distinct possibility, as will shortly be argued in more detail, that Shakespeare wrote this play in response to the public's continued concern over two separate (though thematically linked) witchcraft cases that arose during the late 1570s and peripherally touched upon none other than Elizabeth I herself. *Merry Wives* has a long and rich performance history, one further complicated by the existence of two fairly different versions of the play which were published more than twenty years apart from one another. There is a strong possibility, however, that it was staged before either Queen Elizabeth or Queen Anna of Denmark (or both) at some point during its performance history. Leah Marcus has

previously argued that *Merry Wives* was first performed before Elizabeth and her court as part of the Garter festivities at Westminster on St. George's Day, 23 April 1597.[21] Alternatively, both Giorgio Melchiori and Wendy Wall, while agreeing that the play is certainly from the Elizabethan period, date it fractionally later than Marcus, suggesting that it was first performed in 1599.[22] Other scholars, however, have taken issue with this conclusion, arguing that the only evidence we possess to help us date the play's first performance is the quarto edition, which was published in 1602 and contains no garter references except for the name of the inn. More recently, Richard Dutton has argued that the folio edition of the longer folio version of the play was performed before King James I and his court during his "first full Revels season at Whitehall" on November 4, 1604.[23] If this latter argument is correct, this would seem to suggest that Queen Anna, rather than Queen Elizabeth, was more likely to view the play at some point following her arrival in England. At the very least the folio, published in 1623 four years after Anna's death, could only have been seen by Anna depending on when it was

[21] Leah Marcus, "Purity and Danger in the Modern Edition: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*" in *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare Marlowe, Milton*, 68-100 (New York, 1996), 68.
[22] Giorgio Melchiori, "Introduction" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Arden 3rd Series, 1-118 (London, 1999), 20; Wendy Wall, "*The Merry Wives of Windsor*: Unhusbanding Desire in Windsor," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume III: The Comedies*, Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (eds), 376-92 (Malden MA, 2003), 379.
[23] Richard Dutton, "A *Jacobean* Merry Wives?" in *Ben Jonson* 18.1 (2011): 16.

performed.[24] Regardless of their numerous disagreements when it comes to dating the play, however, modern scholars seem to agree that it was likely performed before royalty at some point during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Like Jonson, therefore, Shakespeare's choice to critique the queen/witch relationship is fitting, given the play's English setting and its potential courtly audience. But how does Shakespeare critique this discourse and what events compelled him to do so?

This chapter examines how Shakespeare uses both an absent witch and an absent queen in *Merry Wives* to attack and disprove the cultural connection that so commonly linked the two during Elizabeth's reign. Beginning with a detailed discussion of two historically (and thematically) linked witchcraft cases, both of which personally concerned England's queen, I will argue that the emergent conflicts between queen and witch, court and country, London and Windsor, and true images and false in both Shakespeare's play and these two legal cases represent a female reclamation of the very magic that historically condemned or victimized them. While scholars have generally had difficulty identifying with certainty what sources Shakespeare may or may not have used when composing *Merry Wives*, I contend that he drew on Windsor's local history, one punctuated

[24] Marcus, 69.

with numerous witchcraft scandals, to help develop sections of his plot.[25] By exposing and exorcizing largely misogynistic views of woman and magic through laughter, *Merry Wives* provides critical social commentary on the persecution of women resulting from superstition and ignorance.

Witches in Windsor, a Brief History

When three wax figures were found buried in a local dunghill in late August 1578, Londoners concluded that an assassination attempt by witchcraft had been made against the queen's person.[26] The unexpected discovery caused "widespread dismay," according to Barbara Rosen, prompting even Bernardino de Mendoza, the Spanish Ambassador, to report on the incident in a letter addressed to Secretary Gabriel de Zayas:

> A very curious thing has happened here lately. A countryman has found, buried in a stable, three wax figures, two spans high and proportionately broad; the centre figure had the word Elizabeth written on the forehead and the side figures were dressed like her councillors, and were covered over with a great variety of different signs, the left side of the images being transfixed with a large quantity of pig's bristles as if it were some

[25] Kristen Uszkalo hints at a similar conclusion when she suggests that Mother Pratt's origin as the fat woman of Brentford connects her to the city of Brentford, where only a few years earlier, in 1595, two women had been executed for witchcraft ("Cunning, Cozening, and Queens in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," *Shakespeare* 6.1 [2010], 22).
[26] Barbara Rosen, *Witchcraft in England, 1558-1618* (Massachusetts, 1991), 83; James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 1997), 83.

sort of witchcraft.[27]

Several factors, including a lack of suspects to prosecute, the perceived susceptibility of Queen Elizabeth to witchcraft as a result of her gender and ancestry, and the looming unease surrounding a possible marriage alliance with Catholic France, helped amplify this single event. What was a random, albeit unnatural, chance discovery helped to accelerate the rate of witchcraft prosecutions throughout England during the next two decades of Elizabeth's reign.[28] Four months later, therefore, Privy Councillors felt compelled to pressure local authorities for a conviction when a separate case involving the same type of witchcraft arose in neighbouring town of Windsor. But why did these particular events spark such widespread unease, and why did Londoners view the wax figures as a legitimate threat to Queen Elizabeth's person? How did these events help shape early modern notions of witchcraft? And, perhaps more important to a discussion of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, how should they continue to shape the way we view a play that was authored and performed two decades later?

The answers to these questions centre on the figure of Elizabeth herself. When the existence of the three wax figures was brought to Queen Elizabeth's

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[27] Rosen, 83; Cyrus Hoy, *Introductions, Notes, and Commentaries to texts in* '*The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*,' Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1979), 341.
[28] Ian Dawson, *Challenging History: The Tudor Century 1485-1603* (Edinburgh, 1993), 333.

attention she was, according to Ambassador Mendoza, "disturbed" and "looked upon it as an augury."[29] In this she was not alone. Many of Elizabeth's subjects also interpreted the wax figures as a sinister sign of things to come. Elizabeth's gender and ancestry, after all, left her particularly vulnerable to witchcraft. As a woman, Elizabeth (like all early modern women) was believed to be more susceptible to magical ailments than men. Women's fluid and unresisting bodies, combined with their supposedly inferior mental faculties, made them "especially vulnerable to diabolic assaults because their impressionable natures made them more apt than men to the influences and revelations of spiritual beings."[30] More troubling, however, than the queen's biological vulnerability to witchcraft was the cold truth that early modern subjects did not find it difficult to make an imaginative leap from women being prone to the *influences* of magic to their being equally likely to *practice* it.[31]

These gender-based witchcraft concerns held even stronger implications in Elizabeth's case given that witchcraft was also often believed to be shared through blood ties, particularly through the female line. It was not uncommon for multiple members of a single family to be accused of witchcraft. Offspring were thought to "reflect the moral state of their parents"; so when a parent, child, or

[29] Hoy, *Introductions,* 341.
[30] Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester, 2003), 171.
[31] Ibid.

sibling revealed a familial inclination towards witchcraft, the entire family line became vulnerable to similar accusations.[32] Purkiss has documented numerous examples of precisely this phenomenon in her book *The Witch in History*. In one instance of this trend of "guilt by association" Purkiss tells of a woman named Margaret Morton, who was "bluntly said to be suspect because 'her mother and sister … were suspected to be the like.'"[33] For Elizabeth, the implications were deeply unsettling. Her mother, Anne Boleyn, was infamous for having been charged with (and subsequently executed for) adultery, treason, and witchcraft in May 1536, with treason being the most important of the three. Prior to her death, however, King Henry VIII in one particularly violent fit of passion reportedly called Anne "to her face … You old devil, you witch."[34] Several surviving records, written by some of Henry's closest acquaintances, also document how Henry repeatedly swore that Anne had seduced him, like a demonic succubus, into their ill-fated marriage. In one such instance Henry reportedly said: "I was seduced into this marriage and forced into it by sorcery. I was wrought upon by witchcraft. Yea, that is why God will not suffer me to have male children."[35] Nor was this an isolated incident. Gertrude Courtenay, the marchioness of Exeter, also

[32] Purkiss, 146.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Montague Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic* (New York, 2000), 124.
[35] Ibid.

wrote of Henry's concerns.[36] According to Anna Whitelock, Gertrude wrote that Henry confided to both her and her husband that he had been "seduced by witchcraft" into his marriage and "for this reason he considered it null."[37] While we will never know for sure whether Henry truly believed his own rhetoric or simply viewed such insults as a convenient weapon to hurt a woman he had fallen out of love with, the taint of his accusations against her mother would stay with Elizabeth for the rest of her life. While many of Elizabeth's supporters, such as John Foxe in *Acts and Monuments*, did what they could to defend Elizabeth's ancestry and repudiate the unflattering myths that still circulated about Anne Boleyn,[38] Elizabeth herself chose the more diplomatic route and adopted a general policy of silence on the issue, choosing to identify more with her guardian, Katherine Parr, than with her biological mother. Nor was Anne Elizabeth's only female relative to be labelled a witch. Protestant reformers had routinely so described Elizabeth's half-sister Mary during her tumultuous reign, providing Elizabeth with not one, but two female relatives who were suspected of witchcraft. In one of his personal letters, for example, Protestant reformer John

[36] Anna Whitelock, *Mary Tudor: Princess, Bastard, Queen* (Toronto, 2010), 76.
[37] Ibid.
[38] In his discussion of John Foxe's literary treatment of Anne Boleyn, Thomas Freeman translates Foxe's work, writing that Foxe describes Anne as "a young woman, not of ignoble family, but much more ennobled by beauty" ("Research, Rumour and Propaganda: Anne Boleyn in Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs,'" *The Historical Journal* 38.4 [1995], 799). According to Freeman, Foxe also goes on to praise Anne's "many great gifts," which include "gentleness, modesty and piety towards all" (799).

Jewel described Mary as both a "witch" and a "seductress," the quintessential opponent for their Protestant "virgin queen" to have to defeat.[39] In her own discussion of his letter, Willis suggests that Jewel "implicitly creates a space for Elizabeth to rewrite Mary I's reign as the 'antimasque' to her 'masque,'" a space that Jonson, of course, will fill years later at the behest of a different queen.[40]

While only Catholic propagandists actually made the imaginative leap from queen to witch (just as only Protestant propagandists made the same imaginative leap with regards to Catholic queens), these factors nonetheless contributed to the ensuing hype and anxiety that accompanied the discovery of the three wax figures in London on that fateful day in August 1578. Due to all the reasons just discussed, Elizabeth's supporters viewed witchcraft as a legitimate threat, a threat that the queen was both defenceless against and predisposed to be vulnerable to. The timing of the discovery also led many to interpret it as an ill omen of things to come. Early moderns believed that witches were "Devilishe Impes," mere minions catering to the commands of a higher evil.[41] The individual crimes committed by witches, therefore, were viewed as part of a whole. With this in mind, many English Protestants noted a certain parallelism between this supernatural attempt on the queen's life and the "satanic" pope's repeated efforts

[39] Willis, 120.
[40] Ibid.
[41] *A rehearsall both straung and true* (London, 1579), 2v.

to undermine her rule through his own "demonic" agents: the Spanish.[42] With religious and political tensions mounting, Englishmen were further unnerved by the queen's current marriage negotiations with François-Hercule, the Duc d'Alençon, who was a French Catholic.[43] With perceived Catholic threats endangering the English crown from all sides, the discovery of the three wax poppets added metaphorical fuel to the fire. The message was clear: demonic powers from both within and without were attempting to bring about Elizabeth's demise.

That the magical mode of attack was achieved through what is known as image magic only helped to further complicate an already complex situation. William Burns defines image magic as the "working of harm to a person by manipulating a small image of him or her."[44] Image magic could be achieved through a variety of materials; the image could be made of clay or wax, sewn from rags and stuffed with goat hair, or simply hand drawn on a piece of parchment.[45] Witches, therefore, could easily construct images with any number of everyday household items, making it one of the most accessible types of black magic available. Consequently, it was also one of the hardest modes to detect. Even more disconcerting to upstanding citizens, however, was that witches would

[42] Purkiss, 185.
[43] Ibid.
[44] "Image Magic" in *Witch Hunts in Europe and America: An Encyclopedia*, 140-1 (Westpoint, 2003), 140.
[45] Burns, 140; Sharpe, 83.

sometimes strengthen the potency of their images by incorporating a small piece of victim's body into the image itself, such as a lock of hair or a piece of clothing.[46] To complete their images, witches supposedly baptised them, a "misuse of a sacrament that aroused the particular ire of church authorities." Once complete, the witches could perform any number of violent actions upon the image, including "burning, burying, stroking, and piercing with pins or thorns."[47] The witches of North Berwick reportedly attempted to use this very type of magic against King James, who personally attended the witches' trials in 1591. One of the accused, a woman named Agnes Sampson, reportedly informed the king that

> she took a black toad, and did hang the same up by the heels three days, and collected and gathered the venom as it dropped and fell from it into an oyster shell, and kept the same venom close covered, until she should obtain any part or piece of the fouled linen cloth, that has appertained to the King's Majesty, as shirt, handkerchief, napkin, or any other thing.[48]

Although Agnes ultimately failed to acquire the required personal item to complete her image, she maintained that should she have succeeded she would have "bewitched [James] to death, and put him to such extraordinary pains, as if he had been lying upon sharp thorns and ends of needles."[49] Nor was Agnes the only North Berwick witch believed to have employed image magic against Scotland's king. Barbara Napier was also accused of having "attempted to kill the

[46] Burns, 140.
[47] Ibid, 141.
[48] "News from Scotland" in *The Demonology of King James I*, Donald Tyson (ed.), 187-220 (Woodbury MI, 2011), 194-5.
[49] Ibid, 195.

King with a 'picture of wax.'"[50]

Of all types of witchcraft, the English viewed image magic as being particularly threatening to Elizabeth's person. Purkiss offers the most compelling explanations as to why this was so. Pointing to the fundamental importance of Elizabeth's identity within English culture, Purkiss argues that the "iterability of the royal image, so crucial to royal authority, became a problem, just as it did with counterfeiters, whose activities likewise troubled the queen's right to determine her own representation and to decide which images of her should count as authentic."[51] Elizabeth was a public icon and her contemporaries often made free use of her image. But which images of Elizabeth were genuine and which were deceptive? This question was one that both Elizabeth and her subjects had to circumnavigate daily. With a false image of Elizabeth popping up in a London dunghill and the looming danger of a French Catholic marriage threatening to change Elizabeth's established reputation permanently, the English were left in an increasingly heightened state of nervous tension. John Stubbs immortalized these anxieties in a pamphlet entitled *The discovery of a gaping gulf* (1579). When discussing this text, Purkiss writes that "it is no coincidence that this pamphlet goes out of its way to portray a Catholic woman ruler, Catherine de Medici, as a

[50] Donal Tyson (ed.), *The Demonology of King James I* (Woodbury MI, 2011), 209.
[51] Purkiss, 185.

witch, surrounded by 'familiar spirits.'"[52] With the witch-frenzy rapidly gearing itself up into a full-blown crisis, a crisis no doubt fuelled by the discovery of the three wax figures, Stubbs's treatise warned Elizabeth to reject the monstrous image of the "Catholic" queen she could so easily become either through a French marriage or through magical coercion.

Only a few months after the discovery of the three wax figures in London, a separate case involving witches and image magic arose in the city of Windsor. In January 1579, a sixty-five-year-old widow named Elizabeth Stile was arrested on charges of witchcraft and brought before Sir Henry Neville, a knight, for a preliminary hearing.[53] While Stile had been accused of witchcraft on a number of different occasions prior to this incident she had always been released in the past due to a lack of evidence. On one of these earlier occasions a man named Richard Galis, a former mayor of Windsor, supposedly tied her up with a cart rope before publicly dragging her from the market place on fresh charges of witchcraft (see Fig. 2 on the following page). Prior to his untimely death, Galis published an open epistle detailing his persistent efforts to have Stile (and her fellow suspected witches) arrested and executed for their crimes.[54] In this most recent case, however, Neville ruled that there was finally sufficient evidence to proceed and he

[52] Ibid.
[53] *A rehearsall both straung and true* 4r; Rosen, 85.
[54] Richard Galis, *A brief treatise containing the most strange and horrible cruelty of Elizabeth Stile alias Rockingham and her confederates, executed at Abingdon* (London, 1579), 13v; Sharpe, 81.

Figure 2 Richard Galis binds Elizabeth Stile with a cart rope on market day and forcibly drags her before Sir Henry Neville on charges of witchcraft. Woodcut. Bodleian Library. Oxford, England. *Early English Books Online* (EEBO).

sent Stile to Reading Gaol for further examination. Before Stile's official confession was recorded, however, rumours of her crimes were already spreading. It was alleged that, as part of her demonic rituals, she might have used image magic against her unsuspecting victims. This piece of information caused a public sensation and news of it quickly travelled back to London. Although both the London and the Windsor cases were almost certainly unrelated events, the sudden ability of London officials to prosecute a group of witches for the same unsolved crime that had recently occurred on their own doorstep became too big a temptation to resist. While such legal cases were usually left to the discretion of local authorities, the Privy Council instead decided to pressure Sir Henry Neville and the Dean of Windsor to convict. In a letter, dated 16 January 1579, the Privy Council instructed Windsor's officials to 'study the wider implications of the witches' activities, particularly with regard to image making "as there hath been lately discovered a practice of that device very likely to be intended to the destruction of Her Majesty's person."[55] Although the Privy Council would later try to minimise their involvement and distance themselves from the case,[56] the connection between these two events became firmly established in the public eye.

Elizabeth Stile made a number of extraordinary claims in her official confession, dated 28 January 1579 (twelve days after the Privy Council wrote

[55] Ibid, 83.
[56] Marion Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 33.

their letter to Windsor's officials). She claimed that one of her co-conspirators, Mother Dutton, "made fower pictures of Redde Waxe."[57] After creating the four images, Stile alleged that Mother Dutton "did sticke an Hauthorne pricke, against the left sides of the heartes of the Images, directly there where thei thought the hartes of the persones to bee sette, whom the same persones did represente, and thereupon within shorte space, the said fower persones, beeying sodainely taken, died."[58] This confession offered concrete proof of the use of image magic in Windsor and the potentially deadly results it could produce. For her crimes, Stile and all but one of her fellow co-conspirators were executed.[59]

[57] *A Rehearsal both Strange and True*, 6r. For additional information regarding Elizabeth Stile's case, see Ostovich's article in this volume.
[58] Ibid.
[59] While all four of the female witches implicated in these events were executed within a month of the first arrest, Father Rosimond, a "wiseman" and the only man included in the charges, was eventually released (Rosen, 83-4). Although Elizabeth Stile's confession stated, among other claims, that Father Rosimond could "transform himself into the likeness of an ape or a horse" (Rosen, 88), he somehow miraculously managed to escaped the same grisly end faced by his magical co-conspirators. When theorising on why this might have come to pass, Helen Ostovich suggests that Father Rosimond might have been spared as a result of his ability to read neck verse. When defining neck verse, John Hostettler writes that neck verse was a law that exempted individuals from capitol offenses if they could read (or at least correctly recite) the 51st psalm, "appropriately known as 'neck verse'" from the bible (*A History of Criminal Justice in England and Wales* [Sherfield Gables, 2009], 45). Instead of death the culprit was branded with a small "M" on his thumb, to permanently mark him, before being released. Father Rosimond might also have been protected by ecclesiastical law. Whatever the reason, he lived, while his criminal associates died.

Echoes of the Past: Confronting the Remnants of Witchcraft in Windsor

These historical events share a number of correlating themes with Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Both the legal cases and the play, after all, gesture towards the problematically narrow degree of separation that ultimately divides queen and witch in a morally corrupt society, and how even the most virtuous of female figureheads must constantly work against ignorance and superstition in order just to maintain her reputation. When writing a play set in the very location where this controversy had found such a destructive foothold, Shakespeare demonstrates both an interest in and scepticism of the figure of the witch who so persistently draws female virtue into question. Writing in the wake of the witchcraft scandals that rocked the English communities of London and Windsor in the late sixteenth-century, Shakespeare chooses to critique Windsor's troubled past by having his main characters challenge and eventually triumph over a very similar history within his play. During their various soliloquies and personal exchanges, Mistress Ford, Mistress Page, and Master Ford all regularly gesture towards pre-existing problems within the Fords' marriage. The two merry wives, for example, frequently exchange revealing quips about Ford's possessiveness, paranoia, anger, and jealousy. In contrast, when contemplating his wife and her inner circle of female acquaintances, Ford obsesses about magic, witchcraft, infidelity, sexual lasciviousness, and illicit female collaboration. While both the merry wives' and Ford's historical narratives provide audiences with two

very different views of the past, they share one striking commonality. At the heart of both of these conflicting fictional memories lies none other than the elusive figure of Mother Pratt, an unstaged wise woman, possible con artist, and suspected witch who symbolically both epitomises Ford's fears and exaggerates (as will shortly be explained in more detail) Mistress Ford's reality.[60]

Mother Pratt's introduction in 4.2, therefore, is more than just an arbitrary invention of convenience. Embedded within this brief interlude is a pre-history to the play itself, one that gestures towards a record of marital discord between the Fords and reaffirms the uneasy impact female homosocial bonds have had within their household. When introducing Mother Pratt to both the audience and her fellow conspirator, Mistress Ford informs us that her husband "forbade [Mother Pratt] my house" (4.2.77). Given that her husband is the patriarchal head of their household, Mistress Ford should obey Ford's orders; Shakespeare casts her compliance, however, in an ambiguous light. When plotting Falstaff's second punishment sequence, for example, Mistress Ford has little trouble procuring the required items, including "a gown," "a thrummed hat," and a "muffler" (4.2.67-9), from Mother Pratt to carry out her scheme. Their collaboration suggests that the two women are still on friendly terms, despite Ford's objections. Kristen C.

[60] In her article "Cunning, Cozening, and Queens in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," Kristen C. Uszkalo reads Mother Pratt as a cunning woman or trickster figure whom the merry wives fashion themselves after as they borrow from a long tradition of "cozening tales to increase masculine humiliation and feminine delight" (*Shakespeare* 6.1 [2010], 20).

Uszkalo hints at this possibility in her own work, writing that Ford's enemies "to whom he has specifically forbidden entry … penetrate his home through his wife's agency."[61] In addition to the clothing, Mistress Ford also willingly employs Mother Pratt's niece, a connection she rather gleefully highlights for audiences when stipulating that the fat woman of Brentford (aka Mother Pratt) is her "maid's aunt" (4.2.66). Although Mistress Ford only acknowledges this familial connection in passing, an audience knowledgeable in witchcraft lore would recognise the potentially unsettling implications behind this affiliation. Since early moderns believed that witchcraft was commonly passed through the female line, as outlined earlier in relation to Elizabeth's own troubled ancestry, Mistress Ford's decision to employ Mother Pratt's niece shows her colluding with women who Ford at least believes are occult figures. Mistress Ford's possession of the gown and willing employment of Mother Pratt's niece also hint, however, at a certain camaraderie between the women of Windsor (both on stage and off) and establish that prior to Falstaff's inappropriate sexual advances and the all-out explosion of Ford's 'fantastical humours and jealousies,' Ford's belief in witchcraft and suspicion of his wife were already disrupting his family household (3.3.160).

Ford's continued suspicions, therefore, speak to a larger social anxiety within the play, a concern that Shakespeare highlights for audiences by having the

[61] Ibid, 27.

majority of the Windsor men participate alongside Ford in his attempted "witch-hunts." While Ford's use of such hunting metaphors as "we will unkennel the fox" and "see sport anon" (3.3.154; 158-9) help him bully his male peers into cooperating with his unpredictable whims, the dramatic absence of the witch they search for allows Shakespeare (through the merry wives) to comment satirically on the ridiculousness of their collective hysteria. Mother Pratt's invisibility within the play is precisely what allows her to be mistaken for the disguised Falstaff. When Evans, one of Ford's neighbours, looks too closely at what he witnesses he momentarily threatens the entire illusion that the merry wives have created. Evans's ability to comment on (if not correctly interpret) the details of this scene is ironic, given that Ford (like Othello) is so desperate for ocular proof of his wife's infidelity. Fortunately, popular stereotypes concerning witches allow Evans to "think the 'oman is a witch indeed" because she "has a great peard" (4.2.178-9).[62] The original reasoning behind the bearded-witch myth is difficult to firmly pin down. Karen Britland, however, argues that attributing beards to witches not only helped visually identify them as monstrous, but also played into the idea that "non-menstruating women grew beards."[63] Beards, Britland writes, not only

[62] Today, the most famous example of the bearded witch stereotype comes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* who uses it in his depiction of the Three Weird Sisters: "You should be women / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.47-9).
[63] Karen Britland, *Drama at the Courts of Queen Henrietta Maria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2006), 239.

represented "a transgression of gender norms, but … provided an image of femininity that was sterile and therefore of no material use to family or state."[64] If this is true, it helps contribute to the men's ridiculousness. Despite Mother Pratt's longstanding connection with their community, the men are able to substitute another for her. Ford does not see her as a specific person, but rather as a concept of "rural witch" that the Windsor men can apply to any woman they choose to persecute.[65] Mother Pratt, therefore, serves multiple symbolic functions; she is Everywoman who might be a witch; she is Mistress Ford more specifically (the metaphorically bearded and sterile woman who cannot be beaten with impunity); and she is Falstaff in drag, the emasculated Everyman who allows emotion rather than reason to guide his actions. In this way, just as Shakespeare comically downplays Ford's potential for violence, he undermines Mother Pratt's potentially sinister characterisation as a witch by aligning her with the comic image of the inept Falstaff in drag. Both Ford and the merry wives are able to use the figure of Mother Pratt to re-establish the appearance of control in the play, with Ford forcefully reinstating his "patriarchal rule"[66] over an "acceptable" substitute and

[64] Ibid.
[65] Historically witchcraft accusations originate equally (if not more commonly) from women. Within the context of this play, however, witchcraft anxieties appear to be the prerogative of men only.
[66] Stuart Clark, "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft," in Darren Oldridge (ed.), *The Witchcraft Reader* (London: Routledge, 2005), 122.

the wives successfully punishing Falstaff.[67]

Through the Looking Glass: Mother Pratt and Mistress Ford

Lingering traces of suspected witchcraft, therefore, permeate both the historical landscape preceding the play's authorship and its internal narrative structure. In addition, on a subtler level, Mother Pratt's very invisibility helps render her a relic of an intangible past, one that continues to haunt both the play's internal narrative and its external history. Just as witchcraft suspicions cloud and tarnish Ford's perception of his wife, continued fears of witchcraft and image magic similarly continue to disrupt the lives of Shakespeare's audience. Shakespeare ultimately refuses, however, to characterise Mother Pratt solely as an object of the past. He cannot afford just to banish her from his stage, as such a choice would not only be redundant given the historical context of his play, but also her continued presence (and liberty) off stage could potentially distract

[67] Richard Helgerson wisely reminds his readers that there are "two actions … being performed simultaneously: a man beats a woman, and two women secure the beating of a man" ("The Buck Basket, the Witch, and the Queen of Fairies" in Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt (eds), *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999], 174). The merry wives' use of the Mother Pratt decoy succeeds in successfully channelling Ford's potential for violence. Additionally, as Helgerson notes, we (as the watching audience) have to remember that Ford's beating of Mother Pratt is only illusionary, while the beating of the more robust Falstaff is not (177). The wives prove that they are capable of manipulating all of their male spectators, including Ford and Falstaff, by appropriating Mother Pratt's appearance. By curbing Ford's actions, his violence, in turn, becomes an outlet for theirs.

audiences from his central message, in which he tries to disprove such socially-constructed categories of women entirely. Instead, Shakespeare gets Mistress Ford, who has already been repeatedly maligned by her community and who has already essentially been cast in the role of both adulteress and witch to channel the men's projection of Mother Pratt, specifically the supposed magical powers they attribute to her, for her own use. Mistress Ford accepts the label of witch, but only to a point. Before the end of the play, Mistress Ford (with the aid of her female companions) succeeds in refashioning what it means to be a witch, paradoxically turning it into something momentarily positive before dispensing with the concept entirely. By harnessing Mother Pratt's image (and not even her true image, but rather the one Ford has created for her), Mistress Ford manages to contain the spectre of the witch who initially haunts both Shakespeare's fictional world and its real-life counterpart. The witch does not remain ominously at large, but instead becomes a regulated and controlled presence through Mistress Ford's calculated plan to have Falstaff usurp the part. Simultaneously, however, as she gradually succeeds in re-educating Ford, she also frees her community from his disruptive delusions and misogynistic judgments. Is Mother Pratt still a witch at the play's conclusion? Was she ever one to begin with? These questions are the fruit of Mistress Ford's labour on stage, as she paradoxically draws on Ford's concept of "witch" in order to secure her own self-empowerment within the performance. By the end of the play, Mother Pratt is no longer a threat to the

integrity of the community, and the people of Windsor are able collectively to abandon their false and destructive superstitions in favour of celebrating the true magic of female virtue.

Before Mistress Ford can truly triumph over the spectre of the witch in this performance, however, she must first identify with the part, proving once and for all that such superstitious labels do not really threaten the fabric of English society. Nor does Mistress Ford find identifying with the role of witch difficult, as Shakespeare alludes to a connection between her and Mother Pratt on a number of different symbolic levels. First, Mistress Ford's acquaintance (perhaps even friendship) with Mother Pratt, when paired with her knowledge of Mother Pratt's dubious moral status, could potentially damage her own reputation as it associates her "with a figure of occult female power."[68] Mistress Ford, however, challenges her husband on this issue by refusing to distance herself from Mother Pratt, as any compromise on her part will only lend credence to his irrational and destructive assumptions. Instead, Mistress Ford utilises this perceived connection to undermine and publically shame the men who slander and mistrust her. By conflating Ford's unfounded fear of her infidelity with his (similarly) unsubstantiated fears of witchcraft, Mistress Ford successfully creates a series of public shaming rituals. The connections that exist between Mistress Ford, Mistress Page, and Mother Pratt give rise to a particular community of women in

[68] Helgerson, 172.

the play that is almost coven-like, a community that causes Windsor's men continual anxiety. Richard Helgerson postulates that Ford's fear of cuckoldry is as rooted in his fear of female intimacy as it is in Falstaff's advances, an opinion that Ford validates early on in the play when he suggests that the bonds shared between the two merry wives could easily replace the marital bond he shares with his wife: "I think if your husbands were dead you two would marry" (3.2.12-13). According to Helgerson, when Ford suspects the integrity of one woman, the rest of the female community of Windsor becomes suspect. The presence of Mother Pratt in this circle of feminine intimacy (for why else would her gown be present at Mistress Ford's house) evokes a "world of witchcraft in which [Mistresses Ford and Page] are no less concretely involved" than Mother Pratt herself.[69] The inclusion of this witch figure within the female community of Shakespeare's Windsor could potentially legitimise some of Ford's suspicions. None of the men, after all, make any attempt to stop Ford's brutal beating of the person whom they perceive to be Mother Pratt, suggesting that they feel his actions are, at least somewhat, appropriate. Yet the women ultimately deny the men even this level of self-justification; the entire sequence is an illusion that the women collaboratively create, from Mother Pratt's lending of the gown, to the merry wives' comic timing, to Mistress Quickly's ability to successfully lull the gullible Falstaff back to the Ford household.

[69] Ibid.

The potential comparisons between Mother Pratt and Mistress Ford, however, do not end here, but become more apparent as the play progresses. While Mistress Ford provides audiences with some of the most direct information regarding her long-standing relationship with Mother Pratt, Ford's nightmarish conjectures on the same subject provide audiences with a deeper understanding of the increasing strain this connection causes him. In 2.2, for example, after first learning of Falstaff's planned rendezvous with his wife, Ford explodes into a long-winded rant:

> Who says this is improvident jealousy? My wife hath sent to him, the hour is fixed, the match is made. Would any man have thought this? See the hell of having a false woman! My bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawn at; and I shall not only receive this villainous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms, and by him that does me wrong. Terms! Names! Amaimon sounds well; Lucifer, well; Barbason, well; yet they are devils' additions, the names of fiends. But cuckold! Wittol! Cuckold! The devil himself hath not such a name … God be praised for my jealousy! (272-91)

When Ford (disguised as Brook) hears Falstaff boast of his planned seduction of Mistress Ford he immediately processes the information by fixating on his now potentially damnable state of being. In Ford's opinion Mistress Ford has not only made him a cuckold, but has carelessly thrown his reputation to the devil. Fixating on this idea, Ford begins to identify with both the horned image of the cuckold and the damned devils he now aligns himself with as a result of his wife's supposed transgression. On the surface, this would seem to suggest that Ford visually identifies with both figures because each provides him with a mirroring

image of a physically deformed man to which he can now compare himself. Yet, such a superficial interpretation erases many of the malevolent undertones of Ford's speech. Ford acknowledges his newly discovered status as a cuckold, but his mind more particularly fixates on the supernatural implications behind his wife's perceived sexual transgression. He characterizes himself as being doubly wronged, as he uses Mistress Ford's supposed sexual looseness as proof of her demonic corruption. Once Mistress Ford becomes morally suspect, after all, Ford easily conjures a whole host of supernatural demon lovers to call upon her and to share in Falstaff's sexual triumphs.

But Ford's anxieties run even deeper. He not only insinuates that these demons (along with Falstaff) have "abused" his bed, but personally identifies with each demonic interloper, so that all three become a perverted mirror of himself. Early moderns, after all, believed that once a witch formed a demonic pact with the devil she was left vulnerable to his sexual whims. Once she had given him her soul he owned her and could lay claim to his property as frequently as he required, whether she desired it or not.[70] As Ford lists each of the demonic names

[70] When witches confessed to having had sex with the devil they were unanimous in recounting the experience as being unpleasant. When studying this phenomenon, Sharpe notes how the women in question described the devil as being exceptionally heavily and cold (*Instruments of Darkness*, 135). To prove this statement, Sharpe recounts the stories of Elizabeth Curry, who commented on how the devil "lay heavy upon her," and the Widow Bush of Barton, who described how he was "colder than a man, and heavier" (135). Several of the North Berwick witches also claimed that the devil "would carnally use them,

that could now be attributed to him, through their communal sexual access to the same female body, he momentarily imagines himself inhabiting each role. Ford grapples to come to terms with his new position as a cuckold, but he more particularly struggles in this moment to make sense of how Mistress Ford's sexual perversion might spiritually violate or contaminate him. Ironically, Ford embraces his new potential affinity with the devil more willingly than he does that of the cuckold, seeming to prefer the devil's sexual (though undeniably perverted) potency over the cuckold's impotency. Even as Ford praises God, therefore, he draws his own spiritual status into question. His diseased ramblings reveal a man consumed by superstition, who inadvertently aligns himself with the devil through the notion that they both share sexual access to the same partner.

Ford's conflation of their characters ultimately reaches its visual climax during the merry wives' second punishment sequence when Mistress Ford only manages to escape her husband's wrath by providing him with the suitable substitute image of Mother Pratt (who, of course, also happens to be Falstaff in disguise). Subtler evidence, however, of Ford's misogyny and paranoia saturate the play prior to this dramatic turning point. Sexual looseness and witchcraft, after all, are all one and the same in Ford's mind and by conflating the two crimes, Ford further blurs the distinction between Mistress Ford and Mother Pratt. Both

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albeit to their little pleasure, in respect to his cold nature" ("News from Scotland," 196). In short, therefore, once a woman succumbed to witchcraft, her body became the devil's sexual property.

women, after all, become victim to Ford's unproven and groundless accusations. By championing Mistress Ford's various schemes and allowing her to vindicate herself in her husband's eyes, Shakespeare forces audiences to accept that Ford's allegations against Mother Pratt must be similarly baseless. If the merry wives are truly virtuous women, after all, then they would not actually associate with a real-life witch. No, the image of the witch they harness is a fictional one, one imposed on them. Like Anna of Denmark and her ladies-in-waiting, the merry wives merely take control of a distorted world view, a witch doppelgänger, rather than the thing itself. Ford's long-winded rants and his verbal descriptions of Mother Pratt herself more specifically reinforce this impression for audiences. Mary Ellen Lamb, for example, notes that Ford calls Mother Pratt "a witch, an 'old cozening quean,' and a polecat, the same word Mistress Quickly uses to refer to prostitutes in the Latin lesson" at various points within the play.[71] Within the same breath that Ford accuses Mother Pratt of witchcraft, he also condemns her for her supposed sexual immorality. Treating Mother Pratt almost identically to the way he does his wife, Ford fixates on Mother Pratt's potential for sexual deviance, repeatedly slandering her by calling her a "quean" and a "polecat," both of which

[71] Mary Ellen Lamb, "*The Merry Wives of Windsor*: Domestic Nationalism and the Refuse of the Realm" in *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, 125-60 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 142.

are abusive terms for a prostitute.[72] Even her pet name, Mother Pratt, evokes notions of her physicality by potentially referencing her "prominent buttock."[73] Ford's characterisation of Mother Pratt as a witch seems to arise as much from her marginalised social standing as it does from his warped impression of her as a sexually promiscuous woman. For Mrs. Ford, therefore, this equation remains a constant threat.

Ford's feverish and misplaced equation of the two women, however, does not end here. His own delusions further help to blur the boundary between Mistress Ford and Mother Pratt. The citizens of Windsor have a host of different names for Mother Pratt, variations which help to make her a somewhat ambiguous presence within the play. One of these names, however, Gillian of Brainford, provides audiences with a specific name, although Shakespeare revises this name to the more non-descript "the old woman of Brentford" (4.2.76) in the later folio edition of the play. Lamb, however, argues that even when Shakespeare assigns Mother Pratt a specific name it functions as a generic description. Pointing to Robert Copland's poem "Jyl of Braintford," Lamb argues that the name "Gillian" paints Mother Pratt as a stock figure, one early modern audiences would easily have recognised as the name "Gillian" was commonly used to refer to a low-class

[72] The *OED Online* defines "polecat" as a "derogatory" statement for a "sexually promiscuous woman" ("polecat, n2"). Similarly, it defines "quean" as an "impudent … hussy [or] prostitute" ("quean, n").
[73] Lamb, 142; "prat, n.3."

woman who was fond of drink and scatological humour.[74] Both versions, however, contain distinct dramatic and literary possibilities. When dissecting the word "Brainford," for example, multiple scholars have commented on the ironic implications behind Shakespeare's initial choice of name. Nancy Cotton, William Carroll, and Purkiss have all separately argued that Shakespeare "indicates the symbolic substitution of witch for wife by naming his witch for the place of her origin in Ford's mind: 'Brainford.'"[75] Witch, prostitute, Mother Pratt, and Mistress Ford all become jumbled together, at least in part, within Ford's feverish conjectures. Additionally, the word "Brentford" also references a real place, one that was widely known for its "questionable reputation."[76] Fran C. Chalfant documents how Ben Jonson uses Brentford as a getaway location for eloping lovers in a couple of his plays, while Massinger mentions it "as a place for assignations" in his.[77] Lamb also describes Brentford as a town "whose looser regulations and out-of-the-way location rendered it a haven for adulterous liaisons."[78] The town of Brentford was further known, according to Uszkalo, for witchcraft as only a few years earlier, in 1595, two women were executed there

[74] Lamb, "Domestic Nationalism and the Refuse of the Realm," 142.
[75] Nancy Cotton, "Castrating (W)itches: Impotence and Magic in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38.3 (1987), 321; William Carroll, "'A Received Belief': Imagination in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," *Studies in Philology* 74.2 (1977), 193; Purkiss, *The Witch in History,* 194.
[76] Fran C. Chalfant, *Ben Jonson's London: A Jacobean Placement Dictionary* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1978), 47.
[77] Ibid, 146.
[78] Lamb, "Domestic Nationalism and the Refuse of the Realm," 142.

for practising black magic.[79] By associating Mother Pratt with the town of Brentford in both the quarto and the folio versions of the play, Shakespeare links concepts of witchcraft, infidelity, history, and the imaginary all together simultaneously, making it difficult for Ford at least to determine where Mistress Ford's supposed crimes end and Mother Pratt's begin.

Although Ford only symbolically associates his wife with witchcraft, particularly though his tendency to equate witchcraft with promiscuity, Shakespeare's choice to experiment with traditional literary modes of righteous female anger also creates a number of meaningful connections between Mistress Ford and Mother Pratt. While multiple scholars have offered theories on Shakespeare's use of the triple Hecate in *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1610), none have considered his use of this model in *Merry Wives*, despite the two plays' numerous thematic similarities.[80] In *Merry Wives*, the play's main cast of female plotters, who include Anne Page, Mistress Page, and Mistress Ford, symbolically create a miniature version of the triple Hecate in their collective efforts to oppose male tyranny and injustice. While Mistress Quickly is also an important character, as

[79] Uszkalo, "Cunning, Cozening, and Queens," 22. Unfortunately, Uszkalo does not provide any further details and does not cite her source adequately. I have not been able to research any further details about this specific case.

[80] For a further discussion of Shakespeare's literary treatment of the triple Hecate in *The Winter's Tale* see Janet S. Wolf, "'Like an Old Tale Still': Paulina, 'Triple Hecate,' and the Persephone Myth in *The Winter's Tale*," in *Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature*, Elizabeth T. Hayes (ed.), 32-44 (Gainesvilles, 1994), 32-44.

she assists the merry wives in their various plots and machinations, she serves more as an assistant figure rather than as a principal player within the play's overall performance arc. While she is also good at plotting, something the audience observes through her various financial deals with Anne Page's suitors, Shakespeare relegates her to the position of a valued go-between in her relationship with the merry wives. Her status within the play is also extremely ambiguous, and she ends up aligning with each of the triple Hecate's three faces in various ways. She is unmarried, aligning her with a maiden figure, but she also holds the position of Doctor Caius's housekeeper, giving her the same status within his household as the merry wives enjoy within their own. Later, when she transforms into the queen of fairies, she also becomes an image of female fury, aligning her with the last face of the triple Hecate. In contrast, the play's three main plotters, Anne, Mistress Page, and Mistress Ford, align very specifically with one face each. Anne Page is the quintessential maiden figure: coveted, desirable, and on the brink of marriage. Her mother Mistress Page similarly idealizes the role of mother, as she fulfills her wifely duties in the Page household, while raising and educating their children. This, of course, leaves Mistress Ford as representative of the final side of the triple Hecate, the side that was most frequently misunderstood because it was commonly associated with the goddess of witchcraft, Hecate. This final side, however, was meant to represent female fury, as much as it did female experience and age. That Shakespeare

chooses to have Mistress Ford embody this final side of the triple Hecate's model of righteous female anger is somewhat problematic. This choice, after all, helps to once again draw Mistress Ford's status into question, by highlighting her potential affinity with witchcraft and, by extension, Mother Pratt herself. Unlike her fellow merry wife, Mistress Ford has no children; her marriage is barren.[81] Instead, her energies become solely invested in trying to manage her unruly husband. While the audience witnesses Mistress Page balance her obligations to her friend with her role as a mother, we witness Mistress Ford only fulfill the role of the fury, 'the return of the repressed wife',[82] who must (out of necessity) avenge herself upon both her tyrannical husband and her presumptuous suitor. Yet, even as Shakespeare aligns her with this final (potentially suspect) face of the triple Hecate, he demonstrates how powerful this final position can be. In the end the women of Windsor collectively band together to aid Mistress Ford in her distress.

[81] The question of whether or not the Fords have any children is a difficult one to answer, but I would like to posit that they don't. Although children were often only introduced part-way through plays if and when they were required, the Fords never identify themselves as parents. Although between the quarto and the folio the Pages gain a second child, the Fords remain (by all outward appearances) childless. Even when children are called upon at the end of the play (to serve as fairies during the community's final revenge scheme) neither Ford nor his wife indicate that any of the children involved are theirs. Ford, in fact, distances his relationship from the children at the end of the play by saying that "the children" (as opposed to 'my children' or 'our children') will have to be "well practiced" to make their plan succeed (4.4.62-3). In this opinion I am not alone. Cotton makes a similar conclusion when she suggests that "Ford might feel impotent (= bewitched) because he has no children" ("Castrating Witches," 322).

[82] Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep?," 90.

What originally began as a harmless plan hatched between two women to punish an obnoxious suitor quickly transforms into a much larger fight. Banding together, the women form a solid front as they wage war on their community's ignorance, suspicion, and credulity.

Through these parallels, Shakespeare quickly isolates Mistress Ford within the play, making her an easy target for victimisation. As a married woman she has failed to produce children, as a citizen she associates herself with potentially dubious characters, and as a wife her husband suspects her of adultery. While the female community of Windsor stands steadfastly at her side, the male community likewise comes together to gawk and inspect her, as her husband's suspicions grow increasingly frenzied. While Mother Pratt does not appear directly on the stage, Shakespeare implies that she does not have to for witchcraft suspicions to spread, a fact to which Shakespeare's own language attests. Although the play lacks a central witch villain, the word 'witch' appears seven times within the play, almost two times more than in any other Shakespearean work.[83] The bottom line, however, is that in a play with no direct witch, the concept firmly infiltrates and disrupts not only Mistress Ford's life, but also the community of Windsor itself. The witch is omnipresent, constantly lurking in the minds and imaginations of the

[83] 'witch | witches'. *Open Source Shakespeare Concordance*. George Mason University. 2003-2011. Web. 24 Feb 2011. Only *Macbeth* eventually surpasses *Merry Wives*, as different variations on the word "witch" help bump it up numerically.

town's citizens, who (in an attempt to alleviate their own growing fear, paranoia, and loss of security) constantly seek to find a way to apply this term to something more specific, whether it be Mother Pratt, or more conveniently (since she is actually a direct member of their community as opposed to an occasional visitor), Mistress Ford.

Image Magic

Ford's ignorance, credibility, and suspicion, therefore, force Mistress Ford to defend herself against his accusations not only of infidelity, but also of witchcraft. Both thematically and socially she has become ensnared within a pre-existing web of witchcraft suspicions, suspicions which now jeopardise her own status and reputation within the community. With few options available to her, and fewer that might actually benefit her situation, Shakespeare has Mistress Ford embrace and transform the seemingly destructive role forcibly assigned to her into something positive. She has been harnessed to the witch, partially through her own choices and partially as a result of factors outside of her control, but instead of allowing this connection to victimise or isolate her within the community, she seizes control of it (with the help of her friends). She uses the connection between herself and her witch doppelgänger to gain access to the supposed magical arsenal attributed to her witch-counterpart. Shakespeare does not just challenge Ford's general impression of witchcraft, but more specifically arranges to have Mistress

Ford and Mistress Page triumph over the very type of magic, in this case image magic, that historically terrorised London and Windsor two decades earlier.

Although Shakespeare does not directly refer to image magic, the visual effect of the two merry wives' various plots ends up not only complementing the larger thematic arc of the performance, but also symbolically enacting this form of magic on stage. Image magic, as earlier defined, was a type of magic that involved a witch creating a small replica of her intended victim, before inflicting injuries upon it. Witches could create their images out of any number of everyday household items and commonly prepared their final products for use by baptising them, in what can only be called a perverse inversion of religious ritual.[84] Witches would also often try to incorporate a small piece of the victim into their creation in order to increase the magical potency of their charms. Image magic, however, could also be used against witches as a form of counter-magic, "with the witch's victim sticking pins into a small image of the witch."[85] Image magic therefore, while certainly deadly in the wrong hands, could also become a positive thing, a type of white magic to combat witchcraft. Similarly, Mistress Ford assumes the role of witch, but transforms this role into something positive, using the supernatural powers that have been violently attributed to her for healing and curative purposes rather than for destructive ones. She succeeds, as will

[84] Burns, "Image Magic." 141.
[85] Ibid.

momentarily be demonstrated in more detail, in harnessing the illicit powers of a witch, but for a legitimate purpose, an accomplishment that ultimately highlights her moral integrity within the performance.

Mistress Ford begins her process of using image magic during the buck-basket sequence, comically arranging to have Falstaff, whom she uses as the base material for her ultimate image, submerged in the River Thames alongside a pile of dirty laundry. Ford has already introduced witch-hunting allusions earlier in 2.2, as previously discussed, well prior to Mother Pratt's later introduction two acts later. His wife, therefore, has already been given symbolic access to magic through this comparison and both she and Mistress Page make strategic use of it in their first punishment sequence, harnessing the powers of illusion and ritual to aid in their magical endeavour. Both of the merry wives become stage-magicians of a sort through their ability to make the Windsor men look in one direction, while they have Falstaff rudely smuggled off stage in the other. Their power and control over the scene, however, extends beyond mere theatrics. Falstaff, after all, resembles Ford in several important ways. As Carol Neely has argued, Falstaff becomes a scapegoat figure "who is punished not just for his own transgression but for the greed, impotence, and misogyny of other men."[86] According to Neely, Falstaff is simply one contributor in a much larger male offence within the play,

[86] Carol Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 147.

one Ford is every bit as guilty of (if not more so) as Falstaff himself. Falstaff's and Ford's separate, yet equally misguided, romantic delusions cause the humours of their bodies to become unbalanced. While early modern male authorities commonly held that women were more vulnerable to witchcraft and supernatural possession as a result of their fluid and unresisting bodies,[87] Shakespeare inverts this misogynistic assumption, characterising his men, rather than his women, as watery entities who lack reason. Not only is Falstaff described as watery through his blubbery excess, but both Ford's proper name and his alias as 'Brook' evoke images of water. The merry wives critically access Falstaff and correctly identify him for the "watery pumpkin" he is (3.3.38). There is something already pliable about Falstaff and in this fashion he offers a perfect substitute image for the irrational and "watery" Ford himself, who is the true object of their magical exorcism.

When it comes to creating her image of Ford, who is the play's central bewitched subject, Mistress Ford, therefore, settles on Falstaff as the core material she must use to construct her effigy. Falstaff's watery nature and shared misogynistic views concerning female virtue make him a suitable foil for Ford. As the buck-basket scene unfolds the audience witnesses the merry wives skilfully shape Falstaff, as they metaphorically shrink him down to size. Mistress Page cleverly initiates this process through a wonderfully dramatic moment, as she

[87] Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*, 171.

conspiratorially points to the buck-basket and tells Mistress Ford "Look, here is a basket. If he be of any reasonable stature, he may creep in here; and throw foul linen upon him, as if it were going to bucking" (3.3.122-4).[88] Mistress Ford follows this cue with her own contribution to their recipe, exclaiming "He's too big to go in there" (126). Yet, the magic of the scene is that the merry wives *can* shrink Falstaff down to size, a power that not only implies Falstaff's impotence in the face of the merry wives' fury, but also demonstrates how the two women have the general ability to reshape a substance into something new. Falstaff, hearing the plan and desperate to save his own skin, becomes the merry wives' willing subject; bursting forth he cries "I'll in, I'll in … Let me creep in here" (127; 132). When we next see Falstaff, newly emerged from his undignified swim, he has become even more watery and pliable than ever before, setting up the next phase of the merry wives' magical device perfectly. As he contemplates his experience, Falstaff offers a few gems of wisdom to the audience, although he himself remains ignorant of their deeper implications. Bemoaning his treatment, Falstaff

[88] Even the use of the work "bucking" in this moment further connects Falstaff with Ford. While the merry wives comically use this word to further enhance their extended laundry metaphor, Ford immediately begins to echo this same word upon his arrival home: "Buck? I would I could wash myself of the buck! Buck, buck, buck! Ay, buck!" (3.3.148-9). Shakespeare once again conflates the two men through the merry wives' ability to have both men "bucked." Wendy Wall has also commented on this issue, arguing that "Ford converts soiled wash into the male horned deer that figures both his sexual vulnerability *and* his overly lusty rival" ("Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52.1 [2001], 96.).

declares that "water swells a man, and what a thing should I have been when I had been swelled" (3.5.14-15). Although Falstaff means to apply this description to the body's physical response to a death by drowning, he misses the symbolic implications of his speech entirely. He and Ford are already both swelled with water, as they allow themselves to be influenced by emotional impulses rather than by rational self-restraint.

With their image now baptised and ready to be christened with a new form and function, the merry wives proceed to the second phase of their plan. Falstaff represents Ford on several levels, but the merry wives continue to add to the complexity of their image by also incorporating into their creation (as least symbolically) a piece of the witch who so haunts Ford's imagination. Although Ford's perception of Mother Pratt is probably just as skewed as his views on Mistress Ford are, the merry wives seize on his perception of witchcraft in part to explain his current bewitched and frenzied state. Just as Ford partially cuckolds himself (or at least attempts too), he also bewitches himself into abandoning his reason as he gives into his diseased delusions. In this assessment of Ford, the merry wives are not alone. Multiple people in Windsor comment on the damage Ford does to himself through his wild ravings. Page, for example, cautions Ford and asks him "what devil suggests this imagination?" (3.3.203). Mistress Page also scolds Ford in a similar fashion, telling him "You do yourself mighty wrong, Master Ford" (3.3.195). During the second punishment sequence the entire

community of Windsor contributes to build on this thread; Shallow tells Ford that his jealousy 'wrongs [himself]' (4.2.141); Evans, that Ford must "pray, and not follow the imaginations of [his] own heart" (4.2.142-3); and Master Page, who has the final word once again, informs Ford that what he seeks for is "nowhere else but in your brain" (4.2.145). Ford's diseased and wild ravings seem both demonic in nature and calculatingly malicious in their intent, and this is where the "gown," "thrummed hat," and "muffler" come into play (4.2.67-9). These clothing items, after all, introduce the audience to a particular kind of magic. It was not uncommon in early modern theatre, as I will discuss in more detail in my third chapter, to have the clothing of magical individuals absorb part of their wearers' supernatural essence, such as Prospero's cloak in *The Tempest* or the handkerchief in *Othello*. Mother Pratt's gown, therefore, is a powerful symbol on stage and, while Ford exposes the couple's dirty laundry (both literally and figuratively) to the community, Mistress Ford also publicly exposes to public scrutiny a potentially incriminating item: the dress of a suspected witch. This exposure, however, does not cause further harm, but actually completes the last part of the counter-magic that the merry wives employ in this scene. As Falstaff descends to face Ford and the other Windsor men, Ford comes face to face with a distorted image of his own internal reality. Impotent, feminised, and demonic all at once, Falstaff symbolically embodies what Ford has spiritually transformed himself into at this point in the play as a result of his personal failings. As the last piece of the

merry wives' spell falls into place, Ford looks at the image of the witch (an image entirely of his own making) and sets about destroying it.

The merry wives successfully deploy their counter-magical offensive against Ford. Ford takes the bait and systematically attacks the demonic, witch-like image they have presented him with. Throughout the play "madness, possession, and witchcraft" have been employed "as figures of speech or parodic attributes to expose Ford's and Falstaff's delusions as pathology and eventually exorcize them."[89] At the end of this violent episode of purging, therefore, the true magic of the merry wives' spell begins to take hold on the play. Once Ford has physically vanquished both his inner and outer demons by attacking his external image, the merry wives are then able to make Ford anew. Once Ford momentarily leaves the stage after beating Falstaff the language the merry wives employ becomes laden with words and images that suggest their ability to complete Ford's magical transformation. In a process that almost implies alchemical purification, the merry wives "scrape the figures out of [Mistress Ford's] husband's brains" (4.2.200-01) in order to cool his inner distemper and successfully recast him into a less disruptive member of the community. The merry wives position themselves as spiritual "ministers" who have done Ford (and the community as a whole more generally) a "meritorious service" (4.2.203; 190). They conclude their magic ritual by cheekily promising to have the "cudgel

[89] Neely, *Distracted Subjects,* 147.

hallowed and hung o'er the altar" (4.2.190-91). Yet, even as their efforts near a conclusion in respect to Ford himself, the merry wives still delight in the prospect of further inflaming and re-moulding Falstaff. Although they call upon a queen, rather than a witch, to help them in the final scene, they retain a bit of the witch within themselves, as demonstrated by their final words, as they contrast their tempering of Ford with their continued desire to "forge with … then shape" the fat knight, as they "would not have things cool" (4.2.207-08).

The next time the audience sees Ford he is a changed man. Between the merry wives' concluding speech at the end of 4.2 and Ford's following stage entrance at the beginning of 4.4 something miraculous occurs. While the audience only witnesses the implementation of the merry wives' counter-magical offensive against Ford and only hear the distinct, almost incantation-like language they use following the scene, we are denied first-hand access to Ford's personal moment of transformation, which occurs off stage (at least in the folio edition of the play, which is the version this argument principally addresses). Once Ford re-emerges he has been utterly transformed and now genuinely repents his earlier actions:

> Pardon me, wife. Henceforth do what thou wilt.
> I rather will suspect the sun with cold
> Than thee with wantonness. Now doth thy honour stand
> In him that was of late an heretic,
> As firm as faith. (4.4.4-8)

Ford's apology highlights for audiences his new found mental clarity, just as his earlier ravings emphasized his emotional imbalance. When he first discovered

Falstaff's plans to seduce his wife, Ford further maligned her honour by painting her as a satanic creature who regularly entertained demonic lovers. Now reformed, however, Ford's words attempt to undo some of the earlier damage caused by his incoherent rants. Cured of his insanity, Ford compares Mistress Ford to the sun, making her and her incorruptible virtue the cornerstone of his newly rediscovered religious clarity. Ford also attributes his new-found spiritual awareness to Mistress Ford's healing techniques. Just as the merry wives earlier predicted, Mistress Ford has become a spiritual minister of sorts who has helped Ford rediscover his lost faith. Looking back on his earlier actions, Ford acknowledges that he existed outside the realm of god, a heretic who was blind to truth. Mistress Ford's ministrations, however, have now miraculously cured him. The women of Windsor reclaim magic for themselves, casting aside its potentially darker implications and making it a thing of wonder once again.

The Queen Reigns Supreme

Having conquered the role of witch and vanquished Ford's inner demons, the merry wives are now free to redefine themselves one final time during the last punishment sequence involving Herne the Hunter. Having conquered the role of witch, the two women are now free to flaunt their moral superiority and they do so by creating a queen, rather than a witch, to aid them in their final scheme. With their virtue now uncontested in the community, the merry wives can now openly

demonstrate their command over events, casting Anne Page (though Mistress Quickly will eventually inherit the part) as the Queen of Fairies to represent the women of Windsor in Falstaff's final humiliation. The queen they create, however, is more than just a regent who resembles Queen Elizabeth through her hatred of "sluts and sluttery" (5.5.45). She is a supernatural deity who comes to resemble the goddess Diana, as she too hunts down and punishes a man who has offended womankind by presumptuously imposing himself upon a woman who has been forbidden to him. As a testament to their total control of events, the merry wives graciously provide both Ford and the men of Windsor more generally with a legitimate hunt to partake in, and legitimate prey to pursue.

Hunting metaphors were numerous throughout the first half of the play, as discussed in regards to Ford's overzealous language as he attempted to trap his wife and expose her supposed indiscretions. Although Falstaff visually reintroduces the return of this motif in the play's final scene by arriving on stage dressed as "a Windsor stag, and the fattest," to quote Falstaff directly, "i'th' forest" (5.5.12-13), the Fairy Queen, through her Hobgoblin crier, appropriates Ford's earlier use of this discourse to instruct her fairy followers. Like Ford, she also rallies her people together by using language laden with hunting and questing images, using this gaming motif to help tutor her elves in their job to hunt out and punish moral corruption, laziness, and incompetency. After commanding her Hobgoblin crier to give her people their assignments we see him assign a couple

of different elves a specific hunt to partake in. First, he instructs the elf Cricket to go inspect all the hearths of all the chimneys in Windsor for those that are "unraked" and "unswept" (5.5.43). When Cricket finds evidence of uncleanliness, the crier tells him to "pinch the maids as blue as bilberry" (5.5.44). Similarly, the crier tasks the elf Bead with the job of locating maids who have not said their prayers three times before going to bed and pinching them, "arms, legs, backs, shoulders, sides, and shins" (5.5.53). As Ford attempted to do earlier in the play, the Fairy Queen assigns her people the task of rooting out moral corruption and punishing it by using hunting metaphors to inspire them. Unlike Ford, however, the Fairy Queen demonstrates how to conduct a hunt properly, with order, collaboration, and a bit of womanly ingenuity and magic to ensure that only the guilty are targeted, who, in this case, is Falstaff alone.

As the Windsorites establish their scene, Falstaff's language ironically helps to emphasise his role as their legitimate prey, as he references several different animals that can be hunted and consumed in his opening speeches. Anticipating the final fruits of his labours of "love" Falstaff transforms himself into a beast, declaring that "love … in some respects makes a beast of man" and "man a beast" (5.5.4-5). Although Falstaff means to identify with Zeus's fabled animalistic virility, his references to a "goose," "swan," "bull," "fowl," and "stag" in the scene's opening fifteen lines help align him, currently dressed as an animal, with the rest of these creatures, all of whom are fit game to hunt. Building on the

ironic implications behind his misguided speech, Falstaff invites Mistress Ford and Mistress Page to "Divide me like bribed buck, each a haunch" (5.5.22). Falstaff invites the merry wives to finish their hunt and divide the profits of labour, consuming his best parts. Although Falstaff once again speaks these words to a different purpose, intending them as a sexual invitation, the two women deliberately misconstrue his meaning. They do divide him up as they figuratively emasculate him, unleashing the men and women of Windsor to bring him down. Even after the community reveals its true purpose both Falstaff himself and others continue to describe him as a type of beast, defining him as a "deer," an "ass" and an "ox" in quick succession (5.5.117-9). As Falstaff becomes more animal-like, both through his horned costume and these repeated references to animals, the merry wives' final transformation becomes complete. Falstaff's "prohibited desires," like Actaeon's in Ovid's original myth, have "self-destructive" implications.[90] Like Diana, the merry wives enact their final vengeance by transforming Falstaff into a deer to be hunted down and punished for his presumptuous behaviour.

The Queen of Fairies, like Herne the Hunter and the witch of Brentford, "never appears in the play. Instead, the play sets out systematically to show these

[90] Wendy Wall, "*The Merry Wives of Windsor*: Unhusbanding Desire in Windsor," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume III: The Comedies,* Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (eds), 376-92 (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 377.

creatures are the inventions of (feminine) cunning allied with (masculine) superstition."[91] Even as the merry wives exploit polarised concepts of female virtue, in the forms of the witch and the queen respectively, therefore, they demonstrate the illusionary nature of both categories, as each remains a pageant-like creation rather than a realistic entity. Both witch and queen remain supernatural presences, the absence of the thing rather than the thing itself. While the play hints that Elizabeth might come closest to fulfilling the positive role of female virtue, it ultimately implies that this standard of greatness is an unrealistic one for ordinary women. The only truth that remains once the merry wives dispel the spectres of the witch and queen they initially summoned is themselves, vindicated, but still flawed in their own ways. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, therefore, use absence to dramatically comment on the implicit cultural connection that existed between queen and witch in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Both women also demonstrate a certain emotional affinity with each role, as they alternatively align themselves as both witch and queen respectively during the course of the play. By associating themselves with each role, however, the merry wives succeed, like Anna of Denmark does in Jonson's masque, in challenging the community's largely negative view of this association. While Shakespeare curiously bars both queen and witch from having direct access to the stage, he does have the merry wives spiritually channel their essence

[91] Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 193.

through a number of disguise plots. Like Jonson's queens, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page call upon and symbolically internalize the spectres of both witch and queen to first wage war upon Falstaff and then make Ford aware of how unwise it would be for him to continue to suspect and slander innocent women within his community. The merry wives use two extreme examples of how women were polarized and arbitrarily labelled by their communities to challenge how men perceive them. Seizing control over this rigid system of social classification and moral judgment for their own use, the merry wives ultimately define themselves as neither entirely good nor entirely bad, *per se*, but as a healthy mix of both.

Chapter Two: Exiting Stage Left: Stage Magicians, Female Scapegoats, and Alternative Histories in William Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin*

Donobert	Burn her to dust.
Artesia	That's a Phoenix death, and glorious.
Edol	I, that's to good for her.
Prince	Alive she shall be buried circled in a wall,
	Thou murderess of a King, there starve to death.
Artesia	Then i'll starve death when he comes for his prey,
	And i'th'mean time i'll live upon your curses. (5.2.65-8)

This chapter asks what it is like to be a witch forced to occupy a space of absence. As noted in the previous chapter, Mistress Ford, Mistress Page, and Bel-Anna (as performed by Anna of Denmark) resist this space in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Masque of Queens*. But what happens when strong and determined female activists do not reclaim or repurpose these (largely female) magical traditions? What happens when the social majority succeed in making suspect individuals disappear, irreparably tarnishing their legacies? Does the act of female reclamation justify the exploitation of this space to begin with? And, finally, what happens when resisting or repurposing this space becomes counter-intuitive to the message itself? In short, what is it like to be someone like Mother Pratt in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or the twelve hags in *The Masque of Queens*, figures who are (by their very essence) both everywhere and nowhere within their respective performances?

In the previous chapter I examined how both Shakespeare and Jonson challenge what they apparently perceived to be dangerous social and political ideologies regarding women and magic. Both playwrights demonstrate a certain skepticism regarding the societal fears that circulated about witches in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, with Jonson naming his hags "Ignorance, Suspicion, [and] Credulity" and Shakespeare symbolically exonerating Mother Pratt through Mistress Ford's triumph and Ford's unreliability. In both Jonson's masque and Shakespeare's play women combat and gain mastery over a sort of nothingness, a mere figment of society's imagination, but one that nonetheless threatens to consume their identities. Mistresses Ford and Page transform the dangerously false superstitions Ford publicizes into something empowering, as they work together to vindicate the women of Windsor collectively from the type of slander that might otherwise isolate them within their communities. Similarly, Anna of Denmark and her ladies-in-waiting challenge a larger, more universal political discourse, one that seeks to demean and degrade strong examples of female rulership. In both play and masque women emerge victorious; transforming what should be a disempowering space into an advantageous one as they challenge the beliefs of their audiences. Both Bel-Anna and Mistresses Ford and Page conclude each piece with a pageant-like spectacle that demonstrates their supreme command over events, forcing their audiences to (quite literally) applaud their success, even as they utilize (or, at the very least, seize control of)

the illusion of magic to create their spectacles.

Not all performances end on such a happy note, however, and in more than a few early modern plays men and women who attempt similar feats of action fail to overcome the scripting process the same way Bel-Anna, Mistress Ford, and Mistress Page (arguably) do. Despite garnering little critical attention in modern times, Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin, or, the Child Hath Found His Father* (c. 1622) explores this phenomenon through escalating episodes of violence as the play's female characters successively exit the stage to face a permanent, pseudo-magical enclosure of some kind off stage.[1] While Rowley's play, which I will

[1] Scholars do not know the precise composition date for *The Birth of Merlin*. Francis Kirkman and Henry Marsh published the quarto edition of the play in 1662, but the play was undoubtedly written and performed much earlier. Joanna Udall, editor of the 1991 edition of the play, has theorized that it could have been composed as early as 1607 ("Introduction" in *A Critical, Old-Spelling Edition of The Birth of Merlin (Q 1662)*, Joanna Udall (ed.), 1-117 [London, 1991], 11). Both R.J. Stewart and N.W. Bawcutt, however, assign the play a slightly later composition date, with Stewart proposing 1620 ("The Birth of Merlin" in *The Birth of Merlin, or the Childe Hath Found his Father*, R.J. Stewart, Denise Coffey, and Roy Hudd (eds), 3-30 [Longmead, 1989], 5) and Bawcutt 1622 (*The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama: The Records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels 1623–73* [Oxford, 1996], 136). Of these varying dates, Bawcutt's argument for a composition date of 1622 proves to be the most persuasive. Bawcutt examined the licensing records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, and located an entry specifically concerning *The Birth of Merlin*, which reads: "The *Childe hath founde his Father*, for perusing and allowing of a New Play, acted by the Princes Servants at the Curtayne, 1622" (136). In addition, I follow in Megan Lynn Isaac's footsteps, who "For the sake of expository convenience" treats "the authorship of *The Birth of Merlin* as unitary throughout [her] argument" ("Structure , Legitimacy, and Magic in *The Birth of Merlin*," *Early Theatre* 9.1 [2006]: 120). Throughout this chapter, therefore, I will credit Rowley alone with the play's authorship.

discuss in more detail momentarily, offers us the perfect example through which to consider the phenomenon of "becoming absent," other early modern texts, ones that are (arguably) more well-known, also engage with this issue. In the closing moments of Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part One* (c. 1591), for example, audiences watch guards escort Joan la Pucelle off stage to be executed. Joan's journey from triumphant herald, to struggling warrior, to pseudo-witch, to dying prophetess is (as one might imagine) emotionally painful to watch. Part of the ongoing scholarly fascination with this particular retelling of Joan's story, however, is her personal fall, one that sees her commune with devils as she gradually transforms into the very witch England's military forces perceive her to be. Joan's inevitable defeat (both physically and spiritually) arises from her failure to maintain her own identity within her assigned role. Instead of remaining true to her initial principles Joan becomes increasingly corrupted by the cruel and misogynistic world in which she finds herself. Audiences witness Joan's English enemies and, on occasion, even her French allies verbally denounce her as they violently attempt to re-write both her purpose and identity within the play. In fact, much of the play's violence arises from Joan's failure to prevent this gradual and sadistic re-scripting, as she passively allows her initially pure intentions to become no more than a grotesque parody of what they originally signified at the start of the play. Shakespeare juxtaposes scenes in which we watch Joan struggle to fulfill her calling with ones that maliciously draw her reputation into question. Much of the

play consists of men scathingly condemning Joan, as they describe her in increasingly damaging and unnatural terms, calling her "a devil or devil's dam" (1.6.5), "a damned sorceress" (3.2.37), a "vile fiend and shameless courtesan" (3.2.44), a "hellish mischief" (3.2.38), and "a witch" (1.6.6; 1.6.21; 3.2.37).[2] Her downfall results from a sinister and wide scale attempt on behalf of her adversaries to re-cast her into a more destructive role, one not of her choosing. Joan's moral decomposition also caters, however, to a larger early modern discourse, one that Cristina León Alfar eloquently identifies as a campaign of fear and misogyny aimed at "eliminating" any woman who "threaten[ed] masculine identity and sovereignty."[3]

What Joan la Pucelle's enemies fail to recognize, however, is that marginalising and compromising spaces can still afford the downtrodden a place for self-empowerment. In contrast to the women in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Masque of Queens*, who seek to reconnect marginalized spaces with mainstream society, Joan la Pucelle uses her compromised position to consciously reject what mainstream society itself represents. She does not intend for her manipulation of this space to heal, but to enflame. In the final moments before her execution, therefore, Joan manages to manipulate her defeat and transform it into

[2] William Shakespeare. *Henry VI, Part One*. Oxford World's Classics. Michael Taylor (ed.), (Oxford, 2008).
[3] Cristina León Alfar. *Fantasies of Female Evil: The Dynamics of Gender and Power in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Newark, 2003), 16.

a symbolic victory. Although she begins her "execution" scene in a state of frenzied fear, as she attempts to plead for her life, that desperation melts away in her final moments on stage. In place of her earlier fear, she begins to exude a certain pride as she makes the nothingness into which her English captors attempt to cast her a space for further resistance:

Joan La Pucelle Then lead me hence; with whom I leave my curse:
May never glorious sun reflex his beams
Upon the country where you make abode;
But darkness and the gloomy shade of death
Environ you, till mischief and despair
Drive you to break your necks or hang yourselves!
[*Exit*]

York Break thou in pieces and consume to ashes,
Thou foul accursed minister of hell! (5.5.86-93)

Having had her identity maligned and smeared, Joan la Pucelle exits the stage in complete defiance, symbolically in control of her own departure. She leaves the stage resolved to face her particularly gruesome end with dignity, one that will see her body consumed by fire (a death which literalizes her captors' desire to completely expunge her from the world). In this final moment, however, something miraculous occurs. Joan manages to re-capture some semblance of her earlier eloquence and conviction, rediscovering herself even as she resists her captors' final attempt to eradicate her. Finding her voice one last time, Joan tells her oppressors that her absence will not signify her defeat, but rather serve as an enduring symbol of England's future struggles. "But darkness and the gloomy shade of death / Environ you," she declares, positioning England (rather than

herself) as the object that succumbs to darkness. Although York attempts to dismiss the power of Joan's final words by stating that she is nothing more than a "minister of hell," her prophecy haunts the following three parts of the Henry VI tetralogy (including *Richard III*) and gives lasting voice to a woman whose male persecutors do everything within their power (for all intents and purposes) to erase her from the play.

Written in 1591, *Henry VI, Part One* both reaffirms and challenges certain stereotypes concerning women and power. Joan figures as a woman who both fails and succeeds in her aims. While she falls short of her early ideals, abandoning her principles and engaging in acts of witchcraft to liberate her people, she also finds redemption in her final moments by ensuring that her death will continue to inspire her people and grant her a degree of immortality through her martyrdom. She also represents, however, a much larger trend in early modern drama and proves that early modern playwrights asked themselves the same question I began this chapter by asking: what is it like to be the witch forced to occupy the "absent space" we frequently see magically suspect individuals resist in the plays of this period?

Authored and performed approximately three decades later, Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin* engages with many of these same themes, although the manner in which the play addresses them is (arguably) more convoluted. Like *Henry VI*, *The Birth of Merlin* situates itself within England's distant past in order to explore and

critique broader patterns of male unease in the face of strong female leadership. Both plays also depict women who embark on quests, face adversity, and have men brand them as witches as a result of their personal drive and ambition. Whereas Shakespeare needs to expunge Joan la Pucelle from the narrative because she symbolizes the antithesis of everything England represents, Rowley neither confirms nor denies the possibility that his female characters use magic to achieve their goals. In *Henry VI* Shakespeare paints Joan's war with the English in decidedly black and white terms and even as Joan personally struggles with the greys of her world she still constitutes a dangerous (and decidedly misguided) presence within the larger thematic arc of the play. Joan's potential for goodness, it seems, can only ever extend so far. In contrast, Rowley refuses to provide his male characters with any level of self-justification for their actions. In each of the play's three main plotlines male characters band together to either symbolically erase or aggressively segregate the play's four female characters for no other reason than that they have the audacity to pursue their own beliefs and convictions, rather than meekly submit to male governance. Although at first glance the play appears to be no more than a patriotic piece that attempts to venerate British myths and promote nation building, on closer inspection (I argue) it simultaneously offers audiences a cynical commentary on England's political and religious anxieties concerning women and power in the early 1620s. When studied in conjunction with Rowley's source text, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The*

History of the Kings of Britain (c. 1136), a distinct pattern emerges.[4] While Rowley brutally punishes the supposed sins of his female characters he deliberately highlights the blatant insincerity of the men, leaving their transgressions an unresolved problem. In doing so he ironically comments on the political hypocrisy that too frequently casts strong female figureheads as scapegoats for larger more universal crimes. While the men succeed in isolating the women in the play, each of the women in turn embraces and redefines her banishment so that she (rather than her opponents) controls how audiences interpret her final exit from the stage. In this pseudo-history, therefore, even as the annals of history attempt to remove these women from the events being chronicled, their absences instead become sites for further resistance and protest.

Allowing the women to control their final exits, however, provides Rowley with the opportunity through which to push his social critique even further. Ultimately, I argue, Rowley uses absence to comment satirically on a number of larger misogynistic trends that began to manifest themselves during James I's reign. First, set against a backdrop of war and religious discord, the play

[4] I have based my following discussion of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work on Lewis Thorpe's translated edition. See Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Lewis Thorpe (trans. and ed.), 149-261 (Harmondsworth, 1968). Geoffrey of Monmouth must have been Rowley's primary source text because neither John Stow nor Raphael Holinshed, two of the other major historians of the period, discuss Merlin's role in any significant detail. Instead, they carefully edit their pseudo-historical accounts to remove some of the more sensational and magical elements from the events they chronicle.

critiques the futility of a system, whether domestic or political, that attempts to wrestle control of fertility rights away from women through highly constructed (and ultimately artificial) alternatives. In a play where the word "birth" appears directly alongside the word "father" in the play's title, notions of parentage, patronage, and personal origins inevitably become important. In each of the play's separate plotlines, however, Rowley prioritizes images of fatherhood over motherhood, a prioritization that ultimately culminates in the banishment of each potential mother-figure in the play. Collectively, the men malign notions of motherhood, with Donobert declaring that his daughters are unnatural for not pursuing a domestic calling, the British courtiers arguing that Artesia is unworthy for such a vocation, and both the Clown and Merlin judging Joan to be an unacceptable parent because of her unorthodox pregnancy. Each plotline, therefore, shows women who are (arguably) incapable of properly utilizing the magic associated with pregnancy and procreation, leaving the men in a position to attempt to seize control of such powers solely for themselves. The absence of the women at the end of the play, however, ultimately draws this apparent prioritization into question by highlighting the artificiality of any system that attempts to remove women from the birthing process.

Second, according to Alfar, who cites Jodi Mikalachki's recent scholarship to support her conclusions, a destructive literary and historical trend began to emerge during the Jacobean period, one that that sought to "systematically erase

… powerful queens of ancient times … from history … as part of England's savage native origins."[5] Within the larger social and historical discourse of the period, therefore, a broader cultural attempt to suppress, demonize, and deface strong examples of female leadership had begun. Mikalachki goes so far as to argue that in *King Lear* Shakespeare develops "two memorable examples of savage (would-be) queens" before allowing "native barbarism to run its inevitable course of national ruin."[6] By setting his play in England's distant past and exploring the "effacement of female power," Rowley directly engages with this emerging literary trend.[7] Rather than support it, however, he satirizes this impulse by having his female characters serve as partial foils to some of the more memorable (and notorious) female figures of the Arthurian legend (such as Guinevere), who is an almost intrusively absent character within the play at large. By punishing, erasing, and removing these earlier women from the events being chronicled, Rowley allows his male characters to bask momentarily in a masque-like pageant at the end of the play that depicts a vision of history supposedly void of feminine failing. In doing so, I argue, the play subtly explores the futility of those who attempt to re-write history to suit their own social and political agenda.

In my first chapter I argued that absence becomes a means through which

[5] Alfar, 17; Jodi Mikalachki, *The Legacy of Boadicea: Gender and Nation in Early Modern England* (New York, 1998), 74.
[6] Ibid. Alfar also quotes this passage, see 17-18.
[7] Alfar, 18.

Mistresses Ford and Page seize control of something outside the scope of human knowledge to empower themselves within their play. They use Ford's suspicion of magic and witchcraft to give themselves momentary access to these supposed magical powers before dispensing with their "magic" tricks entirely and revealing everything to their community. In *The Birth of Merlin*, however, the process of being made absent (as opposed merely to combating it) changes the overall dramatic and thematic function of immaterial spaces entirely. Absence in *The Birth of Merlin* instead becomes a method women use to resist misogyny and injustice. The play explores male tyranny through the men's attempts to deny the women access to any form of potential magical authority. I argue that the women's disappearing acts do not signal the men's success in this endeavour, however, but rather give the women the chance to make their absences sites for further magical protest, as they make the immaterial spaces into which they collectively vanish a testament to their enduring magical legacies within the text. Throughout the play, the women become dispellers of magical illusions and so their final disappearing acts serve to reveal their magical abilities. The moment when the women are cast from the stage, therefore, becomes the moment when they also escape the world's ability to judge and suppress them further.

Exits and Immaterial Spaces: Constantia and Modestia

Off-stage spaces often become sites for violence in early modern theatre.

Playwrights frequently relocate to off-stage spaces events that they cannot logistically perform on stage, or are simply too violent to show. The moment when a character permanently leaves the audience's field of vision to enter one of these immaterial spaces, therefore, is important. Leslie Thomson has previously argued that exits "do not merely get characters off-stage, but are a means of dramatizing and encapsulating the chief concerns of a play."[8] While all exits provide critical moments of action within a performance, as Thomson persuasively demonstrates, permanent exits, ones which mark a character's final moment on stage, are less common (at least within certain genres) and usually more dramatic. The rarity of these events, however, ultimately amplifies their significance. Like Joan la Pucelle's final moment of defiance, who can forget the moment when Doctor Faustus's screams echo from off stage in Christopher Marlowe's play (c. 1592), signifying his final moment of reckoning? These exits indicate more than just the character's physical death; they also crystallize notions of spiritual seclusion and imprisonment, lingering on indefinitely in the audience's imagination.

When characters die on stage (or limp off stage mortally wounded) the audience has some degree of resolution because we know what happens to these characters' bodies. There is a comfort in the certainty that their absences signal

[8] "Shakespeare and the Art of Making an Exit," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 69.2 (2000): 540.

closure, a realization that Hamlet comes to as he considers the conflicting visions of death advanced by his father's ghost and Yorick's skull in *Hamlet* (c. 1600). The deaths of someone like King Lear, who publicly mourns the loss of his daughter before succumbing of grief himself in Shakespeare's play (c. 1605), or Tybalt, whose murder seals the tragic course of Romeo and Juliet's ill-fated love affair (c. 1595), offer audiences a certain level of closure and even a certain degree of predictability. Their downfalls wrap up the plays' loose ends, as we watch Lear's death concludes the play's exploration of failed rulership or Tybalt's murder demonstrate the inevitable self-destruction that accompanies human hate. We can predict the deaths of these characters. In plays that explore magical themes and issues, however, the grave has more widespread implications and the immaterial space that signifies death, that great unknown, becomes an extension to the stage itself. Marlowe does not intend for Faustus's final screams to provide his audience with closure, but rather to remind them of their own vulnerability in the face of forces much larger than themselves. Faustus continues indefinitely, not as a ghost *per se*, but as a lingering presence. His story, after all, continues without end, as the audience imagines the many horrors he will face day-in and day-out for the rest of time as punishment for his hubris. These exits, exits such as Faustus's or Joan la Pucelle's, serve a greater function. They hint at a larger cosmological force that eventually intervenes in the outcomes faced by these characters whether to their detriment or benefit. While Faustus's anguished cries

signal his ultimate victimization at the hands of these larger forces, as the space he vanishes into becomes a place for punishment and pain, the removal of someone like la Pucelle provides her with a more ambiguous space to manipulate. She uses her absence to become a haunting presence within the following plays and she transforms her physical absence into a concrete sign of England's future struggles. By accomplishing this, la Pucelle (arguably) secures her own self-empowerment and enduring immortality within the play and those that follow it, despite the fact that she ends *Henry VI, Part One* as a prisoner en route to her own execution.

In *The Birth of Merlin*, the permanency or symbolic meaning of off-stage spaces becomes a matter of vital importance to the play's overall dramatic purpose. The play weaves together four main plot lines, which Megan Lynn Isaac neatly summarizes as "Constantia's and Modestia's romances, Joan's attempt to find a father for her child, Aurelius's and Uter's entanglements with Artesia, and Vortigern's struggle to hold the kingdom."[9] Each plotline, however, crisscrosses with the others, making the play more structurally harmonious than many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars have typically held it to be. Henry Tyrrell, who produced the first modern edition of the play in the 1850s, for example, complains that the "the magic portion is too palpable, too material" to make the play effective.[10] Similarly, Karl Warnke and Ludwig Proescholdt argue

[9] Isaac, 110.
[10] Ibid.

that none of the play's plot lines are "externally connected with each other."[11] By and large, with only a handful of exceptions, recent scholars have been more concerned with whether or not we should consider *The Birth of Merlin* to be part of the Shakespearean apocrypha. This single-minded focus on the play prompts Isaac to comment ironically that "just as … Merlin's mother spends most of the first act inquiring of every man she meets whether he might have fathered her child, these scholars have attempted to attribute the play to virtually every dramatist and combination of dramatists on record."[12]

The play opens with two nobly born sisters, Constantia and Modestia, who refuse the love of their wellborn suitors, Cador and Edwin, in favour of entering a convent. In this, Isaac argues, the play offers us something that is "virtually unprecedented in early modern drama" considering that in "no other drama does a woman, let alone a pair of women, refuse a worthy, devoted, parentally approved suitor out of simple spiritual devotion, especially when one of the women initially desires marriage rather than a convent life."[13] Constantia, in particular, starts the play eager to wed, proudly informing her father within the opening twenty lines that she has accepted Cador's proposal. In contrast Modestia, who has been blessed with an equally acceptable suitor in the form of Edwin, demonstrates a certain resistance to the idea of marriage. Although Edwin proposes to her

[11] "Introduction" in *Pseudo-Shakespearian Plays, Volumes 1-5* (Hale, 1883), xi.
[12] Isaac, 109.
[13] Ibid, 111.

multiple times and tells her that she must accept his offer or else she "must want some of her Sisters [Constantia's] faith" (1.1.28), Modestia remains resolute in her desire to remain single. By stressing the idea of *faith*, Edwin insinuates that the only way Modestia can truly fulfill her religious calling is by marrying him, a Protestant notion that English playwrights of the period typically endorsed. In Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1588), for example, Lord Lacy wins Margaret of Fressingfield's hand back moments before she enters a nunnery to take her vows. More problematically, in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (c. 1604), the Duke proposes to Isabella in the closing moments of act five, putting an abrupt end to her play-long intention of becoming a nun. In contrast to these other heroines, Modestia refuses to accept this philosophy and remains firmly resolved to enter a nunnery.

If Modestia's only transgression were entering a nunnery in spite of her father Donobert's and Edwin's objections, her story might not be as remarkable as it ultimately proves to be. Not content to slip quietly into a life of religious devotion unnoticed, Modestia instead verbally challenges the men's perception of her choice and, in the process of doing so, wins Constantia over to her cause. Modestia's family, in one last attempt to secure her obedience, stages Constantia and Cador's wedding celebrations as a masque in the hope that the display will soften Modestia to the prospect of marriage. Looking upon the spectacle and seeing it for the illusion that it is, Modestia challenges the wedding party: "This

world is but a Masque, catching weak eyes, / With what is not our selves by our disguise, / A vizard that falls off" (3.2.85-7). Having secured the party's attention she continues to instruct them, telling them that the world of marriage (which men govern) is a mere distraction that gives false confidence to those of weaker constitutions. "The Dance being done," she asserts, "leaves Deaths Glass for all to look upon" (3.2.87-8). Halfway through the play, therefore, Modestia imagines a world beyond the one she has hitherto known. Even though this world exists beyond the boundaries of the stage itself, she somewhat paradoxically feels that it will provide her with something more permanent than the existence she has, until now, been leading. As she looks upon the wedding procession, she views it not only as a lavish, masque-like performance meant momentarily to transport her senses, but as a perverse representation of the *Dance of Death*, an emblem made famous by Hans Holbein the Younger in 1538.[14] Refusing to let her family and friends view her exit as a selfish act, she strives to contextualize how they should instead understand her decision, a goal she meets with at least some degree of success. Amazed by her sister's eloquence, Constantia responds, "her words are

[14] The *Dance of Death* "depicts the living and the dead mingling in energetic procession, a scene often painted on a wall, usually in a churchyard or some other burial place. The *Dance of Death* was characteristic of the early modern death ritual in two ways: the living appeared in order of their social rank, emperors and kings followed by nobles, the gentry, and commoners; the dead were displayed as part of an instruction to the living about the nature of death" (Helene Roberts (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art*, 2 Volumes [Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998], Online.).

powerful" (3.2.95).

Almost immediately aware of the danger Modestia poses, Donobert, Edwin, and Cador set about trying to demonize Modestia's speech and prevent Constantia from listening to her sister any further. Rather than rationally debate with Modestia, the men set about condemning her as a witch, refusing to acknowledge any validity her words might hold. Donobert, in particular, uses demeaning and dehumanizing language to repudiate Modestia's eloquence and conviction, asserting that "her soul's inchanted with infected Spells" and "She's sure bewitcht with Error" (3.2.96; 113). According to Sarah Johnson, Modestia's "'powerful' words are pitted against Donobert's use of spectacle" and by "penetrating Donobert's spectacle with her words, by piercing the 'vizard' of his false parade to reveal genuine married life as 'death's glass beneath,' Modestia proves herself the stronger enchantress using the same tactic the Briton hermit and magician Anselme uses to assert superiority over the Saxon magician Promimus."[15] Despite the verbal abuse levied against her, however, Modestia refuses to be cowed by these assertions, remaining steadfast in her own beliefs, a feat that ultimately wins her Constantia's support. Moved by her sister's words, Constantia renounces her intention to marry Cador and vows to follow Modestia into the convent. "Oh my best sister," Constantia asserts,

[15] Sarah Johnson, "'Away, stand off, I say': women's appropriations of restraint and constraint in *The Birth of Merlin* and *The Devil is an Ass*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 15.1 (2009): paragraph 12.

> My souls eternal friend, forgive the rashness
> Of my distemper'd tongue, for how could she
> Knew not her self, know thy felicity,
> From which worlds cannot now remove me. (3.2.121-5)

Both girls are named for virtues with which they are now seemingly in conflict: Modestia speaks out most brazenly and without "proper" feminine delicacy and Constantia breaks all outward oaths of faith and renounces her marriage to embrace a new world view. They reject the conventional assumptions about female virtue embedded in their names, and redefine the true meaning of constancy and modesty. Instead of performing the gesture of constancy and modesty for the men's benefit, the women internalize these principles and speak as their consciences dictate.[16]

Neither woman appears on stage again after 3.2, which leaves Constantia to speak the pair's final words. Her closing statement once again stresses their shared desire to exist in a space that values them for something beyond their physicality. "You gave us life," she tells her father, "Save not our bodies, but our souls from death" (3.2.153-4). Monika Karpinska argues that this moment of "self-enclosure" is a "victory where [Modestia and Constantia] are able to assert autonomous agency over the fate of their bodies in a way that defies the plans of

[16] Both Johnson and Karpinska make similar observations concerning the symbolic mean of Constantia's and Modestia's names in their respective works.

all interested male parties."[17] The problem with this victory, however, is that the women only gain autonomy over their physicality by effectively sacrificing that physicality within the larger arc of the narrative. After this point in the play, Modestia and Constantia (for all intents and purposes) no longer exist as physical entities. In exchange they become symbolic echoes, who have to trust that the power of their words and the manner of their exit from the stage will be enough to preserve their lasting memory within the play's pseudo-historical events.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's original text, however, offers us a potentially more definitive way to view the sisters' final exit from the stage. While neither sister finds an exact replica in Geoffrey's earlier account, their names call to mind one specific individual: Constans, son of King Constantine II of Britain who ruled in approximately the sixth century. According to Monmouth, Constans was Constantine's first-born son and elder brother of Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon. When Constans was still young, his father (who wanted to demonstrate his religious piety) handed Constans over "to the church … so that he might enter a monastic order."[18] When the king was murdered, ten years later, it sparked a succession crisis. Constans was a sworn monk, and the people of Britain did not consider him to be an eligible candidate for the throne. Both of Constantine's younger sons (Aurelius and Uther Pendragon) were also viewed as

[17] Monika Karpinska, "Bawdily Manipulations : Spheres of Female Power in *The Birth of Merlin*," *Early Theatre* 9.1 (2006): 123.
[18] Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 151.

unfit, simply because they were too young at the time of their father's murder. Dissent arose among the nobles until a man named Vortigern, who wanted to secure his own personal advancement, went to Constans and convinced him to abandon his religious life in favour of kingship. Promising to help Constans discover some loop-hole by which he might be excused from his monastic vows, Vortigern helped disguise the prince and smuggled him out of the monastery, bringing him to London where Constans happily claimed the throne. Seeing how easily Constans renounced his religious vocation, however, the people became dismayed and, at his coronation, no member of the clergy "dared to anoint Constans, seeing as he was giving up his position as a monk."[19] Despite this opposition, Constans succeeded his father.

According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Constans was an extremely ineffective king. Having grown up in a monastery, Constans had not been educated in the skills required to rule a kingdom and so he relied on Vortigern to make the majority of his decisions for him. As his power grew in the face of Constans's ineptitude, Vortigern began to harbour an increasing desire to confiscate the throne for himself, wanting the title of king in addition to the power that accompanied it. Vortigern began to transfer great wealth into his own holdings, at the expense of the crown, and counselled Constans to allow Pict representatives to enter his court. More than one hundred Pictish envoys accepted

[19] Ibid, 152.

the invitation and Vortigern quickly began to lavish gifts on them so that they would feel indebted to him and him alone. When Vortigern felt they were completely under his control, he directed the Picts to enter Constans's bedchamber and murder him, something that the Picts supposedly did without question. When the Picts presented Vortigern with Constans's head, however, Vortigern broke down and performed sorrow so convincingly that he fooled the majority of his countrymen. Wanting to tie up loose ends, Vortigern ordered that the Picts be taken away and punished for their treachery. Although some people remained suspicious of Vortigern − Aurelius and Uther Pendragon's guardians (for example) fled with their wards to Little Britain − most people accepted that Vortigern was blameless in the regicide of Constans. For his worldly vanity, therefore, Constans jeopardised the peace and stability of an entire kingdom.

Rowley's alterations to Geoffery of Monmouth's text highlight the play's specific political and social agenda – namely to critique the ongoing Jacobean tendency to suppress female voices within early modern historical discourses. In Rowley's play, Constantia's name provides audiences with a feminized variation of the masculine Constans and, once this connection has been established, additional comparisons between their situations quickly come to light. While Rowley chooses to explore Constans's political failures through the character of Aurelius in his play, he opts to take a different approach to Constans's religious inadequacies. Modestia and Constantia provide an inverted and, arguably, more

restorative take on the events that initially helped spark such a turbulent period in British history. Like Constans, Constantia faces a choice between religious seclusion and worldly indulgence. She stands at a crossroads, having initially promised herself to one world, but now finds herself tempted to choose a different path. Constans, in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, makes the selfish choice. He abandons the promises he made to God and allows the luxuries of a material world to sway him. As soon as Constans agrees to abandon his monastery, Vortigern dresses him in "royal garments" to signify his transformation.[20] This choice earns Constans the condemnation of both Geoffery of Monmouth and his fellow countrymen. "It was his own lack of character which made him act this way," the historian pronounces, obviously disapproving of Constans's choice.[21] At his coronation, Geoffery further reports, no member of the clergy would anoint Constans, leaving him "a mere shadow of a leader."[22]

Constantia, in contrast, chooses to enter a nunnery and foreswear the material world, one that she describes as a "masque" in which the players wear "but borrowed robes … to waste and spend the time" (3.2.117-18). She becomes an inverted replica of Constans through these deliberate references to clothing. Constans dons the borrowed robes of a king without the anointed weight of God to substantiate his claim. He essentially play-acts the role. Constantia, in contrast,

[20] Geoffery of Monmouth, 152.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

proves herself to be a more adept philosopher and an individual of greater substance. She recognizes the illusionary nature of external images and opts to discard them entirely. In 3.2 Constantia performs in a marriage masque aimed to weaken her sister's religious resolve. This ploy, however, fails spectacularly and Modestia instead uses it to launch into a sermon concerning the illusionary nature of the material world. Looking at Constantia (who is dressed in her wedding garments), Modestia tells her very specifically to "shake off these robes" (94). Immediately upon hearing her words, Constantia sees the light and experiences a complete change of heart: "Her words are powerful, I am amaz'd to hear her" (95). Her spiritual illumination occurs suddenly, but Constantia becomes aware for the first time that she can define her own selfhood beyond the very scripted role her father and would-be husband would have her perform. Constancy in faith is what she recognizes within herself at this moment. While Constantia lacks Constans's royal rank, her actions nonetheless serve as a deliberate denial of his earlier selfishness. In *The Birth of Merlin*, therefore, Rowley refuses simply to repeat the mistakes of the past and he instead chooses to depict the sisters as a corrective force who exert their independence and, by doing so, help to rewrite past wrongs. Constantia's choice and her subsequent exit from the stage deliberately reject what Constans originally signified in Rowley's source text. Constans's actions provoked a turbulent period in England's pseudo-historical past. He becomes a king who very openly rejects God's glory – which he was

supposed to embrace selflessly – in favour of royal power. The religious and political doctrine regarding the divine rights of kings became a controversial issue during the Jacobean period under James I/VI's reign. Constans provides Jacobean audiences with an example of a king from England's pseudo-historical past who fails to submit himself to God's will, instead choosing to embrace the personal glory of becoming king. Even though the sisters' actions must have provoked mixed feelings among England's Protestant audience, as they reject marriage and motherhood in favour of what can only be seen as a Catholic custom, Rowley provides the sisters with increased agency and righteousness as they reverse and correct Constans's legendary sins. The women succeed in accomplishing something that their male counterpart failed to carry out and, by doing so, create an alternative historical tradition that is distinctly their own.

Modestia's role further responds to specific aspects of Geoffrey of Monmouth's male-centric pseudo-history. As the voice of temptation she serves as Vortigern to Constantia's Constans, but unlike the blindly ambitious Vortigern, Modestia preaches self-sacrifice, personal humility, and the renunciation of worldly possessions. This last trait, in particular, sets her in opposition to Geoffrey's Vortigern, who only agrees to help Constans leave the monastery if Constans promises to "increase [his] personal fortune."[23] In Geoffrey of Monmouth's history, however, Vortigern performs the dominant half in the

[23] Ibid.

relationship he shares with Constans. Geoffrey describes Constans as accepting "Vortigern's advice without question, never taking any action himself until Vortigern had told him to do so."[24] Vortigern is the false counsellor. In *The Birth of Merlin*, Modestia initially assumes the dominant role in the relationship she shares with her sister. Modestia's convictions initially prompt the pair to embrace a life of religious seclusion and her words initiate Constantia's transformation. Whereas Geoffrey of Monmouth paints the Vortigern-Constans relationship as essentially parasitic, Rowley establishes a more positive model of cooperation and support between the two sisters. When the girls are at odds Constantia obeys her father's instructions to remain aloof from Modestia, as a form of emotional blackmail to make Modestia change her mind. Feeling a moment's doubt, Modestia seeks Constantia's comfort only to be spurned: "In you I drown'd a sisters name for ever" (3.2.67). Once Modestia sways Constantia to her cause, however, and Donobert no longer functions as an obstacle between them, Constantia changes her tune, instead of merely parroting her father or fiancé. Rather suddenly Constantia finds her voice and begins speaking more freely than she has throughout the entire first half of the play. Until 3.2, the scene in which she experiences her spiritual epiphany, Constantia speaks only 8 lines of dialogue. Once Modestia sways her to her cause, however, she becomes increasingly persuasive and argumentative, speaking several longer speeches before exiting the

[24] Ibid.

stage forever.

Rowley infuses the sisters' last words with further weight by making them echo those of Merlin and his three companions at the end of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Life of Merlin* (c. 1150), an additional source text that Rowley most likely referred to when writing his play. At the end of this second text, Merlin and his four chosen companions decide to remain secluded in the woods and devote their lives to God. Merlin spends the final years of his life, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, in religious seclusion. When announcing his intention to remain with Merlin, Taliesin (one of the aforesaid companions) tells Merlin that "I too shall stay with you and make the third, … turning away from the traffic of the world. I have spent long enough in empty living; now the time has come to recover myself, and you shall lead me."[25] In contrast, Rowley's Merlin ends the play heavily involved in the ongoing political events of Uter's reign. He ends the play surrounded by British courtiers, as he prophesies about Britain's great future for their entertainment. Uter fully embraces Merlin as an active and welcomed participant in his court. Rowley, by contrast, transfers Merlin's supposedly historical desire to live a retired life onto the women of his play. Women become the champions of these fringe spaces, existing outside the scope of the male-dominated hierarchies, whether political or domestic, that represent such a distinct

[25] *Life of Merlin or Vita Merlini*, Basil Clarke (trans. and ed.), (Cardiff, 1973), 131.

element in this play. By transferring the historical arguments made by Merlin and his divinely chosen companions onto Constantia and Modestia, Rowley empowers both women as prophet-like figures. Their voices, therefore, provide the audience with a way to contextualize off-stage spaces. The sisters might choose to exist on the fringes of the stage, but they demonstrate that this decision does not disempower them. On the contrary, Merlin's success as a self-cloistering prophet, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, provides the women with a positive role model. Their enclosure does not erase meaning, but creates it. The women's stand becomes a marked form of defiance against those who would usurp control over their bodies.

Exits and Immaterial Spaces: Joan Goe-too't

While the men might succeed at least amongst themselves in suppressing all thoughts of Constantia and Modestia, the sisters nonetheless set the stage (so to speak) for how an audience should view the subsequent exits of the play's remaining female characters. In the play's second plotline, to summarize briefly, Joan and her rustic brother (known only as Clown) frantically attempt to uncover the identity of the man who impregnated her. After giving birth to Merlin, whom she miraculously delivers as a fully grown youth, Joan discovers that her seducer is not a man at all, but a devil who supposedly played upon her vanity and deceived her senses. Having had sex with a devil, Joan is in an extremely

precarious position as, even before the audience becomes aware of who impregnated her, Prince Uter accuses Joan of being a "Witch, stallion, hag" (2.1.106). After learning the true identity of her lover, therefore, Joan finds herself in an even more problematic position. Faced with the magnitude of her moral transgression, Joan forswears the father of her child and, with her son's help, manages to free herself successfully from his corruptive influence. Satisfied with his mother's remorse, Merlin nonetheless decides to lock her away in a magical bower (supposedly for her own benefit) to live out the rest of her days in isolation and repentance, declaring that he will:

> conduct you to a place retir'd,
> Which I by art have rais'd call's *Merlins Bower*,
> There shall you swell with solitary sighs,
> With grones and passions your companions,
> To weep away this flesh you have offended with,
> And leave all bare unto your airerial soul (5.1.89-94)

Faced with this final heavy judgement Joan remains silent, leaving both performers and audiences alike to debate how to interpret her sudden reticence.

Most scholars who have studied this play treat Joan as an exception to the play's overall treatment of women. Karpinska, for example, has previously argued to great success that Joan is "not given any voice regarding her future" and that unlike the other women in the play who demonstrate agency and control over their bodies, Joan "illustrates an *inversion* of this power: a woman tricked by her own

body as she is seduced by the Devil to bring forth his progeny."[26] Johnson also treats Merlin's mother as an aberration among the women in the play, arguing that Joan's failure "to emotionally constrain and physically restrain [herself] … quickly lead[s] to an imposed form of permanent restraint."[27] Recent editors of the play paint Joan as a weak and passive figure who lacks agency. In her introduction to the play, for example, Udall condemns Joan as being nothing more than a "thick-witted country wench," while R.J. Stewart uses less than flattering illustrations to accompany his text and influence how his readers view Joan.[28] In these drawings (see figure 2 on the next page), illustrator Miranda Gray depicts Joan as a portly woman with an exaggerated nose who wears a threadbare outfit. She is, quite literally, the epitome of the "thick-witted country wench" Udall envisioned.

Only Megan Lynn Isaac and Helen Ostovich, in their recent scholarship, attempt to defend Joan, although both scholars accomplish this in two very different ways. Isaac believes that rather "than arguing that Merlin's mother made moral or virtuous choices, [Rowley] surrounds her with a cast of women who make choices even more immoral and unappealing than her own."[29] By adopting this position, Isaac suggests that in contrast to the sisters' Catholic inclinations

[26] Karpinska 127; 123.
[27] Johnson, paragraph 8.
[28] Udall, 70; See Figure 2.
[29] Isaac, 114.

Figure 3 Joan Go-too't and her son Merlin. Illustration. Miranda Gray. In *The Birth of Merlin, or the Childe Hath Found his Father*, R.J. Stewart, Denise Coffey, and Roy Hudd (eds), 107. Longmead, Dorset: Element Books Limited, 1989.

and Artestia's demonic desire to overthrow British rule, Joan's sin of pre-marital sex does not seem as destructive, even though she is having sex with a devil. Joan's ability, Isaac stresses, to repent her sins further sets her apart from the other women in the play, "who each exit the stage without explaining or expiating their sins."[30] In contrast to Isaac, Ostovich (in a current work-in-progress) takes her defence of Joan even further, viewing her as a distressed gentlewoman, or at least a landowner's daughter, not a bumpkin. Ostovich explores how early modern witches sometimes provide authors with a "concentrated form" through which to respond "to injustice, repression and patriarchal religiosity."[31] Although Ostovich argues that Joan is not a witch, she suggests that Joan should be, given that Joan has sex with a devil. Joan's predicament, the result of male seduction, is one common to women who are blamed for unauthorized sexual activity when it takes two individuals to commit this offence. The biblical angle conventionally states that the devil will forsake Joan once he succeeds in tempting her to sin, but this devil wants to be a "husband" to her, insofar as he can, and a father to their child. By rejecting the devil, Joan refutes all active stereotypes regarding her situation and character. She is not a witch, despite having had sex with a devil, and she

[30] Ibid, 115.
[31] Helen Ostovich, "'A woman's fault': The Merits of Evil in *The Birth of Merlin*," originally written for the international interdisciplinary conference, The Devil in Society in the Pre-Modern World, at the Centre for Reformation & Renaissance Studies, University of Toronto (17-18 Oct. 2008), and subsequently revised for her monograph in progress, *The Face to be Dishonest: Aggressive Women on the Early Modern Stage*.

repents, despite the fact that she seems destined to represent the traditional fallen woman. Although I see the merits of the arguments that view Joan more critically, I think a contextualized interpretation of her character ultimately supports Isaac's and Ostovich's revised critical direction of a new and potentially less patronizing way to interpret Joan's thematic role in the play.

In contrast to the historical texts that discuss Merlin's mother, Rowley's character undergoes a journey of self-discovery, one that helps her reclaim some degree of her generally overlooked (or outright denied) personal agency within the performance. Merlin's mother, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's original account, is a woman of impeccable pedigree and unimpeachable morality, characteristics that become extremely convoluted in Rowley's depiction of the same character. Despite these virtues, she remains a nameless and rather peripheral figure in Geoffrey of Monmouth's text. He identifies her not by direct address nor by any personal characteristics, but rather by her status as the "daughter of the King of Demetia."[32] Geoffrey uses her social rank to confirm her nobility, just as he provides her with a religious vocation to demonstrate her morality. According to Monmouth, Merlin's nameless mother grew up in a nunnery, insulated from the sinful world. Her pregnancy and delivery are miraculous, mirroring the very conception and birth of Christ himself. Obeying Vortigern's demand to know who fathered Merlin, Merlin's mother speaks the following lines to the exiled king:

[32] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 167.

> 'By my living soul, Lord King,' she said, 'and by your living soul, too, I did not have relations with any man to make me bear this child. I know only this: that, when I was in our private apartments with my sister nuns, some one used to come to me in the form of a most handsome young man. He would often hold me tightly in his arms and kiss me. When he had been some little time with me he would disappear, so that I could no longer see him. Many times, too, when I was sitting alone, he would talk with me, without becoming visible; and when he came to see me in this way he would often make love with me, as a man would do, and in that way he made me pregnant. You must decide in your wisdom, my Lord, who was the father of this lad, for apart from what I have told, I have never had relations with a man.'[33]

By this account, Merlin's mother is a passive receptacle, an innocent who remains a blameless pawn of fate. She is a princess by birth, a nun by temperament, and a virgin by intent. Like the Virgin Mary, a higher power visits her and she, in blind obedience, meekly submits to its will. Her only words are those of her confession, which paints her as a figure of perpetual contrition. Geoffrey never specifically identifies Merlin's father as a devil, but from an early modern perspective any birth that attempts to replicate Christ's must have been seen as sacrilegious at best, especially when applied to a pagan figure like Merlin. With her confession now complete and Merlin's mysterious origins now confirmed, Merlin's mother vanishes from Geoffrey's narrative, presumably returning to her nunnery to live out the remainder of her days in isolated contemplation. Her role within Rowley's source text is two-fold: she must physically and then verbally give birth to Merlin to preserve his legacy within the historical record. She has no role beyond these

[33] Ibid, 167-8.

two functions.

In comparison to the saintly and modest woman of Geoffrey's text, Rowley's Joan Goo-too't is a woman of unknown origins who struggles with her sexual desires and expresses conflicting emotions about her situation. Rowley remains vague on the issue of Joan's class status.[34] Regardless of whether she is a peasant "wench" or a country gentlewoman, however, Joan's social status completes a distinct hierarchy within the performance, with Artesia as queen, Constantia and Modestia as noblewomen, and Joan as commoner of some description. Despite these social differences, however, Rowley's male treat Joan and the play's other female characters in an identical manner. Yet, like Merlin's mother in Rowley's source text, Joan has apparently lived a more secluded existence and seems substantially more naive as a result. She lacks the practical knowledge to get a "Father first, and the childe afterwards" (2.1.13-4), according to her sharp-tongued brother. Joan's social inexperience helps contribute to her unfortunate circumstances. Rowley, however, does not condemn Joan for her naivety. Rather, he takes some pains to demonstrate how Joan's inability to respond to exploitation stems from her innate goodness rather than wantonness.

[34] Joan's "Clown" brother serves a satirical purpose within the play and, as Isaac demonstrates, "clowns and fools are just as often in the company of kings as of commoners" (Isaac, 113). The only information Rowley provides us regarding Joan's class status is her brother's reference to her "country breeding" (2.1.12). Rather than definitively casting Joan as a peasant, however, such a comment merely emphasizes that she grew up in a more isolated and rural environment, away from the social enticements of the city.

Both she and her brother, after all, fall victim to a number of con artists throughout the play, most notably Sir Nichodemus Nothing. Their lack of social guile leaves them vulnerable to those who would take advantage of their innocence.

Joan's seduction might initially appear to be a moral transgression of the highest order (and certainly Joan later plays the part of the repentant sinner and confesses), but given the number of other seductions that take place in both *Birth of Merlin* and *Kings of Britain* her actions are not that uncommon. Geoffrey of Monmouth's text provided Rowley with a number of comparable situations to draw on when exploring Joan's situation. In Geoffrey's text both men and spirits assume disguises on a regular basis in order to deceive and seduce women: an incubus seduces Merlin's mother in "the form of a most handsome young man," Uther Pendragon seduces Ygerna in the "likeness of Gorlois," and (perhaps most infamously of all) Mordred seduces Guinevere, after which she flees and takes "her vows among nuns, promising to lead a chaste life."[35] In response to these

[35] Geoffrey of Monmouth, 167-8; 207; 259. In Merlin's final appearance in *The Historyof the Kings of Britain* he helps disguise Uther Pendragon as Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, so that he might have sex with Ygerna, the Duke's wife. After having laid his eyes on Ygerna, nothing could reportedly distract the king from his intentions and, "after a week has gone by, the King's passion for Ygerna became more than he could bear" (206). Calling upon Merlin for assistance, the King enters Ygerna's home in the guise of Gorlois (thanks to Merlin's arts). With her cooperation now guaranteed, Uther Pendragon "spent that night with Ygerna and satisfied his desire by making love with her. He had deceived her by the disguise which he had taken. He had deceived her, too, by the lying things that he

events, Rowley explores notions of male constancy and intent in each of the play's separate plotlines. In the opening scene of the play, Constantia accepts Cador's proposals based on his ability to woo her with words and oaths:

> *Cador* 'Tis the condition sir, her Promise seal'd.
> *Donobert* Ist so, *Constantia*?
> *Constantia* I was content to give him words for oaths,
> He swore so oft he lov'd me.
> *Donobert* That thou believest him?
> *Constantia* He is a man I hope.
> *Donobert* That's in the trial Girl.
> *Constantia* However I am woman, sit.
> *Donobert* The Law's on they side then, sha't have a Husband
> (1.1.10-18)

Constantia accepts Cador's overtures because he repeatedly promises her that he loves her. She takes him at face value. When Modestia fails to do likewise, because she expresses doubts regarding the constancy of men, her father chides her by gently reminding her to be "kinde" to Edwin (1.1.43). Donobert and Edwin dismiss Modestia's fear that a "wife is a dish soon cloys" as a ridiculous notion (1.1.39).

When she emerges on stage at the beginning of act two, however, Joan introduces the worst possible scenario in response to Constantia's earlier

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said to her, things which he planned with great skill" (207). Geoffrey of Monmouth does not mention Merlin again in *Kings of Britain* and Merlin plays no role in Arthur's reign according to this particular source text. Similarly, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's original account, Guinevere lives "out of wedlock" with Mordred after Mordred seizes the crown for himself while Arthur is out of the country (257). Historians credit the poet Chrétien de Troyes with inventing the Arthur / Guinevere / Lancelot love triangle some fifty or so years after Geoffrey of Monmouth published *Kings of Britain*.

assumptions about the male constancy and love, giving increased weight to Modestia's skepticism. Like Constantia, Joan has given in to the desires of her suitor, but in Joan's case the event that Constantia viewed as being almost unfathomable occurs: Joan's suitor breaks faith with her (or at least he seems to), leaving her with no legal recourse.[36] The law, as embodied by Sir Nichodemus Nothing, becomes yet one more "trick" men use to try to beguile and exploit women (3.1.96; 102). Immediately preceding Joan's arrival on stage in 3.1, after all, Donobert congratulates himself for having invented a "trick" to bend Modestia to Edwin's will: "go [Edwin] from me to [Modestia], / Use your best skill my Lord, and if you fail / I have a trick shall do it" (3.1.30-2). Using similar language, Sir Nichodemus promises to "teach" Joan a "trick" to help her legally secure a father for her unborn child (3.1.95-6). When Joan and her brother try to use that "trick" for their own advantage, however, with the Clown proudly asserting "we'l make use of your trick" (3.1.104), Sir Nichodemus scoffs at them: "didst never here of *Nichodemus Nothing*? I am the man" (3.1.111).[37] Tricks, it seems, only create further illusions in a play where episodes of magic and artifice

[36] When audiences discover Joan's lover is a devil they learn that marriage was never a viable option for her in any case. As a devil, he cannot access God's world of sacraments and virtues and therefore can not offer Joan marriage even though he later expresses a desire to be a proper "husband" to her.

[37] There are numerous variations on the Sir Nichodemus figure in the plays of the period. In *The Three Ladies of London* (c. 1581), for example, Sir Nicholas Nemo, whose last name means "no one" in latin, cannot provide charity to Sincerity because he is (quite literally) "no man," despite also being named for the patron saint of giving: Sir Nicholas.

abound. These illusions, however, appear almost exclusively to be the prerogative of men. In contrast, the women gain power by dispelling those illusions. As the play progresses, Rowley continues to demonstrate the folly of Constantia's initial faith in male constancy: Joan's seducer is a devil and Sir Nichodemus (the man Joan tries to proclaim fathered her child) is no one. Rather, men become conjurers who use "tricks" and stratagems to deceive women. Joan's predicament, therefore, justifies Modestia's earlier caution and demonstrates how dangerous faith in male honour can be when put into practice.

Like Modestia before her, who challenged the outside world to demonstrate her religious convictions, Joan engages in a climactic showdown with the devil who seduced her. This conflict provides Joan with an opportunity to triumph over someone who has victimised her, if only for a single moment, before Merlin permanently removes her from the stage. Rowley uses this confrontation to highlight the similarities rather than the difference between the devil's and Merlin's plans concerning Joan's body. After giving birth to Merlin, Joan spends her remaining time on stage repenting and publicly confessing her former misdeeds so that she might find absolution: "In pride of blood and beauty I did live, / My glass the Altar was, my face the Idol, / Such was my peevish love unto myself" (4.1.150-2). When the devil reappears before her once again intent on claiming Joan's body to satisfy his carnal appetites, he provokes a crisis of faith, leaving her struggling to understand why her newly reaffirmed religious

conviction has not protected her. "I had no pride," she insists, "Nor lustful thought about me, to conjure / And call thee to my ruine … I am chang'd" (5.1.28-33). Joan's declaration that she has changed contrasts with the devil's actions as he attempts to repeat his past transgression with Joan. Her words also play into a larger pattern of Rowley's female characters experiencing personal moments of epiphany. Just as Constantia realizes she can no longer meekly submit to male desire and governance, Joan tells the devil that she will not succumb to his will. Although he momentarily appears hurt by Joan's rejection, the devil nonetheless chooses to press his advance, instructing his minions to "claspe" Joan in their "Ebon arms" and "Mount her as high as palled Hecate" (5.1.36-7). Determined to make her permanently his, the devil resolves to "remove her" to some place where she will "ne're … agen … meet" with the world she has hitherto known (5.1.40-1). Only Merlin's timely arrival and rescue save Joan from the devil's intentions. While she has bested him spiritually, through her verbal rejection, her body continues to subject her to danger. Stepping in between his parents, Merlin banishes his father from the stage by imprisoning him within a rock for all eternity. Having secured his father within this inescapable prison, Merlin then proceeds to sequester his mother within a magically erected place that he calls "Merlins bower" (5.1.90), promising her that after she has died he will erect "a Monument" to honour her memory "upon the verdant Plains of Salisbury [i.e., Stonehenge]" (5.2.95-6). Although Merlin's intent is quite different in both

instances, he still chooses to have rocks mark both his mother's and father's final sites of existence. In his father's case, Merlin wishes to make the devil a slave to death, just as the devil himself wishes to do to Merlin when he interferes on Joan's behalf. In response to the devil's threat that he will "on this rock / Stick thee [Merlin] an eternal Monument" (5.1.59-60), Merlin sneers and instead imposes this sentence back upon the devil himself. "Thou first shall taste it," Merlin tells the devil before he makes a "rock [inclose] him" (SD 5.1.73).

In contrast, Merlin appears to want to isolate his mother for her protection (although this motive appears more dubious now given that Merlin had just defeated her tormenter). Like the devil, Merlin first marginalizes Joan and then makes her a monument to commemorate her existence, even though her "monument" will eventually have more positive connotations than the rock that swallowed his father alive. Stonehenge, after all, does transform Joan into the "spiritual mother of the nation," a status that far exceeds her humble origins.[38] He also secludes Joan somewhere peaceful after her many ordeals and promises to create her a sacred circle of standing stones that are open to the sky to represent her immortality. While the play clearly establishes what Merlin's motivations are, it remains silent on how audiences should interpret Joan's response. By juxtaposing these Merlin's similar treatment of his father and mother respectively,

[38] I'm indebted to Alison Findlay, my external examiner, for helping me broaden my appreciation of the more positive aspects of Merlin's decision in contrast to my own reading.

however, Rowley provides us with clues as to how to interpret Joan's silence. The objections she raises in response to the devil's unwanted attentions apply equally to her son's highhanded attempts to control her body. Because she has already emphatically declared that she is "chang'd," there is little else to say, especially given that her male audience seems so unwilling to hear or recognize her voice. Her silence, therefore, becomes a sign of protest, as she stares at her son and slowly comes to terms with his unilateral plans for her. Merlin ultimately judges, tries, and condemns both Joan and his devilish father in an eerily similar way, as the two sequestrations imply. By attributing the building of Stonehenge to Merlin, as a protective circle and memorial for his mom, Rowley does something that is virtually unprecedented in the entire canon of Arthurian lore, according to Isaac.[39] In no other account "is the great structure designated as a tribute and tomb for [Merlin's] mother."[40] In Geoffrey of Monmouth's text, Merlin constructs Stonehenge as a burial monument for King Aurelius. In other sources, Merlin "builds it … as a tribute to … Uter, the Britons who died defending the Kingdom from the Saxons, and even to himself," but never to a woman, let alone the woman who mothered him.[41] Rowley contrasts the permanency of Stonehenge with the impermanency of Joan's presence on stage, just as he contrasted Constantia's initial silence with her sudden reticence in the play's first plotline. If

[39] Isaac, 114.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

any doubts remain regarding Modestia's desire to sacrifice her physical rights in order to gain autonomy over her spiritual life and soul, Joan's exit helps demonstrate the feasibility of this aspiration. Joan no longer has physical standing in the play *per se*, but her spiritual presence remains intact.

Exits and Immaterial Spaces: Artesia

In the final plotline, Artesia (who is, arguably, the play's most clearly defined female antagonist) also faces captivity and confinement at the end of the play. Of the play's four female characters Artesia holds the highest position of power as a noble woman turned queen, and so Rowley arranges to have her sentence be correspondingly greater than the sequestration of the other women, who presumably do not physically suffer following their departures from the stage. She arrives in King Aurelius's court as a political emissary from her brother, General Ostorius, who commands what remains of the recently defeated Saxon army. Artesia's beauty immediately overcomes Aurelius's senses and he eagerly agrees to make peace with the Saxons on the condition that Artesia marry him, a stipulation she accepts. Provided with a unique opportunity to defeat her enemies from within, Artesia "consciously uses her sexual power to destroy Aurelius's kingdom by placing her sexuality between the natural love of two

brothers [Aurelius and Uter]," before dispensing with Aurelius entirely.[42] For her crime, Uter commands that Artesia be buried alive in a small crypt, to starve to death or suffocate, a punishment that mirrors Merlin's treatment of his father, whom he confined within a rock.

Like the women before her, Artesia's eloquence and beauty prove automatic obstacles to male governance. She begins the play operating within a space that already sets her apart by design and elicits either the extreme devotion or the extreme enmity of those around her. While Artesia's mere presence overcomes Aurelius, who applauds her beauty and proclaims that she has an "Angels tongue" (1.2.124), she inspires inversely negative and hostile reactions from the other men on stage, who quickly progress from calling her a "gilded pill" (1.2.88) to a "witch by nature, devil by art" (3.6.88). Artesia's main transgression, however, is that she emerges as a strategic political player and a cunning warrior in her own right. She does not view Aurelius's solution to the British-Saxon war as being a practical one. Instead, she interprets it as an attempt on his part to use her body to signify his larger military conquest of her people.

Artesia, of course, finds her doppelgänger image in the figure of Renwein, daughter of Hengist. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's original text, Vortigern the usurper immediately falls in love with Hengist's daughter when he first beholds her at a royal banquet. Impatient to enjoy her charms, Vortigern sets about

[42] Karpinska, 126.

haggling with Hengist over what he can give him in exchange for Renwein's body. The men quickly strike the bargain. Vortigern takes Renwein as his wife so that he might "make love with this pagan woman" and Hengist takes possession of the province of Kent.[43] Although Vortigern has already committed regicide by this point in Geoffery of Monmouth's text, Monmouth implies that Vortigern's lust for Renwein represents the proverbial last nail in the coffin of both his political career and future spiritual prospects. Fearing the contamination of their faith, the people of Britain abandon Vortigern. Monmouth stresses that the English people wanted to preserve their ancient bloodlines because already "no one could tell who was a pagan and who was a Christian, for the pagans were associating with their daughters and their female relations."[44]

Lust at first sight, a woman's body in exchange for land, the marital union of a Christian man and pagan woman that results in civil unrest, all find their match in Artesia's plotline, but the differences rather than the similarities ultimately reveal how Rowley critiques broader patterns of hegemonic masculinity. Renwein is a pawn in Rowley's source text, as one man passes over possession of her to another man. She has no voice in the transaction and, while Geoffrey of Monmouth spends a great deal of time discussing the spiritual and political ramifications of the match for Vortigern, he remains neglectfully silent

[43] Geoffrey of Monmouth, 160.
[44] Ibid, 161.

on Renwein's response to the sudden union. Geoffrey instead describes Renwein as a demonic presence that threatens the blood purity of the British court: "Satan entered his heart, so that he fell in love with Renwein."[45]

Rowley's Artesia, however, proves herself to be anything but passive and instead her ability to outmanoeuvre her opponents manifests itself through her dealings with Prince Uter. After a chance encounter with Artesia when she travels to the royal court, Uter (like his brother) becomes consumed with longing for her and spends months attempting to locate and discover her identity. Some scholars have compared Uter's chance obsession with Artesia to Joan's rash desire for the devil who impregnates her. Karpinska, for example, argues that both "Joan and Uter wander the forest looking for essentially the same thing: the devil in two forms, one a gentleman, one a gentlewoman."[46] While this contrast of situation proves thematically fruitful, there is another way to view these paralleled events. In the devil's case, he satisfies his desires by sexually seducing Joan. In Uter's case, however, Artesia physically eludes him and thwarts his desire, although she deliberately provokes that desire at the same time. She also breaks with the traditional outcome that results from such situations. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's text, the voyeuristic and lustful male gaze usually finds gratification: the succubus seduces Merlin's mother, Uther Pendragon wins Ygraine, and Mordred commits

[45] Ibid.
[46] Karspinska, 126.

adultery with Guinevere. In contrast with these other women, however, Artesia immediately distinguishes herself as someone capable of resisting male desire. When she agrees to marry Aurelius the audience knows she does so on her own terms and no one else's.

Artesia's interactions with Uter reveal more than just her ability to thwart his desire however. She not only proves herself capable of resisting his attempts to seduce her, but also demonstrates herself to be the more strategic player of the two. When Uter finally returns to his brother's court, he discovers that Aurelius has married Artesia, the object of both brothers' all-consuming lust. Faced with this unwelcome realisation Uter struggles to come to terms with his longing. He immediately begins trying to dissect Artesia's actions to look for any sign of weakness he can exploit in order to diminish her value both in his own estimation and his brother's. He resolves to test her character: "I will confer with her, and if I finde / Lust hath given Life to Envy in her minde, / I may prevent the danger" (3.1.372-4). Not only does Uter fail to grasp the irony in his intention to judge her potential for lust (given his actions thus far in the play), but Artesia also proves herself to be one step ahead of Uter in this device. Instead of falling victim to his attempt to seduce her, she more actively resists him by literally employing the same trick he wants to use against her against him. Even as Uter discusses his stratagem with the audience, Artesia (whose thoughts and plans we are not similarly privy to) sends Uter a gift via one of her gentlewomen. Evaluating the

gift, Uter immediately takes it as evidence to condemn Artesia's honesty and further support his own misogyny:

Gentlewoman	It is an artificial crab, Sir.
Prince	A creature that goes backward.
Gentlewoman	True, from the way it looks.
Prince	There is no moral in it alludes to her self?
Gentlewoman	'Tis your construction gives to that sir, she's a woman.
Prince	And like this, May use her legs, and eyes two several ways. (2.2.331-7)

The Gentlewoman, Artesia's agent in these proceedings, remains purposefully vague on what the crab represents until Uter makes specific reference to Artesia using her body in more than one way. His own underlying desire for Artesia makes him interpret her gift as a sexual invitation. On cue, the Gentlewoman encourages Uter in this belief. Agreeing to a secret rendezvous, Artesia has Uter incriminate himself as he carries out his own charade of seduction. When she asks him to give voice to his feelings Uter obliges, proudly swearing that he is "resolved, no brother, no man breathing, / Were he my bloods begetter, should withhold / Me from your love" (3.6.45-7). Although Uter would have the audience believe his words are a ruse, meant to test Artesia's constancy, they merely reinforce the statements he has been making since the start of the play. Uter attempts to "trick" Artesia and use illusion to beguile her, but her power, like that of Constantia, Modestia, and Joan, lies in her ability to dispel that illusion and reveal it for the falsehood it is. Smiling, Artesia pounces on his words, gently

teasing him that he "speak[s] a Lover like a Prince" before calling out "Treason, treason" (3.6.50-1). Artesia's actions inspire Uter's immediate revulsion, who seems blind to the irony of his situation, in that she has done no more than he himself resolved to do. Renouncing all of his former regard for her, Uter swears that the "Devil shall wed [her] first" before he ever holds her high in his esteem again (3.6.70). In unison, Uter's supporters begin to abuse Artesia, saying she is "as false as hell" and a "witch" for sure (3.6.88). Artesia succeeds in setting brother against brother by using her body as a site for male contention and rivalry. She succeeds in destroying the brotherly love Aurelius and Uter feel for each other, an accomplishment that certainly foreshadows larger events yet to come within the Arthurian legend. If Joan's sin is succumbing to male lust, Artesia's (alternatively) is resisting it. Yet, despite their different response to male desire, Rowley's male characters treat Joan and Artesia in essentially the same manner, as they verbally denounce both women and condemn them as witches, with only their brothers, Clown and Ostorius repestively, valuing them.

In the closing moments of the play Uter has Artesia brought before him to face his judgement. At this time she has already succeeded in outwitting him and killing Aurelius. Like Joan la Pucelle (in *Henry VI*) Artesia comes before her captors radiating her defiance and, despite the fact that she is the one who is on trial, she retains a great deal of control over the ensuing events:

Edol Let my Sentence stand for all, take her hence,
And stake her carcase in the burning Sun,

Till it be parcht and dry, and then fley off
Her wicked skin, and stuff the pelt with straw
To be shown up and down at Fairs and Markets
.....

Artesia Ha, ha, ha.
Edol Dost laugh *Erichtho*?
Artesia Yes, at thy poor invention,
Is there no better torture-monger?
Donobert Burn her to dust.
Artesia That's a Phoenix death, and glorious.
Edol I, that's to good for her.
Prince Alive she shall be buried circled in a wall,
Thou murdess of a King, there starve to death.
Artesia Then i'll starve death when he comes for his prey,
And i'th'mean time i'll live upon your curses.
(5.2.52-68)

The men "impose a triple barrier between Artesia and the rest of society: she is to be starved …, buried, and 'circled in a wall' all at once."[47] Artesia, however, repeatedly thwarts their attempts to threaten and intimidate her, manipulating their words to further express her own defiance, much to the men's displeasure. Although Edol, a British general, begins Artesia's trial with a statement that implies control and order – "Let *my* Sentence stand for all" – it quickly disintegrates into anarchy as the men yell out increasingly brutal suggestions for Artesia's extermination. The men want to scare her and they openly resent her ability to deny them that degree of control. With each suggestion the men make Artesia finds a way to twist their words to suit her own agenda, first by mocking their lack of imagination, then by envisioning her rebirth as a phoenix from the

[47] Johnson, paragraph 11.

ashes, and finally by boasting that instead of suffering starvation she will "starve death when he comes." Artesia "further disempowers her captors by turning their 'curses' into a 'diet' she can 'live upon'" during her confinement.[48] She takes spiteful pleasure in her ability to best her opponents verbally, even as they physically restrain her. Although the men seem content in their final decision to bury her alive, Johnson is right to note that "Artesia's final claim that she will 'starve death' leaves open the mysterious possibility that she will elude death entirely."[49]

Female Magic, Procreation, Suppressed Histories

Although each of these plotlines might initially appear to share little in common, given that Modestia and Constantia are virginal noblewomen who decline matrimony, Joan is an unwed, pregnant woman who desperately searches for the father of her child, and Artesia is a cunning politician who uses her sexuality to defeat her opponents, Rowley ultimately emphasizes the similarities rather than the differences shared by these women. Regardless of their varied circumstances and choices, each plot line concludes by attempting to isolate the woman in question from the action. Each of the plotlines, therefore, culminates in episodes of gender-specific violence, as the men try to suppress and regulate the

[48] Ibid, paragraph 21.
[49] Ibid, paragraph 31.

unruly bodies of their female counterparts. If Rowley had allowed this suppression to succeed, the play would be a tragedy indeed. As it stands, however, Rowley does something much more interesting as the marginalized voices of his female characters find an unlikely space for self-expression. Rowley accomplishes this by establishing two forms of magic in his play and he has his characters (with only one or two possible exceptions) gravitate toward a specific type based on their gender. The first type of magic is pure spectacle and Rowley dramatizes it through the Devil's magical disguises, Proximus's conjuring of Hector, and Merlin's apparition-based prophecy at the end of the play. Smaller episodes, such as Uter's attempt to deceive Artesia, Donobert's wedding masque, and Sir Nichodemus's evaluation of the law, further serve to show men in close affinity with visual magic displays. These events are what prompted Tyrrell, in the 1850s, to dismiss magic in *The Birth of Merlin* as being "too palpable, too material."[50] The magical authority of these episodes ultimately lies in their ability to entertain both on-stage and off-stage audiences. Merlin conjures apparitions for Uter's "joy and wonder" (5.2.93), Proximus performs for Aurelius's "greater happiness" (2.2.175), and Donobert orchestrates Constantia's wedding masque to "take" Modestia. In contrast to this first type of magic, however, Rowley establishes a second more subtle variety, one that opposes viewing magic as a frivolous spectacle that exists merely to deceive the senses. The power of speech

[50] Isaac, 110.

provides a direct point of contrast to the power of sight in the play. Episodes in which Rowley's male characters describe female speech as being magical in nature abound: Modestia's "powerful" words becomes evidence, according to her father, that her soul is "inchanted with infected Spells" (3.2.96); the Clown describes Joan as having "bewitch[ed]" him after she pleads with him not to abandon her (3.1.134); and, finally, Aurelius credits Artesia with possessing an "Angels tongue" (1.2.124), while Uter alternatively recognizes that Artesia's "words are dangerous" (3.6.5). While "male" magic relies heavily on spectacle and gesture, the women alternatively find power in their ability to speak against deception and unmask false illusions. They ultimately dispel overt magical acts rather than create them and, by making magic absent, the women in turn substantiate their own magical authority. Although Aurelius believes that "words want force / To make deeds void" (2.2.168-9), the women repeatedly prove him wrong by demonstrating that their words can magically deflate tangible demonstrations of wizardry: Modestia sees through the illusion of the marriage "masque," Joan the Devil's disguise, and Artesia Uter's trap.

Each plotline, therefore, follows a virtually identical course when it comes to the play's overall thematic treatment of gender and magic. Beginning with the Modestia and Constantia plot, Rowley immediately establishes this basic difference between men and women for his audience by providing them with yet another way to understand Constantia's choice to give Cador "words" in response

his "oaths" (1.1.12). Although I previously considered this passage in relation to male constancy, it also highlights the different arenas in which men and women express themselves and furthers Rowley's divided characterization of magic more generally. Continuing in this vein, Rowley has Constantia describe Modestia's "words" as "powerful" (3.2.95) during the conversion scene, while (in contrast) she dismisses Cador's and Donobert's "words" as being nothing more than "air" (3.2.142). The more Modestia speaks, the more disconcerted the men become. Rowley repeatedly associates female magic not with overt acts (as he did with his male characters), but with their speech. In response, the men set about demonizing the women's voices in an attempt to undermine their authority. Donobert, for example, commands Constantia to "*Hear* her no more" and declares that Modestia must be "bewitcht with Error" (3.2.11-12; my emphasis added). In the same breath, Donobert acknowledges the power of Modestia's words only to try and undercut them, as he accuses Modestia of speaking "error" rather than truth.

Following in this pattern, Rowley characterizes both Joan's and Artesia's speech as magical before having his male characters persecute them. When we first meet Uter, he threatens to cut out Joan's tongue (and her brother's) because Joan asks him whether or not he "knows" her: "Death, I will cut their tongues out for this blasphemy, / Strumpet, villain, where have you ever seen me?" (2.1.108-9). Although Joan's brother has previously implied, to Uter's face, that that the prince must have had sex with Joan, Uter only becomes violent when she

addresses him. According to Uter, Joan's language is "blasphemous," a word that not only emphasizes Uter's opinion of Joan as a moral deviant, but also implies that her speech offends God. Uncomfortable with continuing to operate in her realm of words, Uter immediately brings the conversation back into an area where he feels superior. "Where have you ever *seen* me," he demands as he once again asserts control over sight and spectacle to discredit Joan and make her feel more unsure of herself. Continuing to berate Joan, Uter warns her that he will physically force her to turn her words (i.e., her powers) against herself if she should continue to speak to him. Advancing menacingly towards her, Uter threatens to make her "curse" herself "for this temptation" (2.1.111). The targeted nature of his threats against Joan demonstrates that Uter recognizes that her words possess a certain magical authority. He also takes comfort, however, in the knowledge that he can physically prevent her from speaking further if he needs to do so. He reassures himself by threatening to mutilate her tongue, thus suppressing her powers, if he fears her retaliation.

The Artesia plotline also explores how her subtle magic triumphs over the men's more flamboyant and ostentatious displays. Aurelius immediately recognizes the bewitching effect Artesia has on him and, although she is physically beautiful, he credits her voice as being the locus of her power: "She has an Angels tongue – speak still" (1.2.124). When Aurelius attempts to defend Artesia to his people, he tries to create another spectacle to beguile their senses,

telling them to "cast but [their] eye / upon this beauty" and forget everything else (1.2.197-8). Like Donobert, who tries to create a spectacle so pleasing to Modestia's eye that she will change her mind and marry Edwin, Aurelius tries to make his people see only what he wants them to see. The Hermit, however, the only male character in the play who seems capable of seeing through magical illusions, recognizes Aurelius' attempts to blind his people with earthly vanities. "It is thy weakness," the Hermit laments, "brings thy misery" (1.2.203). This response paints Aurelius' faith in outward appearances (rather than Artesia) as being his true failing. Like Aurelius, however, Artesia's enemies also identify her speech as being magical. When attempting to test Artesia's marital constancy, for example, Uter privately marvels that her "words are dangerous" (3.4.5), while she more confidently identifies Uter's speech as mere "flattery" (3.4.1). Having established this pattern once again for his audience, Rowley then allows Edol, as Uter did earlier, to declare that he would have killed the last woman capable of bearing offspring rather than allow Artesia to marry Aurelius: "had I been by, / And all the women of the world were barren, / She should have died e're he had married her" (2.2.77-9). For Edol, committing female genocide would have been preferable to seeing Artesia become Aurelius' wife. In each plotline, therefore, Rowley situates women's magical powers in their words, rather than in physical displays. Their magic lies in dispersing illusions rather than creating them. The true triumph of the performance resides in the women's understated power, as

their marginalized voices find an unlikely space for self-expression away from the violence of the material world.

Rowley adds weight to the women's magical authority by having their deeds exemplify the same philosophy upheld by Merlin himself in Geoffrey of Monmouth's original text. In *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Merlin preaches magical restraint and abhors overt supernatural displays. He represents a very self-disciplined take on the traditional magician figure and embraces a very strict doctrine of non-excess when it comes to using his talents. When King Aurelius reportedly "received Merlin gaily and ordered him to prophesy the future, for he wanted to hear some marvels from him," for example, Merlin declines.[51] His reasons for doing so are very specific: "Mysteries of that sort cannot be revealed," Merlin tells Aurelius, "except where there is the most urgent need for them. If I were to utter them as an entertainment, or where there was not need at all, the spirit which controls me would forsake me in a moment of need."[52] Merlin consciously refuses to treat his magic frivolously for entertainment purposes. In contrast, Rowley's Merlin seizes any opportunity (no matter how trivial) to showcase his talents. Merlin's magic becomes inseparable from visual acts: a falling stone quickly follows his prophecy of Proximus's death, two dragons appear after he "strikes his wand" (4.1.109 s.d.), the Clown's mumbled attempts

[51] Geoffrey of Monmouth, 196.
[52] Ibid.

to talk signal Merlin's success at magically silencing him (4.5.84), and King Arthur's masque ensures both Merlin's on-stage and off-stage audience know he speaks the truth regarding Britain's future. In each instance, Rowley confirms Merlin's magic by creating corresponding visual spectacles. Inversely, Rowley's women adopt the image of restrained and understated magic initially upheld by Geoffrey of Monmouth. The women's magic, therefore, seems reliant on absence, as they cut through illusions and undermine visual displays. Only threats of physical violence seem to destabilize their magical authority, but the conclusiveness of their final exits resolves this issue. Their magic is inscrutable and transcendent, with no concrete limitations. As each woman leaves the stage, tongue and body intact, her magic overcomes its last physical restraint and secures her a symbolic victory.

Procreation, Fertility Rights, and Historical Legacies: A Response to Absence

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Rowley's female characters embrace both a physical and magical absence to resist traditional modes of male authority and create an opposing space where they can uninhibitedly express themselves. Although Rowley does not permit the audience direct access to this space, leaving it largely metaphorical, he nonetheless provides us with a number of clear indicators as to how we should interpret it. In the women's absence, however, the audience's focus (out of necessity) shifts to the men. In the wake of

the women's departures from the stage a new series of parallel events arise. Rowley's male characters deliberately try to erase the women's past contributions from memory, as they ironically band together to congratulate themselves on their new prospects. They envision a future free of feminine contagion, one where they can pass their titles and lands directly to one another, without the inconvenience of female intermediaries. The men's self-congratulating, however, becomes just one more illusion they create, one more false spectacle they perpetuate as, without women, their line of succession is dead. Rowley ends each plotline, therefore, by compelling the audience to perform the same action that the women have previously performed on our behalf. We become the dispellers of illusion and secure the women their final victory within the play, as we confirm the justice of their voices.

Constantia and Modestia's absence may well be self-imposed, but it does not prevent the male characters from trying to undermine their choice, and much of the violence the women suffer happens subsequent to their actual departure from the stage. In their absence the men now have free rein during the next two and a half acts to challenge and undercut the sisters' actions. Rowley denies his audiences the opportunity to see Constantia and Modestia enter the monastery first-hand. Instead, Donobert (who has become his daughters' harshest critic) informs us of the event, bemoaning that the women are now "lost" (5.2.8). Stressing *his* interpretation of the events even further, Donobert attempts to deny

his daughters the spiritual permanence they longed for by declaring that his "memory shall lose them now for ever" (5.2.16). Audiences almost immediately witness the truth of Donobert's statement as he deliberately turns his thoughts from the girls to Edwin and Cador, whom he now eagerly embraces as his newly adopted sons and heirs. With the women gone, the men congratulate themselves as they revel in their ability to secure the line of succession independent of female bodies. Donobert rejoices in this discovery and appears almost giddy as he realizes that he does not need his daughters to obtain the marital alliances he had hoped to secure at the beginning of the play: "For by the Honor of my Fathers House, / I'le part my estate most equally betwixt you" (5.2.35-6). Women, Donobert concludes, end up being completely superfluous to the situation.

This situation replicates itself in the Joan plotline. After Merlin pronounces Joan's fate, she becomes a distinct source of silence in the play. She does not respond to Merlin, nor do we witness her brother inquire after the reason for her sudden absence. Throughout the play, Clown has been Joan's constant companion and indeed, he has shown himself to be more merciful and forgiving than Merlin in his treatment of Joan. Despite the numerous jokes he makes at her expense, Clown confesses to being "bewitched" by Joan and that he "cannot finde in [his] heart to forsake her" (3.1.134-5). Regardless of the hardships the pair endure, Clown remains by Joan's side. His silence in response to her absence, to say the least, is puzzling. The only line he speaks after her departure, however,

holds great significance. Uter, celebrating his new kingship in the wake of Aurelius' death, happily pronounces his confidence in Merlin's abilities: "Merlin will us and our fair Kingdom keep" (5.2.40). Uter upholds Merlin as a guardian (or father figure) who will protect both Uter's physical body and the kingdom more generally from all future strife. Donobert passed his lands directly to his newly adopted sons, but Uter reverses this paternal relationship. Uter, as son, places his confidence in a protective father figure who will help guide and shape his future prosperity as a king. Hearing Uter's words the Clown speaks his final line in the play: "As his Uncle lives, I warrant you" (5.2.41). The Clown swears by *his* life that Merlin will remain a true and just councillor to Uter. Building on Uter's prioritization of male relationships, the Clown situates himself as Merlin's parental figure by stressing their familial connection. They build an unbroken chain as Merlin's future protection of Uter becomes juxtaposed against the Clown's past protection of Merlin. By specifically using the word *lives* the Clown's comment also thinly hints at Joan's absence which, in contrast to the Clown's life, may imply Joan's death. The Clown's brief comment, therefore, points to the men's continued existence in contrast to the women's disappearances. As was the case in the Donobert plotline, Uter, Merlin, and the Clown all reaffirm their friendships and forge new connections with one another as they look towards their futures.

After Artesia's departure in the play's final plotline, Rowley once again

has his male characters band together to celebrate their collective unity and revel in thoughts of their future prospects. In this culminating event of the play, Rowley draws particular attention to the moment by explicitly linking it to notions of magic and illusion, so that the audience cannot help but draw the comparisons Rowley would have them make. Once Edol orders "away with her" (5.2.69), Rowley's male characters stop thinking about Artesia, despite the fact that she continues to speak following this high-handed dismissal. Her name is not mentioned and, by all appearances, the men forget her the moment she leaves the stage. Instead, they focus on establishing brotherly bonds of love and support. Turning to Merlin, Uter asks him why he "stand[s] apart" (5.2.72) and if he will employ his "divining art" to "satisfie / Some part of my desires" (5.2.74-5). Merlin immediately seizes on this final opportunity to demonstrate his magical powers, announcing that he will, "in visual apparitions, / Present you Prophecies which shall concern / Succeeding Princes, which my Art shall raise" (5.2.88-90). Merlin paints himself as a creator figure: his arts "shall raise" future generations of "succeeding Princes" through the summoning of "visual apparitions." Merlin becomes the agent through which Uter sees his crown pass from generation to generation. Arthur begins Merlin's masque and Constantine ends it, allowing Uter to bask in the security of his future longevity.

In contrast to Merlin's male-centric vision of England's future that guarantees Uter his continued historical relevancy, the women's permanency or

impermanency within these events is less clear. Even as the women vanish from within the play, Merlin's closing masque also ejects them from events yet to come. No Guinevere exists in Merlin's masque to test the bonds of brotherhood and subvert male authority. By removing her female predecessors, it seems, the men simultaneously remove Guinevere from the events being chronicled before she even comes into existence. In the closing moments of the play, therefore, unofficial histories come into conflict with official ones and Rowley leaves his audience to decide which voices should be given historical relevancy.

Chapter Three: Appearing Absent: "Material Memory" and Magical Identity in William Shakespeare's *Othello* and Ben Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd*[1]

> "O who is yonder," quoth Little John,
> "That now comes over the lee?
> An arrow I will at her let flie,
> So like an old witch looks she."
>
> "O hold thy hand, hold thy hand," said Robin then,
> "And shoot not thy arrows so keen;
> I am Robin Hood, thy master good,
> And quickly it shall be seen."[2]

The subject matter of the final chapter of my dissertation brings my discussion of absence full circle: from confronting absence in chapter one, to becoming absent in chapter two, to finally seeming to be absent or appearing absent in chapter three. Throughout my dissertation thus far, I have discussed characters who directly influence how the magical absences that threaten to consume their identities should be understood. Bel-Anna (performed by Queen Anna of Denmark) in *The Masque of Queens* and Mistresses Ford and Page in *The*

[1] I am indebted to Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass for the phrase "material memory." Their book, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, 2003), contributes to my reading of Maudlin's belt throughout this chapter.

[2] Anon, "Robin Hood and the Bishop" in *Robin Hood: A Collection of Poems, Songs, and Ballads*, John Mathew Gutch and John Hicklin (eds), 140-3 (London, 1866), 141-2. This passage is also quoted by Lois Potter in *Playing Robin Hood: The Legend as Performance in Five Centuries* (Canbury NJ, 1998), 94.

Merry Wives of Windsor actively confront their absent (and witch-like) doppelgängers in order to challenge their society's prejudices and reaffirm their personal integrity in the face of such unseeable threats. In contrast, the women in *The Birth of Merlin* use their stage time not to reform their on-stage community, but to teach audiences how to interpret their final exits. Through their various reactions to the process of being made absent, these women help us to understand that, by embracing their imminent physical enclosure, they maintain autonomy over their inner selves. At the end of the previous chapter I suggested that the women's final triumph, in the wake of their respective departures from the stage, was that their absences forced us to recognise their function within the performance as dispellers of illusion. We alone, as the audience, are left to question the validity of the supposedly idyllic future put forward by Rowley's male characters at the end of the play. In doing so, we carry on in the women's footsteps and keep their memories alive long after their physical disappearance from the stage.

Perhaps the one nagging question, or inescapable problem, that remains, however, is do the women's legacies in *The Birth of Merlin* provide any permanent voice in the larger historical arc of the play? True, their final moments on stage radiate with an undeniable magical authority and righteous conviction (as each woman, in turn, musters her courage and makes her final plunge into nothingness), but as soon as they depart, the men re-write events to suit a

distinctly patriarchal agenda and we, the audience, disperse. In a play about history, memory, and longevity then, the women's stories seem fated to fade into obscurity. Very little remains, after all, to commemorate them except the audience's memories, and even these might be put aside once the play ends. How then do early modern women pass on knowledge to future generations and keep their remembrances alive not for a single moment in time, but for eternity? While early modern historical texts frequently suppress female voices in their official accounts much in the fashion Rowley critiques, the drama of the period reveals that other early modern playwrights regularly experimented with alternative traditions through which female voices found expression, particularly in relation to their material culture.

While the focus of this chapter will largely center on Shakespeare's *Othello* and Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd*, plays that I will introduce in more detail shortly, one must first understand the broader connection between women and their possessions in the drama of the period. Thomas Heywood, for example, in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (c. 1603), juxtaposes his examination of women's property against the notion that women *were* property. In Heywood's play, John Frankford's over-trusting nature prompts him to be too lackadaisical in the management of his household, at least according to early modern strictures. Frankford confesses to the audience that he "prefers" his close friend Wendell "to a second place / In [his] opinion" (4.34-5) and he generously invites Wendell to

"use my table and my purse" as though they were "yours" (4.65-6). Frankford's invitation carries with it immediate and unfortunate implications for his wife Anne, whom the play characterizes as being lumped in with Frankford's other worldly property.[3] At the first temptation Wendell persuades Anne to engage in an affair with him, an event that strengthens the idea that by granting Wendell permission to use his material possessions, Frankford also unknowingly grants Wendell permission to use his wife. This dehumanizing comparison leaves Anne both a victim of fate and a frustratingly passive figure who lacks individual agency outside of her role as Frankfort's spouse. Humiliated and angry, Frankford promises Anne that while he will not "martyr thee / Nor mark thee for a strumpet" (13.154-5), he will "kill [her], even with kindness" (13.157). Generosity is a two-edged blade in this play and even as Frankford "kindly" promises to spare Anne's life, he assures her that she will die nonetheless. Instead, he tells Anne that she should take her possessions and leave:

> Take with thee all thy gowns, and all thy apparel;
> Leave nothing that did ever call thee mistress,
> Or by whose sight being left here in the house
> I may remember such a woman by.
> Choose thee a bed and hangings for a chamber;
> Take with thee everything that hath thy mark,
> And get thee to my manor seven miles off,

[3] In the play's secondary plot, Sir Charles also treats his sister Susan, whom he describes as being "one rich gift," as a commodity with which he can "pay back all [his] debt" (10.123-4). "[Tricking]" her up in "gay attire" and "ornaments," he treats Susan's body, and more specifically her virginity, as a good that he can barter with in order to settle his financial problems (14.1-2).

Where live. (13.160-7)

As Frankford inventories his material loses, Anne's body becomes just one more entry, one more "thing," he instructs his servants to remove. Beginning with those items that exist in closest proximity to her body (her clothes), he systematically moves outwards as he lists everything she should take with her. He characterizes her existence as being dependant upon sight, and more particularly upon *his* ability to see her. If he cannot see her, he suggests, or the "things" that he associates with her, then he will be able to erase her from his recollection. *His* kindness, *his* sight, *his* memory. He does not view her as possessing individual agency beyond the connection she shares with him.

Frankford's attempt to systematically remove Anne from his home, however, leaves behind a casualty: her lute. Upon discovering the forgotten item, Frankford becomes tormented by a flash of sudden memories. Frankford (who previously stressed Anne's purely visual nature) instead becomes overcome with memories of her voice. "Oft," he cries, "hath she made this melancholy wood … Speak sweetly many a note" (15.18-20). Unable to cope with the emotions these memories provoke within him, he quickly commands that the lute be sent after her, a reunion that prompts Anne to experience her own epiphany. Echoing her husband's earlier lines, Anne remembers that she has a voice and that she "Oft" in the past used the lute to sing (16.17). Although both Anne and the lute might be metaphorically "out of tune" (16.18), according to her own confession, Anne still

decides to play the instrument one final time before ordering her servants to break it. The music becomes the model whereby Anne takes control of her fate. Beautiful and evanescent, Anne's music draws tears of empathy from both her servants and Wendell, who watches her performance in secret. Even as her husband attempts to visually erase her, therefore, Anne's music allows her to infiltrate the memories of others, to have her voice remembered even after Frankford's attempts to silence her and her physical departure from the stage. By breaking the lute, Anne assumes a sort of limited agency over her death. Not only does she expose her husband's "kindness" for the hypocrisy it really is, but she also models her own end after the lute's. Like her music, Anne turns her death into a performance, one in which she, music-like, will gradually fade away to the tears of onlookers. Rather than simply allowing Frankford to serve as her moral judge and executioner, Anne undergoes an informal trial of her own, where she both speaks in her own defense (by playing the lute) and sentences herself to death (by breaking it). While Frankford has already condemned Anne, she enacts this process a second time, eclipsing his earlier judgement. Although the breaking of the lute functions as an act of self-punishment, as the instrument whereby she finds her voice and resolve becomes lost to future generations, it still provides her with a model whereby to reclaim her identity. Although it would seem that Heywood's play falls into a similar model as Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin*, in that neither Anne's daughter nor her daughter's daughter will ever inherit the lute,

his play reveals the possibilities material "things" offered women when it comes to preserving their memories.

Nor does Heywood's play offer us an isolated example of the profound connection women often shared with their material culture in the drama of the period. In Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday, or the Gentle-Craft* (c. 1599) the shoes that Ralph makes for his wife, Jane, become an enduring symbol that helps to reunite the couple after they are tragically separated from each other. Through it all, Jane's shoes, embroidered with her initials, become a symbol of their enduring love and her eternal faithfulness. The play draws a deliberate comparison between Jane's "soul" (i.e., her constancy in love) and the "soles" of her shoes, as both become worn down after the army forcibly conscripts her husband into service and sends him overseas to France, leaving her to fend for herself. Alone, Jane becomes an artisan, like her husband before her, and finds employment in a sempster's shop as a seamstress. Weaving and embroidering garments of her own to sell, Jane consoles herself in Ralph's absence by channelling the power of the shoes she wears and immersing herself in textile production. When Hammon (a wealthy, though decidedly dishonest individual) sees her through her shop window, he voyeuristically watches Jane as she works, developing an instant obsession with her: "How prettily she works. O, pretty hand! / O, Happy work" (12.13-14). Envying the cloth she touches, Hammon's "love" for Jane arises as much from her person as it does her creative prowess as a

seamstress, to the point where he envies the very material that she works with. Deceiving her, Hammon sinks to the lowest possible methods to win Jane's hand in marriage, including making her think Ralph is dead. In an attempt to sever the connection she shares with Ralph and make her fully his own, Hammon first removes her from her shop and then orders one of his men to take Jane's shoes to a shoemaker, so that a new pair might be made for her. Miraculously, the shoemaker the servants end up approaching is none other than Ralph, who immediately recognizes the shoes as belonging to Jane. In a plot twist reminiscent of a Cinderella fairytale, the shoes become like Ariadne's thread, which Jason uses to guide himself from the minotaur's cave. Using them to guide him, Ralph navigates the streets of London and finds his lost wife, saving her only moments before she enters the church to marry Hammon. The shoes' ability to endure all obstacles allows the play's present to reclaim its past, as husband and wife renew their marriage vows and leave the stage hand-in-hand.

Both *A Woman Killed With Kindness* and *The Shoemaker's Holiday* experiment with notions of material memory and magical identity in their respective plots. In a play that deliberately tries to suppress notions of female agency, for example, Anne Frankford uses her lute to overcome this obstacle and speak, as she preserves her memory in the minds of others through music. While her husband's reaction to discovering the forgotten lute demonstrates its power independent of Anne's physical presence, her subsequent music recital allows us

to experience this magic first-hand. Even the most intractable heart melts at the beauty of Anne's performance, as the music serves as a religious confession whereby Anne makes peace both with her maker and her immanent death. Anne uses the lute to transcend her present reality and seek spiritual guidance. While she previously infused the lute with this power through her clever "fingers" (15.14), audiences now witness her recover it within herself as she plays her instrument one final time. Identity reclaimed, she disposes of the instrument entirely and models her death after the music she just created. Both beautiful and ephemeral, she too chooses a death that will symbolically have her fade away like the notes of her song. When her brother, roused in anger and contempt, beholds her in the play's final scene even his callous heart succumbs to sympathy: "I came to chide you, but my words of hate / Are turned to pity and compassionate grief" (17.63-4). Similarly, in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, Jane's shoes bridge the gap between past and present, memory and oblivion, the material and the non-material. Jane's connection with her shoes allows her to channel their creative powers, as she becomes a sempster who survives in Ralph's absence by sewing and embroidering material. Although a vast distance separates Jane and Ralph, the shoes serve a dual purpose, first keeping Ralph symbolically alive and present for Jane, as she strives to support herself while he is overseas, and then reciprocating this gesture by keeping her alive for him, when he returns from war and does not know where she is. Created by Ralph and worn by Jane, the shoes with their

embroidered letters and worn "soles" join the couple together, even as the hardships and cruelties of their world attempt to drive them apart. In both plays meaning becomes imposed on the objects through the tenacity, conviction, and even love of those who possess them. These are not just mere props. They possess larger meaning for both the characters who interact with them and for the audience who watches, spellbound by their mystical qualities. In both plays, women use these "things" to circumvent unequal power hierarchies and prevent their identities from being stripped from them.

In this final chapter, therefore, I intend to pick up where I left off at the conclusion of chapter two and examine female legacies within theatrical contexts revealing how absent female voices resist being forgotten and continue to manifest themselves within the plays of the period. Once physical absence becomes an absolute, how do female traditions continue to find self-expression? In an attempt to answer this precise question, I consider how such female-created, magical objects as the handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello* and the belt in Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd* resist the absence of their female creators and continue to provide physically absent or dead women with magical agency. With strong female historical traditions commonly denied to women I consider the uneasy impact female "things" (particularly those related to textile production) continue to have in plays where notions of ocular proof and accountability are vital to the stability of masculine honour.

Othello's Handkerchief: A Tragedy in the Making

Early modern playwrights were not oblivious to the magical and metaphorical opportunities weaving and textile production provided, as the plays of the period can attest. Early modern drama frequently explores the complexity between women and needlework, offering a plethora of different takes on the relationships women share with the garments they wear. Textile production, after all, was often viewed as a feminine art and carried with it certain supernatural qualities. It often provided women with a canvas on which they could create their own narratives, as they wove individual strands together to create an overarching picture. The connection between textile production and storytelling is so intrinsic that both words derive from the same Latin root. "*Text* and *Textile*," Rebecca Olson writes, both come from *textus*, and the connection between these arts still manifests itself in "narrative terms such as *plot*, *clue*, or *spinning yarns*, which specifically refer to textile vocabulary."[4] Embroidery, or needlework as it was originally called, was seen as the epitome of virtuous female industry and provided women with an alternative to speech through which to find self-expression.[5] Early modern conduct books frequently encouraged women to invest themselves in silent, diligent labour and this became such a fundamental activity

[4] Rebecca Olson, *Arras Hanging: The Textile That Determined Early Modern Literature and Drama* (Lanham MD, 2013), 2.
[5] In using the term "needlework" I intend for it to cover a wide range of domestic activities that resulted in textile production, including (but not limited to) spinning, weaving, and needlepoint.

for Renaissance women that "to speak of 'work' in relation to a woman of high rank was to mean needlework."[6] Not only was needlework seen as a sign of silent obedience, but also provided women with a moral alternative to hours that might otherwise be spent in wanton idleness. In turn, according to Susan Frye, these "needleworkers did not confront their society's equation of needlework with chaste labor so much as they accepted it and made it their own."[7] By embracing the art of needlework in a pre-industrialized society, women gained access to a form of authorship that was often overlooked by patriarchal systems of control designed to root out and suppress female self-expression. Even as recently as the twentieth century, a resistance to viewing needlework as a type of authorship existed. Sigmund Freud, for example, wrote that "women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization," but the "one technique which they have invented [is] that of plaiting and weaving."[8] After acknowledging this one contribution, however, Kathryn Sullivan Kruger notes that he refuses "to give this invention its due" and "heralded it not as an important achievement and organizer of culture but rather (since it is a female

[6] Jones and Stallybrass, 134.
[7] Susan Frye, "Sewing Connections: Elizabeth Tudor, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth Talbot, and Seventeenth-Century Anonymous Needleworkers" in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (eds), 165-82 (New York, 1999), 166.
[8] Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Mississauga, 2001), 21.

invention) as a metaphor for lack."[9] Despite Freud's skepticism regarding the narrative significance of needlework, textile production in the early modern period undoubtedly held great significance, particularly in relation to the social identity of early modern households. While men built public exteriors, women crafted their interior comforts. Linens, blankets, tapestries, carpets, and clothing helped characterize homes and create family spaces. In turn, the demand for these items resulted in an increase in related businesses, from the growing of raw materials, to the construction of spinning wheels, spindles, and shuttle-cocks, to the emergence of related professions such as laundresses, tailors, and sempsters.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers owed their considerable insight into the relationship between women and needlework to their Greek and Roman forbearers and the myths they inherited from them. Most famous, perhaps, is the connection between spinning "and life's journey from birth through to death" as represented in "the Fates, who spun, measured, and cut the thread of life."[10] Through the Fates' example, textile production not only became viewed as a communal activity, through which women could share techniques and patterns with one another, but with telling life-stories, as the needle workers wove or stitched life's essence (as it were) into the very fabric or tapestry they created. In

[9] Ibid.
[10] R. Natasha Amendola, "Weaving Virtue: Laura Cereta as a New Penelope ," in *Virtue Ethics for Women 1250-1500*, Karen Green and Constant J. Mews (eds), 133-144 (New York, 2011), 134.

her work on women's textile production, Frye further stresses the importance of viewing needlework as a form of female collaboration. According to Frye, women's "alliances can be seen through needlework because early modern English women sewed them to be seen" and, in doing so, they made "forms of female alliance visible."[11] The Fates, however, are not the only well known women who used needlework to tell stories and create lasting legacies. Penelope, whose devotion to Odysseus has since become a universal symbol for female constancy and faithfulness in the face of absence and loss, is also intrinsically associated with the act of needlework. Kruger, for example, notes that as "she weaves Laertes' shroud by day and unravels it by night, Penelope is able to extend time, to hold the suitors and time at bay until Odysseus' return."[12] For Penelope, weaving becomes a way for her to control time, even as the item she creates, a shroud, serves as a contradictory reminder of life's finality. In the constant presence of Death, she proves to be the more powerful of the two and, through her needlework, she creates and re-creates it until the one assumed dead, Odysseus, miraculously returns to her.[13]

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[11] Frye, "Sewing Connections," 166.
[12] Kruger, 79.
[13] Other examples of classical weaving women demonstrate further the spiritual, moral, and (dare we say it) magical attributes that accompanied the act of needlework. These include: Arachne, who uses her art to "demystify the gods (the sacred)" (P.K. Joplin, "The Voice of the Shuttle Is Ours" in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, Laura K. McClure [ed.], 259-86 [Oxford, 2002], 274-6); Helen of Troy, who "while men wage wars" she "weaves

Although early modern conduct books endorsed needlework as being a refined activity, a cultural unease surrounding women's textile production still existed. Classical stories may emphasize the connection between women and storytelling, but they also draw a connection between textile production and magic. Both the Fates and Penelope use their mastery over threads to control time and the destinies of others – with the Fates ending life's journey with a single snip and Penelope constantly unweaving and reweaving an emblem of Death in order to delay remarrying. Early modern individuals were not oblivious to the intrinsic magic that needlework could signify, even though (paradoxically) they also viewed it as a chaste and reticent activity. Anne Barton and Eugene Giddens, for example, observe that in *The Masque of Queens* Jonson writes that "the spindle, in antiquity, was tool of the witch."[14] Jones and Stallybrass expand on the "reverse side" of needlework, writing that while the distaff and spindle were "emblems of virtue," they also linked women "to the nocturnal wandering and revelry of wild sorceresses and to women's control over male potency."[15] Sigrid Brauner has also

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them" (Patricia B. Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies: Gaze, Image, and Gender in Ovid's Metamorphoses* [Columbus, 2005], 121); and Philomela, whose "weaving tells of her own rape by Tereus, thereby regaining narrative control of the ekphrastic act of ravishment" (William May, "Verbal and visual art in twentieth-century British women's poetry" in *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, Jane Dawson [ed.], 42-61 [Cambridge, 2011], 44).

[14] Ben Jonson, *The Sad Shepherd* in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, Vol. 7, Anne Barton and Eugene Giddens (eds), 422-78 (Cambridge, 2012), 456 note. When quoting from *The Sad Shepherd*, I use this edition.

[15] Jones and Stallybrass, 132.

remarked on this connection, noting that many "alleged witches were 'spinsters' [or] rural female spinners."[16] Surviving sixteenth- and seventeenth-century woodcuts frequently sensationalized the dubious nature of needlework by depicting witches clutching or riding distaffs. The sexual implications incorporated into these depictions were unavoidable, as though the distaff was the witch's penis and gave her phallic power. In a notorious French pamphlet, for example, this rejection of the positives in favour of the negatives regarding women and needlework came to a climax, with a "printer's woodcut of a [decapitated] woman holding a distaff" (see Figure 3 on the following page).[17] The caption translates to "If you are looking for her, here she is," implying, according to Jones and Stallybrass, that "the ideal woman – a good spinner and silent companion – can be achieved only by cutting off a real woman's head."[18] By the seventeenth century, therefore, the positive connotations surrounding women and needlework were inevitably accompanied by an equal dose of suspicion.

The handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello* provides us with what is perhaps the most well-known (and most frequently discussed) example of a textile that resists, even in the absence of its long dead female creators, Othello's, Iago's,

[16] Sigrid Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany* (Massachusetts, 1995), 17.
[17] Jones and Stallybrass, 132.
[18] Ibid.

Figure 3 Woodcut from *Les Imperfections de la* femme, Paris, c. 1650. Woodcut frontispiece. Reproduced by Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, 132. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

and even Cassius's attempts to re-write its distinctly feminine identity within the play. Since Shakespeare first composed *Othello,* generations of scholars have attempted to account for the perplexing riddle that is the handkerchief. Attempts to decipher its meaning have left both literary critics and performers alike at times intrigued, perplexed, and even (on occasion) outright annoyed. In a scathing review of the play in the late seventeenth century, for example, Thomas Rymer famously wrote "so much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*?"[19] Nor does Rymer end his tirade against the handkerchief here. Instead, he continues to express his annoyance with this prop device by questioning why Shakespeare chooses, in Rymer's words, to "make a Tragedy of this Trifle."[20] Rymer is not alone in voicing his frustration with the thematic centrality of Othello's gift to Desdemona within the events of the play. Michael Neill notes, for example, that famed playwright Bernard Shaw also criticized *Othello* as being no more than a "farcical trick with a handkerchief."[21]

Distancing themselves from this earlier approach, contemporary scholars

[19] Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy, 1693,* A Scholar Press Facsimile (Yorkshire, 1970), 139. Michael Neill, editor of the Oxford edition of the play, also quotes Rymer in his introduction. All quoted material from *Othello* throughout this chapter, unless otherwise stated, will come from his edition: William Shakespeare, *Othello,* Oxford World's Classics, Michael Neill (ed.), (Oxford, 2006).
[20] Ibid, 145.
[21] Michael Neill (ed.), "Introduction" in *Othello,* Oxford World Classics (Oxford, 2006), 5.

have attempted to evaluate more analytically the thematic function and metaphorical significance of this object, as opposed to merely dismissing it as an implausible plot device. To discuss *Othello*, one must (out of necessity) discuss the handkerchief, given that Shakespeare refers to it more than twenty-five times in his script. This repetition has led to a prolific range of innovative interpretations regarding its symbolic value within the play. Stephanie Moss argues that the handkerchief is a "receptacle" for sickness and contagion and suggests that once Desdemona misplaces it, pathogens spread and Othello, in turn, becomes a diseased subject.[22] Will Fisher, alternatively, examines the historical significance of handkerchiefs during the early modern period to argue that Othello's handkerchief acts as a misogynistic but magical barrier (of sorts) in response to the "ideological figuration of women as 'leaky' vessels." Once the handkerchief becomes lost, Fisher argues, Othello easily accepts that Desdemona no longer controls her body and believes her capable of committing any number of unchaste acts.[23] Numerous other scholars, such as Ruben Espinosa, W. Reginald Rampone, and Lina Perkins Wilder (to name but a few), have leaned towards a Freudian reading of the strawberry-covered handkerchief as a perverse symbol for the blood-spotted wedding and / or funeral sheets that define Othello

[22] Stephanie Moss, "Transformation and Degeneration: The Paracelsan / Galenic Body in *Othello*" in *Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, Stephanie Moss and Kaara L. Peterson (eds), 151-70 (Aldershot, 2004), 162.
[23] Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, 2006), 44.

and Desdemona's marriage bed within the play.[24]

What makes discussing the handkerchief's thematic significance even more troublesome for literary scholars is that Othello provides it with two conflicting creation stories. In his first account of the handkerchief's manufacturing, Othello confides to Desdemona that his mother inherited it from an "Egyptian … charmer" (3.4.54-5) who had it from

> A sibyl, that had numbered in the world
> The sun to course two hundred compasses,
> In her prophetic fury sewed the work;
> The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
> And it was dyed in mummy which the skilful
> Conserved of maidens' hearts. (3.4.69-74)

Throughout this account, Othello repeatedly attributes supernatural qualities to the handkerchief, stressing that it contains "magic in the web of it" and had the power to "subdue my father / Entirely to [my mother's] love" (3.4.68; 58-9). In his second account, Othello strips the handkerchief of its mythical past, instead telling Gratiano that the handkerchief was simply "an antique token / My father gave my

[24] Ruben Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare's England* (Aldershot, 2011), 139; W. Reginald Rampone, *Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare* (Santa Barbara, 2011), 74; and Lina Perkins Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre: Recollection, Properties, and Character* (Cambridge 2012), 142. There are many additional essays that provide innovative insight into Desdemona's and Othello's relationship with the handkerchief. For additional sources, please consult: Dympna Callaghan, "Looking Well to Linens: Women and Cultural Production in *Othello* and Shakespeare's England" in *Marxist Shakespeare*, Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (eds), (London, 2001), 53-81 or Valerie Wayne, "Historical Difference: Misogyny and *Othello*" in *The Matter of Difference*, Valerie Wayne (ed.), (New York, 1991), 153-80.

mother" (5.2.214-5). How does this object go from being a magically embroidered web, passed down through generations of women, to being a token – a word that implies legal rather than magical significance – that Othello's father gave to his mother? At the crux of its inclusion in the play the handkerchief presents audiences with two conflicting narratives: the first celebrates a mythical matrilineal history as it passes from Sybil, to Egyptian charmer, to Othello's mother and the second falls into a more mundane patrilineal account that lacks the same historical scope. Why does Othello's account change so radically and what do these stark contradictions tell us about the handkerchief's material identity?

Scholars have asked themselves this precise question for years. Peter G. Platt views the conflicting stories as evidence of Othello's divided cultural identity within the play, arguing that while his first story (delivered directly to Desdemona) connects him with his former and larger-than-life past, his second (censored for his Venetian audience) shows how fractured Othello's identity has become over the course of the play's final two acts.[25] Janet Adelman, alternatively, views the handkerchief's conflicting origin stories as evidence of Othello's inclination towards "fetishizing" representations of "maternal virginity as the impossible condition of male desire."[26] In contrast, numerous other scholars have merely dismissed what we cannot ever fully hope to explain, suggesting that

[25] Peter G. Platt, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox* (Burlington, 2009), 90.
[26] Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York, 1992), 69.

Othello's first account of the handkerchief's origins is a lie he tells Desdemona to frighten her, a false story he weaves together in order to aggrandize further his own self-exoticized past.[27]

If we think about the handkerchief as a magical object produced by women for women, then Othello's attempts to utilize it for his own purposes perhaps present us with the key to making sense of these contradictions. Othello's first account of the handkerchief provides it with a very specific and detailed history, a legacy that is decidedly separate from and alien to Othello himself, although (as we will see, shortly, in more detail) he tries to usurp control of the handkerchief's magical properties for his own devices. Returning to Othello's first account of the handkerchief, however, reaffirms its decidedly alien presence within the Venetian court, as Othello tells Desdemona that the Egyptian who gave it to his mother

> was a charmer, and could almost read
> The thoughts of people; she told her, while she kept it

[27] John A. Hodgson, for example, writes that Othello's first "story seems not to be true at all" ("Desdemona's Handkerchief as an Emblem of Her Reputation ," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 19.3 [1977]: 315), while David Kaula views Othello's emphasis on magic as a moment of escapism, writing that "the magical associations of the handkerchief are temporary. They are symptoms of the delusion which grips the hero in the middle of the phase of tragic action" ("Othello possessed: notes on Shakespeare's use of magic and witchcraft ," *Shakespeare Studies* 2 [1966]: 127). More recently, Philip D. Collington argues that Othello uses "a tissue of lies" to "[exaggerate] his differences for" his Venetian audience's "amusement and his own advancement" ("Othello the Liar" in *The Mysterious and the Foreign in Early Modern England*, Helen Ostovich, Mary V. Silcox, and Graham Roebuck [eds], 187-205 [Newark, 2008], 190)

> 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
> Entirely to her love—but if she lost it,
> Or made gift of it, my father's eye
> Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt
> After new fancies. She dying gave it me
> And bid me, when my fate would have me wived,
> To give it her. (3.4.56-64)

Even as he tells Desdemona this story, Othello deliberately misinterprets its significance as he attempts to seize control of the handkerchief's intrinsic power to substantiate his growing anxieties regarding Desdemona's possible infidelity. He allows Iago to convince him that Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief symbolizes, in contrast to the meaning conveyed in this passage, that Desdemona's heart, rather than his own, "should hunt / After new fancies" (61-2). Even though Othello's mother instructs him, according to his own report, to give his future wife the power to enthrall his heart, Othello seems oblivious to the handkerchief's magical purpose. Desdemona's actions are not bound to the handkerchief's presence or absence, just as his mother's affections before Desdemona's were not. Rather, the handkerchief's location, according to Othello's own account of its magical properties, impacts Othello and Othello alone. While the loss of the handkerchief does ensure that Othello "should hold [Desdemona] loathed" (61), his use of the handkerchief as evidence to support his belief that she has committed adultery goes against the magical jurisdiction of the handkerchief itself. The handkerchief's power centres on a woman being able to bind a man's affections to her person by maintaining control of its possession, and

yet Othello (alternatively) uses it to keep Desdemona bound to him. He seems to feel that if she can produce it and prove that she still possesses it then her loyalty will be unimpeachable. He shows no awareness of understanding the handkerchief's alleged significance and, in attempting to exploit it for his own purposes, Othello succeeds in getting Desdemona, the handkerchief's next true heir, to reject it as well: "Then would to God that I had never seen't" (75).

Although they may not so intend, modern editors of the play frequently aid Othello in his attempts to assert authorial control over the handkerchief and give undue credit to his misplaced conviction that Desdemona is to blame for its loss. While Othello manages to get Desdemona to reject it, after he incorrectly uses it to menace her as he symbolically transforms her body into something that can (like a handkerchief) easily pass from hand to hand, the problem of who is to blame for its physical loss inevitably arises. Othello blames Desdemona, but she, in contrast, categorically denies being the one at fault: "I'faith, you are to blame … I am most unhappy in the loss of it" (3.4.94; 98). While her somewhat ambiguous choice of words emphasizes the handkerchief's absence, she uses the definitive article "the" to describe the handkerchief's disappearance, instead of using a personal pronoun (e.g., "I am most unhappy in *my* loss of it"). Her choice of language situates the handkerchief's loss as being unrelated to her actions. Rather, she argues, Othello is the one to blame, and certainly his failure to communicate properly the handkerchief's importance to her *prior* to its loss gives

credence to her claim. Othello, alternatively, uses very direct statements and accusations to assign blame: "That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee / Thou gav'st to Cassio" (5.2.50-1). How an edition or production of the play chooses to handle the handkerchief's loss inevitably becomes a moment of paramount importance in this ongoing conflict between matrilineal and patrilineal narratives.

All too frequently modern editions of the play reveal an undue bias as they favour Othello's account of events over Desdemona's. In 3.3, before Othello outlines the history of the handkerchief, Desdemona attempts to use it to tend to Othello, whom she believes is unwell. Complaining of a "pain" in his forehead, Othello misogynistically contemplates the horror of a cuckold's horns, while Desdemona innocently attempts to heal him (287). Distracted and irritable, Othello responds to her tender concern with a dismissive comment: "Your napkin is too little" (290). Michael Neill, in the Oxford edition of the play, is not alone in adding a stage direction following this line to help contextualize the corresponding stage action for modern day readers: "*She drops her handkerchief*" (SD 3.3.290). Other editors of the play include similar prompts, usually assigning the act of dropping the handkerchief to Desdemona (as Neill does) or to the handkerchief itself.[28] In the original 1622 quarto edition of the play no such stage

[28] Examples include: David Bevington, who writes "*He puts the handkerchief from him, and it drops*" (William Shakespeare, "Othello" in *The Complete Works*

direction appears, leaving it up to the performers to decide for themselves how and why the handkerchief falls to the ground.[29] Does Othello irritably snatch it from Desdemona and toss it aside as she attempts to nurse him back to health? Is the handkerchief brushed aside and forgotten when the pair exit the stage? Or, alternatively, does Desdemona, as Neill suggests, drop it in her haste to put it away, after Othello declines to use it? Whatever the reason, there seems to be widespread unease with attributing this action directly to Othello himself, demonstrating his continued success in usurping narrative control over both the handkerchief's mythical past and its present on-stage movement.

Consequently, *Othello* provides audiences with two tragedies simultaneously, making Rymer's sneering aside that the play should have been "call'd the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*" all the more ironic because, in some respects, his belittling comment is true, although not in the way he intended. In a

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of Shakespeare, 7th Edition, David Bevington [ed.], 1150-1200 [Boston, 2014], [SD 3.3.304]); Walter Cohen, who writes "*He puts the napkin from him. It drops*" (William Shakespeare, "Othello" in *The Norton Shakespeare, Vol. 2: Later Plays*, Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus [gen. eds], 375-458 [New York, 2008], [SD 3.3.291]); John Jowett et al, who write "*He puts the napkin from him. It drops*" (William Shakespeare, *Othello* in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd Edition, John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells [eds], 873-908 [Oxford, 2005], [SD 3.3.291]), and Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, who write "*He pushes away the handkerchief and it drops*" (William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen [eds], 25-128 [London, 2009], 81).

[29] William, Shakespeare, *The tragoedy of Othello, the Moore of Venice as it hath beene diuerse times acted at the Globe, and at the Black-Friers, by his Maiesties Seruants* (London, 1622), 50.

play that focuses on a man who desperately wants to achieve his own degree of immortality and who wins Desdemona's love by telling her the "story of [his] life" (1.3.129), the handkerchief provides us with an inscrutable, yet undeniably feminine courter-narrative to Othello's absolute authorial attempts to control the play's storyline. While the play's main plot revolves around the masculine Othello's tragic downfall, as he loses touch with his noble ancestry and allows the pettiness of the Venetian court to consume his identity, the handkerchief's story tells an alternative tale of something remarkably similar and yet distinctly different occurring simultaneously. The handkerchief's female oriented history, after all, also faces a tragic end, its magical significance lost, as it passes casually from hand to hand over the course of the play. Slowly, we watch it become a symbol for destruction rather than enduring (albeit enforced) love.[30] While the handkerchief's downfall does not result, as is the case with Othello, from a Venetian "self" brutally attempting to annihilate and destroy someone who has been marked as a perceived outsider, it occurs nonetheless at the hands of men who attempt to squash and regain authorial control over a female-created object. The sudden shift at the end of the play, when Othello retracts his earlier words regarding the handkerchief's origins, is neither a lie nor a contradiction. His

[30] Given its magical significance, Othello is incredibly remiss in not imparting this information to Desdemona earlier. To emphasize further Othello's failure to properly pass the handkerchief on to Desdemona, Shakespeare has both couples who subsequently inherit it (Emilia/Iago and Cassio/Bianca) suffer as a result.

second account merely accentuates and emphasizes the loss that has occurred, as the magical properties originally embroidered into the very fabric of the handkerchief become lost once and for all. Othello was the handkerchief's temporary custodian, as he was meant to pass it from his mother to his future wife. Misappropriated, the handkerchief becomes no more than what Othello acknowledges in the play's final scene, "an antique token" that the male realm firmly controls once more, given that all the women in the play who might have been able to salvage its significance are now incapable of doing so. In fact, as the handkerchief changes hands over the course of the play, Shakespeare highlights the degradation it experiences by having it pass from Desdemona, to Emilia, to Bianca. Audiences witness the handkerchief pass first to a woman who is already wived and then to a woman who has no chance of being a wife, given that she is Cassio's mistress, a condition that the handkerchief's magic requires. As Bianca throws it back at Cassio, accusing him of receiving it from another woman, the handkerchief disappears entirely, lost somewhere in the gutters of Cyprus.

Ultimately, what *Othello* demonstrates is that the historical connection between women and their material (particularly textile) creations carried with it particular connotations for early modern audiences. *Othello* serves as a tragic warning that even in the face of lasting memorials, legacies can be lost or misplaced and that nothing, by right, is guaranteed or certain. The handkerchief's centrality shows that even in the face of humanity's failure to recognize and

honour the objects that give lasting voice to the past, the attempt to preserve these traditions and tell counter-narratives is not pointless. While Desdemona's handkerchief continues to function as an elusive symbol that confounds modern day scholars, as Othello, Iago, and Cassio (who wants Bianca to copy it for him and doesn't care about its significance) systematically strip it of meaning, its unceasing process of loss serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of re-writing narratives to suit present-day agendas. *Othello* shows us the end of a magical dynasty of sorts, and even as the play's central protagonist faces his own tragic fall, the metaphorical significance of the handkerchief faces a similar end.

Jonson's Prologue

Shakespeare's *Othello*, as tragedy, inevitably deals with loss. In contrast, Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd* is an English pastoral comedy that potentially offers us a more redeeming stance on the permanency of female legacies in relation to their material culture. In *Othello*, Shakespeare shows us the end of a magical dynasty. Stripped of meaning and recycled to suit Othello's private purposes, the handkerchief becomes a "common" thing (3.3.305), an object that further demonstrates (rather than refutes) the men's misogynistic opinions regarding female sexuality. In *The Sad Shepherd*, however, Jonson's exploration of similar themes is, arguably, more nuanced, a complexity largely generated by his decision to explore female magic and memory through the flawed and highly suspect

figure of Maudlin, the witch of Papplewick, rather than an upper-class figure like Othello or Desdemona.

Absence becomes an unavoidable topic of discussion when studying *The Sad Shepherd* because the manuscript remained unfinished at the time of Jonson's death in 1637. Set in Sherwood Forest, it revolves around the legendary figures of Robin Hood and Maid Marian as they prepare to host a feast for all the shepherds and shepherdesses of the vale of Belvoir. Two outsiders, however, repeatedly disrupt their efforts: Eglamour the sad shepherd and (more particularly) Maudlin the witch. While Eglamour's sorrow, in response to the presumed drowning of his sweetheart, Earine the beautiful, serves as a somber distraction from the general merriment of the impending festivities, Maudlin's use of her magic belt, a belt that allows her to assume the shape of other people, creates episodes of even greater disruption. In many ways Maudlin appears to be a traditional English witch. She begs for charity, steals other people's property, and curses those who oppose her. Maudlin's belt, embroidered with magical letters and symbols, significantly increases the range and scope of her supernatural powers. Maudlin not only kidnaps and imprisons Earmine in a tree, but also draws on the belt's magic to impersonate Marian in order to steal the deer that Robin's men slay for the upcoming feast in act one. When Robin discovers Maudlin's devices, he rallies his people together and leads them in an organized witch hunt, intent on revenging himself upon Maudlin for her trespasses and deception. In a showdown

between Robin and Maudlin (who disguises herself as Marian), Robin sees through Maudlin's magic and rips the belt from her, exposing her true self to view. This is where the play stops, however, leaving us uncertain about how Jonson planned on resolving the play's tension.

Despite Maudlin's role as the play's antagonist, evidence within the play suggests that Jonson uses her representation as an outsider to express his own social commentary. Lamb suggests that Jonson's tendency to use "coarseness … as a vehicle for social critique" may provide "reason to take seriously various cues aligning his interests with Mother Maudlin."[31] This possibility proves true as Jonson provides some weight to Maudlin's complaints about poverty, the injustice of England's oppressive class system, and the hypocrisy of the gentry who self-aggrandize their own importance as elite landowners. Although she is an undeniably imperfect figure, being both grotesque and transgressive, she becomes Jonson's unlikely spokesperson within the play and, more than any other character, fulfills what we will see were the priorities he mapped out in his prologue. In this play, which I discuss for the remainder of this chapter, Jonson presents audiences with a world that is heavily divided. Elite culture, as we shall soon see in more detail, (which Jonson characterizes as being hyper-masculine), represented by Robin Hood, and folk culture (which he characterizes as being perversely feminine), represented by Maudlin, compete for dominance one over

[31] Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, 226.

the other. Jonson characterizes both sides in extreme and often unsympathetic ways, as there seems to be no middle ground between their respective positions. Yet, at the heart of this conflict lies a past that has been forgotten by both sides, one that should unite these factions instead of driving them further apart, a past that becomes epitomized by Jonson's repeated allusions to textile production and, more concretely, to Maudlin's belt. By the 1630s, when Jonson wrote *The Sad Shepherd*, the tone of pastoral dramas had begun to change as the genre moved away from celebrating older folk traditions to becoming "overly-refined" and "not sufficiently English."[32] According to Lamb, Jonson "criticizes the Italian influenced pastorals … then fashionable at court," plays that that frequently relied on "stylized and humourless speeches."[33] Jonson explores this change through Robin Hood and Maudlin's rivalry, as he strives to find a way within the play to negotiate some sort of compromise that will reunite elite and folk traditions, allowing him in turn to create the perfect English pastoral.

Emerging front and centre, the prologue sets the tone for what Jonson wants to accomplish and, perhaps more importantly, how he wants his audience to interpret the play that will follow. While the prologue's opening lines slip into a highly constructed form, with a heavy emphasis on "f" alliteration, this pattern

[32] Ibid, 219.
[33] Ibid. For further information on the "developments in pastoral drama in the early seventeenth century, and the ways in which new influences from Italy and, later, France complicated pastoral's archaising heritage" see Lucy Munro, *Archaic Style in English Literature, 1590–1674* (Cambridge, 2013), 10.

breaks abruptly by the end of the third line: "He that hath feasted you these forty years / And fitted fables for your finer ears, / Although at first he scarce could hit the bore –" (1-3; my emphasis). Jonson begins his play by drawing attention to his development as playwright and poet. The first two and a half lines use alliteration to charm audiences and draw us in as we become captivated by the euphonic refinement of Jonson's craft. The romantic, almost whispering quality of Jonson's language breaks off abruptly with the word "bore" followed by the long em dash. In this way, Jonson uses the prologue to highlight the changes time brings to everything, including his own proficiency as a playwright as he juxtaposes soft and hard syllables. While Jonson attributes his poetical mastery over "fitted fables" to his forty years of experience, he also playfully comments on his earlier inexperience by having the poetical breakdown of his language replicate the failure of his metaphorical hunter to "hit the bore."[34] He uses unfamiliar sounds to interrupt the promised "feast" (i.e., the poetry) he offers his audience, much the way Maudlin will later interrupt Robin's feast, and by doing so he sets the tone for how we should view similar disruptions later in the play.

After introducing himself as a host who feasts his audience's appetite for

[34] Jonson's apparent modesty here refers only to his very early career: he became wildly famous as a young man with *Every Man In His Humour* (1598) and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599). His modesty in this moment, therefore, adds to the illusion that he is a "host" who wants to serve his audience.

theatre, Jonson quickly dispenses with this metaphorical allusion.[35] Instead, Jonson uses the prologue to philosophically reconfigure what his role as a pastoral playwright should entail. In place of the "host" comparison, Jonson begins to develop a much longer and more complete description of himself as a wool worker who wants to fashion the clumps of wool he currently possesses into a garment (i.e., a complete play) for his audience:

> And though he now present you with such wool
> As from mere English flocks his muse can pull,
> He hopes when it is made up into a cloth
> Not the most curious head here will be loath
> To wear a hood of it – it being a fleece
> To match or those of Sicily or Greece. (9-14)

Dispensing with his identity as an educated playwright, Jonson instead uses the linguistic association between text and textile to comment on the orality of his craft – as he reconfigures himself to become a humble storyteller. The play he offers audiences becomes a garment with his narrative woven into the very fabric he produces from his English flock. His narrative process becomes akin to that of wool workers, who would shear, beat, and de-grease the wool before handing the process over to their female counterparts, who traditionally combed, carded, and

[35] Jonson was rather famous for his "feast" introductions, such as the one found in *Epicœne, or The Silent Woman* (1609). By briefly returning to this pattern at the start of his prologue, Jonson draws on the familiar before he deliberately crafts something different.

span it.[36] In the play's opening moments, therefore, Jonson sets this process in motion by having his prologue, shepherd-like, shear or "pull" wool from his English flock with the help of his muse, Thalia, before creating a "hood" from the product he gathers.[37] The prologue transcends roles, able to perform both the role of the gatherer and the weaver, a transcendence that speaks to his marginalized status as an outsider to the play's main events. Within the play proper, Jonson recreates this division of labour (as I will discuss in more detail shortly) through the figures of Robin Hood and Maudlin respectively, as one becomes associated with the fleecing of sheep and the other with the spinning of wool.

The prologue's elaborate metaphor regarding textile production and narrative authenticity is but the first priority that Jonson maps in this introductory moment. Near the end of the opening monologue, after introducing the play's

[36] In their scholarship, Jones and Stallybrass observe, for example, that "the making of wool cloth occupied men and women alike, although in different spheres." Men "herded" flocks of sheep and "supervised" the sheering process, while women traditionally "produced" the wool yarn that was "required for work in cloth and tapestry" creation (92).

[37] As an epigraph to his play Jonson includes a quote from Virgil that reads "Nec erubuit sylvas habitare Thaleia." Translated from Latin, this phrase reads, according to Barton and Giddens, "Thalia [the muse of comedy] did not blush to be a forest-dweller" (Jonson, *The Sad Shepherd,* 423). Invoking Thalia at the start of a pastoral comedy was not unusual for the drama of the period. As the muse who "presides over both pastoral and comedy," Thalia is a fairly conventional figure (Annabel M. Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* [Madison WI, 1984]). Jonson's specific choice of words, however, starts the play out on a defiant tone, as he both praises Thalia as a goddess (highlighting her elevated standing) and emphasizes her humility as a "forest-dweller."

basic plot, Jonson assigns the prologue a very specific stage action: "*Here the Prologue, thinking to end, returns upon a new purpose and speaks on*" (SD 30). Traditionally, early modern prologues served a very basic, albeit necessary, function: to introduce the play's immediate plot, characters, and setting. Having discharged this purpose, however, Jonson's prologue delays leaving the stage, and comments further on the thematic changes that began to re-fashion what it meant to be a "pastoral play" in the 1630s:

> But here's an heresy of late let fall,
> That mirth by no means fits a pastoral.
> Such say so who can make none, he presumes;
> Else there's no scene more properly assumes
> The sock. (31-5)

When glossing these passages, Barton and Giddens remark that in this moment "Jonson is thinking of the kind of elevated and humourless pastoral … then in vogue at court."[38] Jonson did not agree with elitist pastorals, ones that frequently sought to naturalize and privilege the gentry's connection with rural England because they were landowners. Rather, Jonson implies that pastorals should embrace older folk and carnivalesque traditions, to ensure they are sufficiently English enough.[39] At the same time, he also seems to accept that these coarser traditions simultaneously need to be made elegant by the elite culture that

[38] Jonson, *Sad Shepherd*, 428.
[39] By drawing attention to this thematic shift in pastorals during the early seventeenth-century, Jonson, among other playwrights according to Munro, juxtapose "the old pastoral technique of archaism with new styles and conventions absorbed from continental theatre" (10).

demanded it in order for the pastoral genre itself to be properly conceptualized. Pastorals that lack this harmony, Jonson argues, constitute a type of "heresy" (31) and do not pay proper respect to their theatrical origins. No other type of drama, the prologue insists, "more properly assumes / The sock" (34-5), or the "light shoe worn by ancient comic actors."[40] Once again, Jonson calls attention to the dramatic authenticity of pastoral dramas by referencing the humble garments that should define them. He also forces his audience to start thinking about how contradictions co-exist with one another, as the prologue's call for mirth stands in ironic contrast to the play's title, *The Sad Shepherd*.

Before leaving the stage, Jonson's prologue offers his audience one final word of advice:

> But that no style for pastoral should go
> Current but what is stamped with 'Ah' and 'Oh',
> Who judgeth so may singularly err,
> As if all poesy had one character
> ……
> From such your wits redeem you, or your chance,
> Lest to a great height you do advance
> Of folly to contemn those that are known
> Artificers and trust such as are none. (53-6; 63-6)

Jonson asks his audience to pay particular attention to the craft that goes into constructing a true pastoral, as he compares writing a play to the hours needleworkers might put into making a garment. Pastorals should not bend themselves to fit a single set of parameters. Playwrights, like weavers or textile

[40] Ibid.

workers, put physical labour into writing their plays and exhibit a range of techniques through their ability to "spin" tales and "craft" language. Ending with a warning, Jonson tells his audience that if they fail to recognize this skill, then they will end up, to their folly, being duped by substandard dramas. Addressing his audience, Jonson stresses that such narrow-mindedness will prompt them to "contemn" or scorn "those that are known / Artificers and trust such as are none" (65-6). Barton and Giddens gloss the word "artificers" as artisans, but the word can also mean an "artful … dissembler."[41] In his final summation, therefore, Jonson chooses to conflate seeming contradictions once more. His role as a dramatist characterizes him not only as a craftsman who creates something through his linguistic skill, but also as a trickster who can deceive the senses of his audience as he transports them beyond the presiding superficially trendy definition of what pastoral drama means. Opposites, the prologue argues, do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The "New" Robin Hood

By the end of his prologue, Jonson not only has passionately defined what he believes a "true" English pastoral should be, but also has set the stage for how audiences should respond to the figures of Robin Hood and Maid Marian, on the one hand, and Maudlin, on the other. Robin Hood's well established fictional

[41] Jonson, *Sad Shepherd*, 430; *OED Online*, ("artificer, n").

legacy makes him the seemingly perfect figure to champion folk customs, given that his own origins stem from "carnivalesque and populist" traditions.[42] Throughout medieval and early Tudor literature, Robin Hood and Maid Marian were figures of sport and revelry, who featured prominently in the May-games and morris dances of parish feasts and Whitsun festivities.[43] In his earliest conception, Robin Hood was a disguised outlaw who tricked wealthy individuals into entering his woods, where he subsequently robbed them before forcing them to "play the part of an outlaw, joining in the dances and sports of Robin Hood's band."[44] He was a yeoman, who through his ingenuity and versatility was able to subvert social order and get the better of his wealthier rivals, while handing the proceeds of his criminal enterprises over to those who most needed it: the poor. For his purported charity, actors hired to play Robin Hood during festival days would frequently be tasked with collecting alms for the church.[45] According to Lois Potter, Robin Hood became a symbol of resistance as he "presides over a sort of earthly paradise, both in its physical surroundings (it is always May) and its recreation of ideal justice."[46]

If, after the clear message delivered in his prologue, audiences expect

[42] Potter, 14.
[43] Wiles, David. "Robin Hood as Summer Lord" in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, Stephen Knight (ed.), 77-98 (Cambridge, 1999), 77.
[44] Potter, 14.
[45] Wiles, 78.
[46] Ibid, 15.

Jonson's Robin Hood and Maid Marian to resemble their earlier incarnations, however, they are in for a rude awakening. Instead of honouring Robin Hood and Maid Marian's carnivalesque origins, Jonson instead uses them to demonstrate the radical shift Robin Hood has undergone over the previous century and a half as depictions of Robin Hood altered to become more sanitized and socially acceptable, a shift that Jonson seems to feel resembles the changes English pastorals have likewise experienced. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Robin Hood's traditional meaning became "appropriated" by early modern authors who transformed him from yeoman into "a pastoral aristocrat."[47] Many scholars who have written on *The Sad Shepherd* comment on Jonson's rather perplexing decision to depict Robin Hood and his merry men not as rebel outlaws and figures of misrule but as members of the landed gentry. Both Lamb and Barton, amongst others, succinctly summarize Jonson's unexpected choice, with one calling Jonson's Robin Hood an "aristocratic host" and the other observing that he:

> does not waylay unsuspecting travellers, nor does he rob. And he seems to move freely outside Sherwood, among the shepherds in the Vale of Belvoir, without fear of apprehension by the law. Maudlin also calls Robin a 'ranger,' meaning a forest official, and this on the whole seems more in accord with the life he and his entourage live, as it does with those forest 'walks' – paths but also, technically, administrative divisions – mentioned

[47] Edwin Davenport, "The Representation of Robin Hood in Elizabethan Drama: *George a Greene* and *Edward I*" in *Playing Robin Hood: The Legend as Performance in Five Centuries*, Lois Potter (ed.), 45-62 (Canbury NJ, 1998), 47.

more than once in the play.[48]

Barton and Giddens argue a similar point, noting that many of the titles Jonson bestows upon Robin's men, such as bow-bearer, bailiff, and acater, identify them as official employees who work for Robin Hood, rather than rural outlaws who join him in hiding.[49] Rounding out this overview of Robin Hood's faction, Lois Potter remarks that Jonson's Maid Marian "is the least Amazonian or maidenly of consorts, billing and cooing with Robin and worrying about cooking venison for dinner."[50]

The numerous descriptions of Robin's bower and the garments of his men add further evidence to support viewing Jonson's Robin Hood as a member of the gentry class, as opposed the outlawed yeoman he once symbolized. In medieval and Tudor ballads, Robin Hood, who typically dressed in green to symbolize his connection with Sherwood, sought sanctuary within the forest, living in harmony with nature as he sought to conceal himself from the law that hunted him. In

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[48] Lamb, 218; Anne Barton, "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, Vol. 7, David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (gen. eds), 417-21 (Cambridge, 2012), 418.

[49] Barton and Giddens identify a "bow-bearer" as an "under-officer who guarded against infringements of forest law," a "bailiff" as an "estate-manager," and a "acater" as a "purchaser of provisions" (426). Julie Sanders makes similar observations: "Friar Tuck is not only the 'chaplin' but also 'steward' to this household; … Little John is a 'bow-bearer,' which could suggest another formal forest official's role; Scarlet and Scathlock represent different generations of huntsmen; George a Green is employed as an usher; and Much … is employed as 'Robin Hood's bailiff'" (*The Cultural Geography of Early Modern Drama, 1620-1650* [Cambridge, 2011], 89).

[50] Potter, 94.

Jonson's play, by contrast, Robin's elevated status as a forester comes accompanied with "a keeper's lodge" which is "well-provisioned … with a full kitchen (including chimney nook) and, indeed, a cook."[51] Similarly, Robin's men dress not in green camouflage, but in formal livery, which Barton and Giddens identify as "servant's garments."[52] As opposed to the humble attire he championed in his prologue, Jonson associates Robin Hood, Maid Marian, and their retinue with very formal garments, garments that reinforce the notion of a strict social hierarchy as opposed to the egalitarian society Robin Hood presided over in his distant past.

By aligning Robin Hood with newer traditions that completely ignore the past, Jonson characterizes elite culture as possessing a distinctly masculine identity. Robin Hood rules in Sherwood Forest with absolute authority, the unmistakable image of a ruling patriarch. Time and time again, Robin's people place him on a pedestal, making his voice and existence the be all and end all of their pastoral reality. "He and his Marian are the sum and talk," Clarion, one of Robin's followers, declares, "Of all that breathe here in the greenwood walk" (1.5.106-7). Not only does Clarion create a hierarchy based on gender inequality, as he acknowledges Marian's identity only in relation to Robin's claim over her, but he also points to Robin Hood's fundamental centrality within this constrained

[51] Sanders, 89.
[52] Jonson, *Sad Shepherd*, 433.

pastoral landscape. Marian is Robin's Marian. Similarly, Clarion (in a state of utter hero worship) claims Robin is the "talk / Of all that breathe" within Sherwood Forest. Quite literally, all narratives, all voices that arise out of Jonson's depiction of elite customs, centre on Robin Hood himself. In her role as Robin's consort, Marian repeatedly reaffirms this power structure, submitting herself to Robin's will whenever possible. Her world, by her own confession, revolves around Robin, much in the way Clarion suggested. Reuniting with her love, after a separation of ten days, Marian smothers him with kisses. "Breathe, breathe awhile" (1.6.18), Robin has to instruct her, echoing Clarion's earlier words, as the play demonstrates how fundamental Robin's presence is to Marian. In response to Robin's patient (yet somewhat patronizing) words of comfort, Marian musters herself enough to utter a single, desperate question: "Could you so long be absent?" (1.6.13-4). Gushing Marian continues to place Robin at the centre of her existence: "How hath this morning paid me for my rising, / First with my sports, but most with meeting you" (1.6.3-4). Just as Clarion predicted a scene earlier, all "talk" revolves around Robin, as he becomes the ultimate figurehead for this elite and idealized world.

Building on the patriarchal connection between Robin Hood and elite traditions, Jonson associates Robin Hood and his people very specifically with the act of herding livestock and shearing sheep. Wool workers typically divided labour between the sexes with men shearing, beating, and de-greasing the wool

before handing the process over to their female counterparts, who would comb, card, and spin it. Robin's first words in the play revolve around wool production, as he congratulates the local shepherds who reside under his jurisdiction for their successful completion of the spring shearing:

> Now that the shearing of your sheep is done,
> And the washed flocks are lighted of their wool,
> ……..
> Why should or you or we so much forget
> The season in ourselves as not to make
> Use of our youth and spirits (1.4.5-6; 11-13).

With their labour complete, Robin encourages his people to enjoy the spring warmth and indulge in pleasant pastimes. What this moment solidifies, however, is that in a play where older folk customs struggle to find expression in the predominantly elite landscape of Robin Hood and his court, Jonson chooses to stage the battle between folk and elite traditions as a gendered conflict. As we will see in the next and final section of this chapter, the act of weaving (a metaphor for storytelling) becomes fractured through the attempts of both groups to assume narrative control over it. Although this division of labour should ensure a cooperative model whereby both parties benefit, Robin's and Maudlin's battle for ownership over the belt suggests otherwise. As argued by the prologue, Jonson stresses that good storytelling should involve tricks. The prologue's parting words, as you will recall, instruct audiences to not "contemn those that are known / Artificers and trust such as are none" (65-6). The ultimate symbol of deception in the play is the belt, a magical device woven from English materials that allows

its wearer to play different parts. The belt, which is the only textile in the play that Jonson provides with a creation story, should be the final fruits of joint labour, the story (as it were) of their efforts. Instead, Robin and Mauldin transform it into a symbol for conflict as both interpret the belt's significance in different ways. The belt is a magical device and, even as it becomes a symbol of contention within the play, it simultaneously offers both Robin and Maudlin the possibility to step into each other's worlds and learn from the differences that seem to irreparably separate them.

Maudlin's Belt: Weaving Unexpected Legacies Together

Present day scholars generally use evidence of Robin Hood's elevated social status to argue that Jonson had a set of very "conservative … agendas," both "personally and politically," when he authored *The Sad Shepherd*.[53] Dissatisfied with this critical approach, Lamb, for example, nonetheless argues that the "play's production of popular culture surrounding Mother Maudlin is … considerably more ambivalent … than it would at first appear."[54] In a similar vein, Julie Sanders argues that the "magic and romance of *The Sad Shepherd* needs always to be understood in tandem with the practical and pragmatic world of

[53] Lamb, 221.
[54] Ibid.

woodland dwelling," a practicality Robin's role as forester brings to the play.[55] Such arguments do not take into consideration the possibility that, just as Jonson highlights Robin's new "bleached" persona in relation to elite culture, he does something remarkably similar in regards to Maudlin and her connection with older folk traditions.[56] By stripping Robin Hood of his carnivalesque origins and transforming him into a gentleman landlord, Jonson establishes a model through which he can explore elite and folk customs through distinctly polarized figures, with Robin representing the ultimate extreme of one form and Maudlin the other. While Robin Hood's depiction becomes saturated by the elite idealism that Sanders points to, Jonson contrasts this elitism with a similarly exaggerated representation of older folk traditions (and the cultural fears they generated) by making Maudlin a perverse figure who dabbles in sorcery and defies Robin's management of the pastoral landscape. If Jonson's updated Robin Hood and Maid Marian represent a sanitized and overly constrained version of elite customs as they exist in sophisticated 1630s London, then Maudlin, in contrast, represents all the horrific and potentially subversive aspects of folk customs as they existed elsewhere in the country. Jonson does not intend for either Robin or Maudlin to be an idealized form of the traditions each represents. Instead, their exaggerated personas become a means to an end, as Jonson explores the inevitable divide he as

[55] Sanders, 89.
[56] Lamb uses the word "bleached" to describe Robin's transformation; I am indebted to her for that turn of phrase (see Lamb, 221).

a playwright must face when trying to reconcile these two opposing views – a divide that ultimately becomes physically manifested for audiences through Jonson's depiction of Maudlin's belt.

Maudlin, after all, forcefully reclaims and repurposes all the censored elements inherent in Jonson's whitewashed depiction of Robin Hood. As Robin sheds his former carnivalesque identity, Maudlin, as a figure of misrule, takes up this role. In the original Robin Hood stories, Robin was a trickster figure, who donned disguises to swindle the wealthy. Similarly, during festival days, morris dancers would perform traditional routines that featured "brightly clad dancing men, their limbs decorated with ribbons and bells" competing "with one another and with a free-ranging Fool for the hand of Maid Marian (often played by a man)" while Robin Hood presided over the competition.[57] In his original form, Robin not only subverted social and economic order, as he strove to champion the basic necessities of human life amongst the poor, but also functioned as a harmonizing figure who fused notions of folk humour, carnivalesque literature, and grotesque realism together. In *The Sad Shepherd*, however, Robin abandons these former principles in the wake of his makeover into a gentleman. In his place, Maudlin takes up these devices, as she partakes in disguise, dances in true morris fashion, and attempts to swindle Robin Hood out of the deer he

[57] Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), 347.

requisitioned for his banquet. Numerous scholars have pointed to Jonson's transference of folk rituals onto Maudlin, as she takes up the reins left abandoned by Robin Hood and Maid Marian. Potter, for example, comments that after having successfully "expelled both the outlaw and the grotesque" in his Robin Hood and Maid Marian, Jonson "[reintroduces] both of them in the form of the grotesque and unsociable witch."[58] Lamb similarly points to Maudlin's connection with "an aesthetic of the low."[59] While scholars interpret the significance of this shift in different ways, the basic fact remains unchanged: after Robin Hood casts off his former identity it falls to Maudlin to preserve these older folk traditions and give them lasting voice.

In much the same way Jonson links Robin Hood with concurrent elitist attitudes towards pastoral themes, he establishes early on that Maudlin speaks for earlier traditions. Unlike Robin Hood, whose bower encompasses an entire hunting lodge complete with kitchen, she emerges from a landscape steeped in decay, as though from a past that has almost been forgotten:

> Within a gloomy dimble she doth dwell,
> Down in a pit o'ergrown with brakes and briars,
> Close by the ruins of a shaken abbey
> Torn with an earthquake down unto the ground,
> 'Mongst graves and grots, near an old charnel house (2.8.15-19)

Jonson characterizes Maudlin as an ancient relic, surrounded by death and

[58] Potter, 94.
[59] Lamb, 221.

overgrowth, left over from a bygone time, one marred by destruction and loss. Dwelling in the shadow of the quasi-magical ruins of a leftover remnant of England's Catholic past, Maudlin represents something that has almost been reclaimed by the pastoral landscape.[60] Chaotic, wild, and haunted by ghostly reminders (via the gravestones) of a time long gone, her home defies the cultivated order we observe elsewhere in the play. Maudlin's very existence in the midst of this gradually vanishing chaos demonstrates her perseverance in the face of both the changing whims of popular culture and Robin's stern patriarchal authority, an authority he imposes on Sherwood Forest through his role as a forest official.

Her survival, however, has taken a distinct toll on Maudlin and, to emphasize this, Jonson chooses to emphasize her struggle by portraying her as a fallen figure. Maudlin quickly demonstrates that she is a product of her surroundings and that, in turn, she has internalized the disorder in which she lives.

[60] Shakespeare's depiction of the strawberry-covered handkerchief does something rather similar, in that it also depicts female legacies in contrast to chaotic images of nature. Scholars have tried to reconcile the handkerchief's exoticized past with its distinctly English-inspired embroidery pattern. Viewing the strawberries as a sympathetic warning on behalf of nature, however perhaps provides a possible solution to this perplexing riddle, given that another "way of understanding the handkerchief is emblematically, as a Renaissance viewer might have recognized it. The handkerchief is 'spotted with strawberries', the fruit sometimes used in emblem books to signal treachery, because serpents hide beneath the attractive leaves to poison any unwary person who picks the sweet berries" (Frances N. Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* [Cranbury NJ, 1991], 26).

Through witchcraft, she becomes a corrupt form of humanity, one that mirrors her unnatural landscape. On several occasions, characters emphasize this sense of loss in conjunction with Maudlin's character as they refer to her potential as a "wise woman," against the more dubious truth: that she is now nothing but an "arrant witch" (1.6.61-2). Not only can she shape-shift into various animals – the hunters who kill the deer at the beginning of the play, for example, report that a raven who "o'erhead sat … was Mother Maudlin" (1.6.42; 47) – but, by her own admission, she can "Take any shape upon her and delude / The senses best acquainted with their owners" (2.1.7-8). She takes carnival grotesquery to a whole new level of extreme, demonstrating the lengths to which Jonson goes to depict both elite and folk traditions in exaggerated ways. In a scenario that echoes Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, Maudlin becomes the anti-masque, who serves in contrast to the ideal embodied by Robin Hood and his company, as she strives for narrative supremacy over Sherwood Forest's pastoral landscape.

Despite her questionable idiosyncrasies, the true root of Maudlin's magic, we soon discover, originates from her deep-seated connection with the past, a past of which she now stands as an embodied emblem. Speaking in a rustic dialect, quite unlike the elevated court poetry employed by Robin Hood and inner circle, Maudlin takes great pride in telling Douce, her daughter, the story of how she first acquired her formidable powers, powers that centre on her possession of a magically "browdred belt with characters":

> A Gypsan lady, and a right beldam,
> Wrought it by moonshine for me and starlight,
> Upo' your gran'am's grave that very night
> We earthed her in the shades, when our dame Hecate
> Made it her gaing-night over the kirkyard,
> With all the bark and parish tykes set at her,
> While I sat whirland of my brazen spindle.
> At every twisted third, my rock let fly,
> Unto the sewster who did sit me nigh,
> Under the town turnpike, which ran each spell
> She stitched in the work and knit it well. (2.3.39-49)

Amidst the growing tensions and competing narratives found within *The Sad Shepherd*, Maudlin's story stresses the importance of her creative and magical powers. Maudlin confirms and then re-confirms her narrative authority in this episode, as she juxtaposes her physical ability to weave (an action emblematical of storytelling) with her oral account of the belt's creation. Maudlin's story also violently inserts a matrilineal counter-culture into the play, one rigidly opposed to the patriarchal authority embodied by Robin Hood. According to Ostovich, "[independent] female power emerges as malevolently unnatural" in this moment, "associated with howling dogs, eerie nights, and ghastly morality."[61] Like the decayed abbey, it presents audiences with something that has almost become lost even as it has mutated and changed over time due to its under-use. Hecate's inclusion in Maudlin's midnight revelry emphasises this interpretation. Originally conceptualized as a "goddess of women and nurturer of children," Hecate had been stripped of much of her original significance by the seventeenth century and

[61] Ostovich, "Appropriation of Pleasure," 99.

was now, according to Ostovich, "solely" identified with witchcraft.[62] Hecate represents one of Maudlin's possible futures, as a figure who has already been defamed and distorted by early modern popular culture. Even the strongest female traditions, it seems, can experience degradation at the hands of an oppressive counter-culture, especially when these traditions actively seek to resist larger mechanisms of control.

In a way that echoes the gradual loss of meaning experienced by the handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Jonson depicts Maudlin on the cusp of irrelevancy, surrounded by relics and figures who are in varying states of decay: from the abbey's overgrown graveyard, to Hecate's diminishing sphere of influence, to Maudlin's own declining familial circle in the wake of her mother's death. Rallying together, these separate elements merge to create a lasting symbol of their former power and potency. In the face of their inevitable decay from human memory, a mystic and spontaneous event occurs. The women band together in a moment of true collaboration ensuring the longevity of their very survival in the process. In the dead of night, Maudlin channels the spirit of her deceased mother, as she spins wool on top of the freshly covered grave. Joining her in a moment of sympathetic union, a hodgepodge of supernatural figures materialize to help give structure and form to Maudlin's weaving endeavours. A "Gypsan lady," a "right beldam," and Hecate all unite with Maudlin as she spins

[62] Ibid.

the wool and they embroider it with magical charms and incantations. In a shocking moment of both grotesque witchcraft and authorial expression, Maudlin unites with voices from the past to create a lasting testimonial of what Maudlin wants them to represent in a prelapsarian form. As a magical symbol for female collaboration, the belt signifies the very traits that Jonson praises in his opening prologue. It denotes both narrative integrity, with "magic in the web of it," to quote Shakespeare, and becomes a vehicle for disguise, allowing the user to assume any form (3.4.68). Furthermore, as Ostovich perceptively observes, by creating a matrilineal line of inheritance, as the belt's creation flows through Maudlin's dead mother, to Maudlin, to Douce herself through Maudlin's tale, "Maudlin implies that the matriarchal line will perpetuate itself through similar acts of female generation."[63]

Maudlin demonstrates the legitimacy of her magical powers through her ability to spin wool and, by doing so, sensationalizes the connection among women, storytelling, and weaving. Using her belt to infiltrate Robin Hood's vastly different pastoral world, Maudlin sets about exposing what she sees as the follies and hypocrisy of her opponents. Sparing no thought for the consequences of her actions, Maudlin parodies and satirizes Robin's hollow masquerade and soulless customs. Disguised as Marian, Maudlin rudely bursts onto the scene, determined not only to rob Robin Hood, but also to expose him for the charlatan she perceives

[63] Ibid.

him to be. Brushing Robin aside with the imperious command, "Hand off, rude ranger," Maudlin commands Robin's man to "bear the venison hence. It is too good / For these coarse rustic mouths that cannot open / Or spend a thank for't" (1.7.4-7). Maudlin expresses her disdain for Robin Hood's mute companions by metaphorically reducing them to silent mouths who cannot speak for themselves. She scathingly exposes the shepherds' complicity in losing touch with their folk origins by pointing to their dumbfounded silence, as they allow all the "talk" of Sherwood Forest to centre on Robin Hood. Maudlin judges them and finds them guilty for their passive acceptance of Robin's systematic usurpation of the play's pastoral world. Her words also highlight the class inequalities that exist amongst Robin Hood's peers. Addressing in particular Scathlock, who is the only person in Robin's camp who, like her and her children, speaks in dialect, she further identifies Scathlock's silence as evidence of his coarse (i.e., low) breeding. Disguised as Marian, Maudlin *performs* her with haughty arrogance, as she condescendingly equates the shepherds' supposed incivility with their low social rank. In doing so, she exposes the crux of the problem, as Robin's identity within Jonson's play re-imposes (rather than disperses) a hierarchy onto the pastoral landscape, a hierarchy Maudlin takes great exception to.

Sadly for Maudlin, what goes around, comes around, and Robin eventually manages to turn the table on her, hunting her down and violently exposing her follies and shortcomings much in the fashion she did his. While Maudlin's earlier

tricks are reminiscent of the type of comic inversion that preoccupied May-games and morris dances, Robin's reaction to Maudlin's meddling is decidedly more violent. When Robin and his followers "instigate" the "witch-hunt … later in the play … the slippage between stag and hag in the terminology of the hunt is deeply unsettling."[64] Coming upon Maudlin, who has disguised herself as Marian once more, Robin Hood "*stays her by the girdle and runs in with her*" only to return a moment later, "*with the girdle broken, and she in her own shape*" (SD 3.4.45-6). Robin's theft, the only one he commits during the course of the play, leaves Maudlin utterly bereft. "Help, murder, help!" she screams in response to Robin's attack, demonstrating how profound the connection between the belt and her identity is. In its absence, Maudlin is beside herself, demanding that Robin return her rightful property: "You will not rob me, outlaw? Thief, restore / My belt that ye have broken" (3.4.46-7). Maudlin can hardly believe Robin's audacity in this moment, phrasing her first reply as a question, as though she is certain that the patriarchally-entitled Robin must be playing some sort of sick practical joke on her. The Robin Hood of old, after all, stole from the rich to give to the poor. In a shocking reversal of that original dynamic, Robin chases the elderly Maudlin down, in an act that thinly implies a type of rape, before ripping a piece of clothing from her body. Unapologetic, Robin gleefully taunts the distraught woman after completing his assault:

[64] Sanders, 97.

> Was this the charmèd circle,
> The copy that so cozened and deceived us?
> I'll carry hence the trophy of your spoils.
> My men shall hunt you too upon the start
> And course you soundly. (3.4.48-52)

Robin's response to Maudlin's distress is ironic, given that earlier in the play he openly lamented that internal threats endangered the pastoral era, something he described (in a moment of meta-theatrical awareness) as a "happy age" (1.4.42). Although Maudlin quickly becomes defiant in the wake of Robin's jeering insults – threatening to "make … sport" of the men Robin sends after her, as she teaches "'em to climb stiles, leap ditches, ponds, / And lie i'the waters" in their pursuit of her (3.4.52-5) – the sense of loss that accompanies Robin's theft underscores the growing unease that exists between Robin (as a patriarchal embodiment of elite pastoral customs) and Maudlin (as a matrilineal spokesperson for carnivalesque folk traditions). As audiences witness Robin Hood problematically transform from former folk-hero to witch-hunter, the play uses the climactic moment, when Robin and Maudlin engage in a tug of war battle over the belt, to literalize the dramatic division Jonson perceives as being at fault for the "heretical" pastorals that he condemns in his opening prologue. Midway through the play, Robin emerges as the winner of this contest, as his superior relevancy further strips the past that Maudlin represents of meaning.

If the play were meant to end here, then the themes of *The Sad Shepherd* would speak profoundly to those of *Othello* as both plays depict the loss of female

legacies through the masculine appropriation of their material culture. In *Othello*, we not only witness Desdemona's murder and Othello's downfall, but also the tragic silencing of a number of correlating themes: love, identity, military heroism, and (in the case of the handkerchief) memory. Certainly in its incomplete form, *The Sad Shepherd* follows a similar course: Eglamour the sad is still sad, Maudlin has been stripped of the object that symbolises her dynasty, and Robin, delighted with his conduct, remains oblivious to the threat he ultimately poses to the pastoral landscape he purports to champion. Presumably, however, Jonson had a larger plan, one that, given the dominant genre of comedy in his play, involved some sort of reconciliation. The belt, after all, could represent a product both of male industry, through the shearing of sheep, and female creativity in the weaving of the wool. Despite Maudlin's misuse of the belt and Robin's subsequent theft, the belt offers audiences a harmonizing symbol, one that Jonson (as a self-proclaimed wool gatherer and weaver extraordinaire) no doubt planned to reclaim in order to bring about some sort of reconciliation between both parties as he demonstrates the fundamental importance of both elite and folk, high and low, traditions to the integrity of the pastoral genre. Perhaps, although this will only ever be supposition on our part, this was the lesson Rueben, whom Jonson lists in the Persons of the Play under the heading "The Reconciler," was meant to teach both Robin and Maudlin, and he restores both parties to a happier medium.

Conclusion

Confronting absence, becoming absent, and overcoming absence. The previous chapter's closing discussion of magical transformation and material memory in *The Sad Shepherd* demonstrates how, thematically speaking, everything comes full circle: Maudlin and Marian, witch and "queen," the supposed images of "corruption" and "virtue," separated by the thinnest of margins as Maudlin impersonates Marian in a perverse reversal (loosely speaking) of the image Mistress Ford creates when she dresses Falstaff in drag, disguising him as Mother Pratt. Similarly, just as Robin Hood commands his men to "Go, sirs, about it" (2.7.21), as they partake in the "rare sport" of "witch-hunting" (2.8.1; 2.7.20), we hear echoes of Ford's orders to his male posse to "search, seek, [and] find out" proof of his wife's adultery (3.3.154) and Uter's desire to have Artesia brought before him in chains. Hunted and demonized by their respective societies, the women discussed throughout this dissertation persistently use their creative ingenuity, magical authority, and moral resolve to generate new meaning out of the various forms of absence that they encounter. Whether they depict characters who challenge the imaginary spectres of unembodied witches or who become disembodied in order to confront social injustice, early modern playwrights frequently (although not exclusively) bestowed the ability to give "airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (5.1.17-18) to their female

creations.

For each variation of absence I identify, however, numerous points of comparison and crossover also arise. Although I have maintained a narrow focus in each chapter, the thematic links that exist between each type cannot (and should not) be denied. Perhaps Shakespeare's *The Tempest* best demonstrates this interconnectivity. Like *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, after all, it also explores a troubled past, one clouded by witchcraft anxieties, through the inclusion of an unstaged witch. Like Donobert who attempts to re-write Modestia's and Constantia's legacies in *The Birth of Merlin*, Prospero repeatedly slanders Sycorax, as he seizes control over the island's history by defining her magic as being the antithesis to his. Nor do his misgivings regarding Sycorax end here. Prospero not only fears her as a rival magician, but also resents how she inevitably complicates his patriarchal fantasies for supremacy (on both a political and personal level). He repeatedly maligns her sexuality by describing it as being perverted and unnatural, a characterization that allows him to prioritize his role as Miranda's father over her position as Caliban's mother. Venting his insecurities regarding Sycorax upon Caliban, Prospero frequently tells him that he is a "bastard" (5.1.273) who was "got [i.e., fathered] by the devil" (1.2.319).[1] Finally,

[1] All quoted material from *The Tempest* comes from Stephen Orgel's edition of the play: William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Oxford, 2008). Stephen Orgel, in particular, shares my skepticism of Prospero's alleged knowledge regarding Sycorax's sexuality and asks his readers: "Did Sycorax really tell Ariel that her

like Othello and (to a looser extent) Robin Hood, Prospero feels compelled to withhold Sycorax's dying legacy to Caliban from him, despite Caliban's legitimate claim: "This island's mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou takest from me" (1.2.331-2). Shakespeare juxtaposes Sycorax's former possession of the island upon which both she and Prospero became castaways against Prospero's current occupation, deliberately drawing into question who the island's rightful owner is. In fact, much of the play's magical and colonial commentary stems from the conflict that arises when Sycorax's son strives against Prospero for supremacy over the land itself. Sycorax's inability to give the island to Caliban lies at the heart of the play's exploration of usurped kingdoms, as Prospero, who has just had his own dukedom usurped by his brother Antonio, enacts the same sort of theft that he has just experienced upon Caliban. Nor does the play ever reconcile the similarities between these two sets of circumstances, demonstrating a continued unease regarding the notion that women could transmit "things" to future generations. At the end of the play audiences witness Prospero attempt to internalize this power for himself as he re-gifts the island to Caliban, acting as an intermediary who imposes his own limitations upon Sycorax's memory.

Each chapter in this dissertation, therefore, focuses on plays that explore

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baby was the illegitimate son of the devil? Or is this Prospero's contribution to the story; an especially creative piece of invective, and an extreme instance of his characteristic assumptions about women?" ("Prospero's Wife," in *The Tempest: Critical Essays*, Patrick M. Murphy [ed.], 231-44 (New York, 2001), 235).

how early modern playwrights use off-stage spaces or characters to comment on cultural attitudes towards gender, magic, and the immaterial. Whether we witness women confronting demonic doppelgängers of themselves, as the merry wives, Bel-Anna, Joan la Pucelle, Artesia, and Maid Marion all do, or we watch characters find their voices despite being (or being made to be) absent, as Mother Pratt, the women of *The Birth of Merlin*, and the creators of Desdemona's handkerchief and Maudlin's belt all do, absence becomes a two-edged sword that both threatens women and empowers them simultaneously. When magic becomes relegated to off-stage spaces it creates a subtler form of power in contrast to the types of theatrical displays we see in plays like Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1588) or Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* (c. 1621) where magic becomes the devil's parlour trick. In contrast, the illusionary nature of magic, when relegated off stage, penetrates the imagination of theatre-goers and involves them in the creation process. It characterizes magic as being an internal process, one defined and generated by the human mind. By giving "airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" women in dramatic productions are often able to assume authorial control over the cultural attitudes that originally drew their reputations into question to begin with, regardless of their moral or social standing (*Midsummer* 5.1.16-17). Throughout this process, we (the audience) become accomplices in their endeavours, as our "minds [transfigure] so together" and we help them create "something of great constancy" (*Midsummer* 5.1.24; 26).

Utilizing their society's belief in magic to enhance their personal authority, the women in the plays I examine throughout this dissertation challenge cultural stereotypes concerning woman and magic, and (occasionally) even succeed in re-writing these dangerous ideologies into something less menacing. Although these actions never guarantee a permanent victory, absence frequently becomes a site for magical protest and change.

The Future of Absence

As I conclude this project, I do so with more questions in mind than definitive answers. The study of theatrical absence is an underdeveloped critical approach in the field of early modern literary studies and one that I want to help further advance. Moving forward, I see my goals as being threefold. First, I want to conduct more archival research in order to advance our appreciation of how early modern individuals used and understood notions of "absence" in their writing. Witchcraft transcripts, early modern poetry, political and religious tracts, memorial and funerary writing, and additional anti-theatrical pamphlets all present viable avenues for future research when it comes to furthering our comprehension of early modern attitudes towards absence and the immaterial. Notions of absence occurred in the period, but the vocabulary writers used to contemplate this phenomenon varied wildly from author to author, and text to text, as they struggled to make sense of this inherently abstract concept. For

Shakespeare, absence is "airy nothing" or the creative potential of the human mind, for preacher Samuel Ward absence is death, which is both the "knownest and vnknownest thing in the world," for René Descartes absence is the "metaphysical," and for Thomas More absence is "Immaterial Substances."[2] Mapping these various terms and impressions of absence out in more detail will be a vital next step in furthering future discussions of the immaterial in the study of early modern literary studies.

Second, I would like to analyse additional examples of the three types of absence this dissertation identifies in order to establish a more comprehensive survey of this phenomenon in practice. I have discovered, for example, a number of other cases where absent, unstaged witches feature in the drama of the period, such as Nell in Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* (c. 1594), Mistress Shore in Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1591), and Meroe in George Peele's *The Old Wives Tale* (c. 1591). In the latter case, Peele (in conjunction with the Queen's Men) juxtaposes Madge the storyteller, Sacrapant the magician, and his mother Meroe the witch to challenge the negative stereotypes that commonly linked female oral traditions with witchcraft during the early modern period, a purpose that speaks to

[2] Samuel Ward, *Life of Faith in Death. Exemplified in the Living Speeches of Dying Christians* (London, 1622), 51; Zvi Biener, *The Unity of Science in Early-Modern Philosophy: Subalternation, Metaphysics and the Geometrical Manner in Scholasticism, Galileo and Descartes* (Anne Arbor MI, 2008), 112; Sarah Hutton, "The Cambridge Platonists" in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy,* Steven Nadler (ed.), 308-19 (Malden MA, 2008), 314.

Mistress Ford's achievements in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as argued in chapter one. Similarly, episodes of magical or quasi-magical confinement abound in the drama of the period. Like Constantia and Modestia in *The Birth of Merlin*, for instance, the three women in George Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (c. 1610) all enter a cloister at the end of the play, there to "survive" as they "forsake the world in which they reign" (5.5.210; 212).[3] In Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, alternatively, women respond very differently to off-stage spaces, perceiving them as a threat, rather than an opportunity. Florinda and Hellena actively resist absence, with Florinda refusing to marry Vencentio and "lie in a moth-eaten bed chamber" (1.1.100) and Hellena rejecting a life of religious contemplation, arguing that such a fate would be a "waste" of her "youth" (1.1.125).[4] In contrast, the feminized (and absent) turquoise ring that Shylock's now deceased wife gave to him as a betrothal present in *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1595) represents a tragic loss of history and identity when her daughter, Jessica, steals it from her father only to trade it for a monkey after she elopes with Lorenzo. During the early modern period, betrothal or wedding rings served multiple purposes, including the function of a legal contract. Jessica's theft of the ring, therefore, represents yet another instance in the play where Shylock endures

[3] See George Chapman, *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, Katharine Eisaman Maus (ed.), 175-248 (Oxford, 1995).
[4] See Aphra Behn, *The Rover; or, The Banished Cavaliers*, 2nd Edition, Anne Russell (ed.) (Peterborough ON, 2004).

a broken bond, although this instance proves far more personal. As Jessica renounces her Jewish traditions and elopes with a Christian husband, she also takes away the ring, which symbolized the dynasty her parents wanted to build with one another, their promise of a future together. As the sole offspring of her parents' marriage, that future becomes lost with Jessica herself. When she trades away the ring, therefore, in the most insulting manner possible (in payment for a mere curiosity), the play critiques her inherent materialism and creates a stark contrast between the pledge of love her parents exchanged between them and the senseless spending spree she and Lorenzo partake in. These episodes continue to define theatrical absences in rich and complex ways, ways that I want to investigate further.

Third, and finally, I need to continue to identify additional shades of absence. Throughout this dissertation I have focussed on three specific types, but unarguably other variations exist. In plays such as Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1610) and Mary Wroth's *Love's Victory* (c. 1620), for example, the sudden reappearance (and miraculous resurrection) of what should be permanently absent amplifies the potentially redemptive or miraculous power that off-stage spaces have over their on-stage counterparts. These moments of magical unveiling represent the opposite of magical confinement, where instead of the present becoming absent the absent (to the shock of audiences) imposes itself back onto the stage. Alternatively, examining absent male figures, such as Portia's

father in *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596) or (to a more ambiguous extent) Cynthia's husband Lysander in Chapman's *The Widow's Tears* (c. 1605), could become an informative point of comparison in contrast to my interest in absent witches. Do female authors, like Behn, characterize the immaterial differently from their male counterparts? What do moments of reclaimed absence signify? Do episodes of male gendered absence differ from the types outlined throughout this dissertation? Moving forward, I want to answer these questions as I continue to examine additional texts.

When I began this project, a project that first commenced during my M.A. year after a course I took with Dr. Helen Ostovich, my supervisor extraordinaire, I set out to write a dissertation about absent witches. As the project evolved, however, I discovered (to my surprise and delight) how prolific and thematically connected moments of magical absences were in the drama of the period. Regardless of the type of absence I studied, thematic connections materialized. The three chapters included in this dissertations have only begun to scratch the surface of this topic. There is still much work to be done on issues such as material memories, magic of the incomplete artifact, silences in scripts, and the evanescent nature of theatrical performance itself.

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