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Shelby Richardson, ed. *The Witch of Edmonton* by Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2021. Pp 162. Paperback £17.95. ISBN: 9781554814169.

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'Like actors', Shelby Richardson observes in her new Broadview edition of *The Witch of Edmonton*, 'witches are unsettling figures because they have at once too much and not enough power' (14).[1] This elision between the dramatic performance of witchcraft in popular plays and the all too real persecution of Elizabeth Sawyer in 1621 captures the central argument teased out across this slim volume: that *The Witch of Edmonton* is, ultimately, a play concerned with the unknowable limits of reality. Setting the play in the context of a world in which 'everything, and nothing, might be true', Richardson exposes witchcraft as both punishable offence and potent metaphor: 'the figure of the witch' shows 'the extent to which human knowledge of the world was painfully finite' (15).

Richardson's themes of truth and knowledge extend from the plot of *Witch*, with its exploration of bigamy as well as witchcraft, to its production. She begins with questions of authorship and sources and refers on several occasions to the 'media enterprise' (9) which inspired the play, including sensationalist balladmongers who 'embellish Sawyer's crimes' (12). In her discussion of this frenzy of publications, Richardson does what can be done with little information (the relevant ballads are neither named nor extant). Instead, she offers a detailed reading of Henry Goodcole's 1621 pamphlet, *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch* (a text she includes in full in a later section). Again, Richardson frames Goodcole's discussion of such ballads in his pamphlet account of Sawyer's apparent confession as a question of truth. What the ballads offer as 'ridiculous fictions', Goodcole counters with a 'true declaration' (12), although of course Richardson is quick to point out that Goodcole is no less biased in his assumption of Sawyer's guilt. *Witch* is then proposed not only as a play which interrogates truth in its own plot but also as a play drawn from and surrounded by profoundly questionable testimony.

Witchcraft's capacity to expose fault lines in popular systems of belief is an argument that recent critics have found fruitful and one by which I am persuaded. Only at Richardson's claim that Rowley, Dekker, and Ford were 'abundantly aware of the cultural biases in their society' such as the frequent association of witches with old or 'deformed' bodies (12), have I found myself unsure. Are these truths so

readily challenged by a play that draws such cruel attention to this 'witch's' body? Are these playwrights really so sympathetic to Sawyer's suffering? To be aware of a bias, Richardson seems to imply, is to counter it, but while the playwrights may be sceptical of typical representations of the witch, they do not entirely dispel them, not least because Sawyer is absent for large sections of the play. Sawyer's poverty and age, expressed early on in soliloquy, are soon forgotten as she makes her blood pact with the devil, revels in the company of Tomalin, and becomes, as the play would have it, a worthy subject of persecution after all.

As Richardson notes, however, the play does not always offer one consistent perspective. To demonstrate this complex polyvocality, her introduction begins with a discussion of collaborative authorship, establishing from its opening lines that *Witch* is a play that melds three authorial perspectives and agendas, drawn from three 'quite different backgrounds … and influences' (7). The text is immediately understood as composite, with no one stable 'truth'. With no debate over which plot is primary, secondary, or tertiary (the witch plot, for instance, could be considered surprisingly 'subordinate'), Richardson frames Rowley's Cuddy Banks, Ford's Frank Thorney, and Dekker's Elizabeth Sawyer scenes as essential parts of a shared conversation about societal corruption and personal dishonesty.[2] A few fascinating moments in her discussion of authorship are left unexplored because of the succinct nature of the introduction. We are told, for instance, that 'Ford eventually came to be known as a major writer of revenge dramas' (8) — this detail, useful for contextualizing the playwright for student readers, also begs a moment of analysis. The final scenes of Frank Thorney's simultaneous punishment and forgiveness might then be viewed through the lens of Ford's favoured genre. Sawyer herself might be the revenger, inflicting punishment on a corrupt community, while (like many revengers) transgressing many moral boundaries in the process. There might even, in the play's final deaths, be some catharsis.

While Richardson does not stretch outwards to consider these ideas (and this restraint is in part what makes her introduction so sharp and readable), there are many such morsels for thought throughout her opening pages. The same is true of her succinct and unobtrusive notes across the play itself, largely serving to gloss early modern terminology but also offering analysis. For instance, the line, 'Once good, and ever' is given the note, 'Perhaps a reference to the Calvinist doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints' (20). This note is a tiny detail, enough to spark a thought, to prompt further research, but not so intrusive as to force a certain reading. Such details are typical of Richardson's edition, which offers potential rather than prescriptive meanings.

Alongside its careful notes, a great strength of this edition is its final section, 'In Context'. Here, Richardson not only includes excerpts from four contemporary texts which are relevant to those reading or teaching *Witch*, but also glosses them with rigour and precision. James I's *Demonology* (1597), William Perkins's A *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1608), John Cotta's *The Trial of Witchcraft* (1616), and Henry Goodcole's pamphlet (1621) are included or excerpted with a brief synopsis. Richardson's consideration of witchcraft as a metaphorical exploration of reality is usefully complicated by the inclusion of *Demonology* and its discussion of the real persecution of witches. Here, Richardson chooses her excerpts sharply, including both the Preface and an argument from the fifth chapter of the second book in which Philomathes and Epistemon debate the powers and motives of witches. Each text has thorough notes, with biblical quotations glossed and referenced, cited authors situated, and details of print offered through facsimiles of each title page. In this section, Richardson offers more extended commentary. For instance, her note on 'differentia', explains that, in using the term, James is 'staking the claim that he focuses on high principles, which have priority over specifics and simultaneously encompass every possible instance of them' (117, n 1). The note offers a useful detail which unlocks the limits of James's philosophy.

However, in her edition of Goodcole's pamphlet, a text so crucial to her introduction, Richardson's footnotes are not separated from Goodcole's own notes, which are printed in the margins of his questions and answers in the 1621 pamphlet. There, Goodcole's asides physically frame Sawyer's reported words, both elaborating and undercutting. In Richardson's edition of the short text, however, those comments are laid out as footnotes, interwoven with her own comments. While the act of laying out Richardson's notes alongside Goodcole's offers an interesting counterbalance to his biased interjections, and while each relevant note is of course appropriately marked as Goodcole's, it does make it difficult to tell that the 1621 text crowds Sawyer's words with printed marginalia. But this layout offers a minor formatting quibble in what is a highly accessible edition, bolstered by other highly accessible excerpts of relevant 'witch texts', each concerned with the questions of scepticism and belief that the introduction seeds.

Overall, Richardson has produced a clean and comprehensive edition that is highly useful for both students and general readers in that it does not assume knowledge (a reference to a windmill at 4.2.85, for instance, is tied succinctly to Miguel de Cervantes and the idea of the 'imaginary enemy' [93]). In this sense, the work is a highly successful teaching edition, one that lays out the intricacies

of early modern language and cultural references painstakingly but without unnecessary complication.

Giving space to both the pressing sociopolitial concerns of a play which exposes the damage done by misogyny and poverty and to its sensational necromancy and colour-shifting devil dog is a difficult task. The play exposes, as Richardson memorably puts it, an exploration of 'the sorts of mundane reality that are so often to be found at the heart of sensational occurrences' (9). While her additional materials on witchcraft touch upon the sensational, Richardson's thorough notes ground the play in the specificity of small-town daily life in 1621. This edition, contextualized in a world that wrestles with what is true and what is fair, then offers a careful and thought-provoking approach to a 'strikingly modern' (8) early modern play.

Notes

1 With thanks to the Leverhulme Trust whose funding has allowed me to carry out this work while in my role as an early career fellow at Newcastle University.

2 Susan D. Amussen, '*The Witch of Edmonton*: Witchcraft, Inversion, and Social Criticism', *Early Theatre* 21.2 (2018), 167–180, 167, https://doi.org/10.12745/et.21.2.3608.