

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

The Witch of Edmonton. 1621

Dekker, Thomas (1572-1632)-**Rowley**, William (1585-1626)-**Ford**, John (1586-1639)

Background of the play

The background to the present play lies in events, current with the play itself, which occurred in the parish of Edmonton, outside London. (This closeness to events on the street or, so to speak 'in the papers,' is not the norm in tragedy, nor is it generally in high literature; even in the novel, a genus born in the daily matter of life, essentially a child of newspapers, the social media of its time. As modernly as the Goncourt brothers (1822-96; 1830-1890), who prepped their realistic fiction by touring factories and industrial suburbs, pen in hand, compiling extensive notes on 'the way people live, it was still new to approximate the texture of ordinary life in making fictional accounts of it.) One sees from the outset that the sociological impulse rests at the root of the present play, which explores the real life consequences of diabolism and social morbidity, as they can still be found today. The factor of diabolism, which sits at center of *The Witch of Edmonton*, may in fact seem to project the play's trajectory into the past, and yet that factor, presented in the present play,

CHARACTERS

Cuddy Banks, local rustic and clown, leader of the morris dancers. This innocent country guy is unique in his ability to sympathize with Mrs. Sawyer.

Dog, Tom, a black dog who is an embodiment of the devil, and who appears on occasion to spread the sense of evil.

Frank, servant of Sir Arthur Clarington. He marries Winnifred, in the mistaken belief that he is the father of her child. In the end he is executed for having stabbed Susan to death.

Justice; the representative of the law, who passes final sentence on Mrs. Sawyer and Frank.

Sir Arthur Clarington, a wealthy landowner, he has had covert sexual relations with Winnifred, Frank's bride, and adopts unscrupulous means to cover up the scandal.

Katherine, daughter of Old Carter, discoverer of the incriminating murder knife on Frank.

Mother Sawyer, the witch, so called because her neighbors have decided that this quite decrepit old Lady is the source of the withering of their crops. In other words she is a scapegoat, and on the basis of that suspicion she is hanged by an angry crowd.

Winnifred, maid of Sir Arthur, falls in love with Frank Thorney. She is pregnant with the child of Sir Arthur, with whom she has had a secret affair

PLOT

The play opens on a scene out of a text on family life. Frank and Winnifred come before us. Frank and Winnifred find themselves in a room in the house of Sir Arthur Clarington, at prominent of the community of Edmonton. It is an intimate scene--one might say Ibsen *avant le fait*--one feels disclosures in the air and yet can barely suspect the degree to which the confidential talk that opens before us is taking place in a deep atmosphere of deception. Frank is there ostensibly to reassure the innocent and virtuous Winnifred, maid of Arthur Clarington, that he will take care of her in her pregnancy--he refers to the child she is carrying, and of which he fully knows that Sir Arthur is the father. He assures her, while living his

lie, that he will meanwhile, as he says comfortingly see to the child, housing her with his uncle, and visiting her at least once a month. The true story behind this set of assertions is that Sir Arthur is the child's father, is determined to keep the potential scandal quiet, and has paid Frank to take the scandal off his back by 'marrying' Winnifred, and keeping her out of sight. A tangle of corruptions, in a circumscribed communal setting, seems to point only inward, to a true social heart of darkness.

By a sharp and brilliant transition, Dekker shifts us into a field near Edmonton, where Mrs. Sawyer, the witch of Edmonton, is gathering sticks. She is an ugly ordinary looking 'old lady,' minding her own business, when she is accosted by old Banks, out walking the fields. She is muttering to herself about her virtual ostracism from Edmonton, ostracism based on the rumor that she is a witch with dark powers, who has brought ruin onto the farmers' crops by her mere toxic presence. Banks is at once hostile and brutal toward her. He beats her and throws her to the ground, as though she is an infected thing. He represents the view of the Edmonton farm establishment,

For whom this allegedly toxic witch is the source of their dried up farmlands. (Significant parallel can be drawn here with the situation in Thebes, at the outset of Sophocles' Oedipus the King, in which the plague harrowing the Theban countryside is caused the network of violence and temper, Oedipus' own witch like nature--as the people saw it).

The course of the drama, the first two acts, continues by juxtaposing the 'witch' --and Tom, her accompanying devil-dog--with the son of the nasty old Banks. Cuddy Banks is a local yokel, Fond of wandering in the countryside with his fellow rustics and old buddy type Morris dancers. He lives straight out of the pagan rustic tradition--perfectly genuine at Dekker's time--for which the kind of ostracism central to the present play is alien. He is of a different universe from the morally gnarled figures--Frank, Sir Arthur Clarington, old Banks, Old Carter--whose cruel and limited thought parameters are narrow and egotistic.

The remainder of the play transpires under the rubric of Frank, his destiny and, ultimately events which could seem to shed an aura of brightness over the earlier dark tones of the play (Hard though it is to call the work even a tragicomedy, the final scenes may seem to lean in that direction.

It seems that moral tone and possibility decline, as Frank's faked marriage to Winnifred leads to a dreadful conclusion, generated by the world of evil that lies on all sides in the society of Edmonton. Frank's father is interested in his children's marriages for one reason, his own personal monetary advantage.

Not love. The result is that he insists Frank should marry Susan, Old Carter's daughter, a financially more valuable step for the family. However the imposing of this bigamous relation, on the anyway morally weakened Frank drives the young husband to flee, his 'wife' Winnifred with him disguised as a pageboy. The result of this break for independence is that Susan, the newly appointed wife for Frank, follows after him, so maddening him with demands to recover her dowry money, that he stabs her to death.

In the end both Frank and Mrs. Sawyer, the witch, are executed. (Frank is surrounded by sympathy and understanding, while there is little sense of remorse at the disappearance of Mrs. Sawyer) Her devil dog, Tom, persists in his plan, to spread the spirit of evil.

THEMES

Social differentiation. In this 'early sociological' drama, it is of great importance into what class you fit. Mrs. Sawyer, the witch, is at the bottom, by every standard of measurement. Sir Arthur Clarington is near the top of the social pyramid--financially if not morally.

The spirit of evil. The village of Edmonton comes on as permeated by the sense of evil. Tom, the devil dog, is bluntly present, as ally of Mrs. Sawyer, but, more widely than that, as an obstreperous symptom of Edmonton's disorder.

Madness. At the bequest of Mrs. Sawyer Mrs Ratcliffe is driven mad. A brushing against Tom the devil dog is enough to do it. Madness is volatile in this play, and just under the surface of all events.

Envy and self-transcendence. Most of the gentry whom we get to know are flagrantly self-interested--Sir Arthur, Old Carter, Old Banks--interested either in the value of their property or in the marriage value of their children.

EVENTS AND COMMENTARY

Discussion of this play must retreat through an historical cloud. Have we seen portrayals of low or middle class life, in early English drama? In *Gorboduc*? *Everyman* in his humor? In the roster of rustics who make their ways through Elizabethan and Jacobean drama? We have indeed extended our lens out beyond the parameters of that 'upper social level, which we find in *The Spanish Tragedy* or *The Changeling* or for that matter the vast majority of the works analyzed here. We have to stop, though, at the instance of a Mrs. Sawyer, a relatively non-descript, indeed characterless 'witch,' a product more of her social setting than of any inherent evil. 'Evil' there is in her, of course, but nothing rivalling the evil of her fellow citizens, whose inherent immorality generates the entire sordid panorama of *The Witch of Edmonton*.

Is there then a mysterious spirituality to Mrs. Sawyer, or is she simply a projection of the calamities and disorders of her society? We need to retreat, for an explanation, to an historical moment which precedes the scapegoat thinking of modern social anthropology or of Arthur Miller's astute sociology of Colonial Massachusetts. We have returned to an era in which the mysterious, even the mediaeval is close to the daily, and requires less clarification than would the daily. Mrs. Sawyer is, as she appears to be, just a simple old lady who is harmless unless you want her to be something else.