

**The Historiography of Witch-Hunting:  
Discipline of the Unruly in *The Witch of  
Edmonton and Vinegar Tom***

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**ABSTRACT**

Witchcraft manifests a threat to Christian civilization. Historically the fear of witchcraft together with socio-economic forces produces different perspectives on social intergration and effects witch-hunting activities. Authority is seen in legal documents, and historical witch persecutions echo witch-hunting in literary works. Theories of the persecution of witchcraft can be divided into two groups: 1) the scapegoat theory, based on the conflicts created because of a new regime, 2) social strain theory emphasizing tensions produced by social and economic changes. This paper tries to discuss historiography of witch-hunting as represented in *The Witch of Edmonton* and *Vinegar Tom*, with an emphasis on the punishment of deviant women in the early seventeenth century.

**KEY WORDS**

witch-hunting	<i>Vinegar Tom</i> (1976)
<i>The Witch of Edmonton</i> (1621)	John Ford
Caryl Churchill	familiar
Morris dance	

On July 27, 1566, two days after her capture and trial, Mother Waterhouse, found guilty of witchcraft, was executed on the gallows. She was among the first executed 'witches' under the law enacted in 1563, according to *The Examination and Confession of Certain Witches at Chelmsford*, published in 1566. According to this record, Mother Waterhouse was said to have used her cat Sathan to kill a neighbor, her own husband, and pigs, cows, and geese of her neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> The significance of the Chelmsford trial was the introduction of three solid precedents invoked in later 17th century witch-hunt trials in Old and New England: 1) the discovery of a witch's marks or teat, from which the Devil could suck blood, 2) a familiar which can transform itself into different shapes, 3) evidence based on the testimony of any one who suspects the accused of being a witch (Williams 83-4).

Compared with the law in Scotland and European countries, English judicial attitudes and practice toward witchcraft were tolerant. It was not until 1563 that the first comprehensive act was passed decreeing that bewitching to death led to the death penalty, injuring persons or goods or cattle and seeking treasure warranted prison and pillory for the first offenses (Corbin 3). The law was strengthened during the reign of James I. The act of 1604 made witchcraft a felony, the keeping of familiars an offense together with the exhumation of bodies for conjuration or evocation (3). The judicial procedure which the accused had to go through included solitary confinement with little food and water, the

deprivation of sleep, separation from relatives and friends, as well as the humiliating "teat finding". In England, with the civil war, the witch-finding activity reached its climax. Mathew Hopkins, who proclaimed himself "Witch-finder General," successfully sent some two hundred witches to the gallows within two years, most of them women. Two dramatic works, *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) and *Vinegar Tom* (1976), the first published with the contemporary activities of witch-hunting of the seventeenth century and the second with the retrospective viewpoints of our time, have succinctly reproduced a special seventeenth century phenomenon. This paper focuses on the early modern disciplinary system as related to the punishment of unruly women, and the potential of the weaker sex as a religious rebel. This paper exposes also the strains of the economic situation how the tension caused by witch-hunting helps create a collective psychosis, with the implications for the punishment of disturbances as found in the cultural history of England.

In the seventeenth century most common people in Europe still lived in a world of magic. Although belief in contact with nonhuman spirits of various kinds has been common to all the tribes of humanity, the fascination with the power of evil in the 16th century had already greatly influenced the disciplinary system and the ways of interpreting unfortunate events. Witchcraft manifested a great threat to Christian civilization; the most unbearable part of witchcraft for the puritans was the belief that witches, during heir Sabbath, participated in orgies with the Devil. Witchcraft therefore not only shared a vocabulary of misrule but also signified the fear of unruly woman. Puritans firmly believed that the two sexes had different destinies so that they had endeavored to construct a society which institutionalized male superiority-dominance and female-submission, on the ground that woman, as weaker vassal, tended to be an instrument of the Devil (Anderson, 174-80). Although philosophers and physi-

cians like Reginald Scot and George Gifford had proclaimed the possibility of victimization of the innocent,<sup>2</sup> the prevalence of witches was a fact widely accepted by the majority, including a number of the most powerful intellects of the time. Luther and Calvin never denied the existence of witchcraft. The embodiment of evil in witchcraft was clearly pointed out by Jean Bodin and James I<sup>5</sup>; William Perkins, confirming James' condemnation of witchcraft, asserted at the same time, "the more women, the more witches" (Williams 111). Once officially recognized as a crime representing serious problems in the society, the system of control was organized to have witches and witchcraft suppressed. The charge of demon worship grew in England. The indicted witches of village or slum became more vulnerable and defenseless, since those accused could neither grasp the substance of her indictment nor be powerfully backed up by someone else. Toward this atmosphere, Robert H. West confirmed, "in England, as elsewhere, a willful human approach to Satan's destructive angels was the heart of sixteenth century theory on witchcraft" (5). Mother Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton* as well as Joan, Ellen, Susan and Alice in *Vinegar Tom* fell into the category of the indicted who were considered unruly and subversive by the neighbors and found no supportive voice at all at their executions.

*The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) is a collaborative work by Dekker, Ford, and Rowley. Published not long after the famous Lancaster trial, this play is a dramatization of the historical execution of Elizabeth Sawyer for witchcraft on April 19, 1621. The Play's immediate source is the *Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch*, a pamphlet written by Henry Goodcole, chaplain of Newgate prison. It was entered in the stationers' Register on April 27 of the same year (Comensoli 43). The play's first recorded production was in December 1621, but for some reason, it was not printed until 1658, with the title page describing the work as "A known true

story, Composed into a Tragi-Comedy" (Harris 92). The pamphlet of Goodcole recorded his interviews with Elizabeth Sawyer immediately before her execution. The most important statement which influenced the creation of the play was Sawyer's confession of having seen the Devil and Sawyer's being detested by her neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

*The Witch of Edmonton* follows the pamphlet account very closely. It discloses the alienation of Mother Sawyer from her neighbors and exposes the tense human relationship caused by economic and class conflicts. At the very beginning of the play Mother Sawyer is already crowned with the title of 'hag' before her willing involvement with the Devil. Old and starved, without any relatives or other means of survival, she begs around and was resented by her neighbors. *The Witch of Edmonton* was written when in England the enclosure law was enacted. That the laws forbidding the poor to make use of the substance on private and public land was reflected in the play. Enclosure laws, breaking up many of the old cooperative village communities, increased the numbers of poor people, many of them widowed and elderly, deprived of any means of subsistence (Comensoli 50). Without knowledge of law and any means of survival, at the beginning of the play, Mother Sawyer collects firewood from her landlord's property and ignites the already-existing tension. She is beaten and her thatch is burned; Mother Sawyer vows revenge.

To construct Mother Sawyer as an indicted witch, the playwrights gave her a black dog, serving as Sawyer's familiar and the media between Sawyer and the Devil. However, Mother Sawyer, before and after the conversion, did not realize the Devil could not rally revenge for her or help her, neither could she rationalize the fear of damnation or not her transgressive cursing had already posited her as a witch, the body of whom needed to be disciplined and punished. Mother Sawyer is executed at the end of the play; however, throughout *The Witch of Edmonton*, the sympathetic tone and

the transformation of Mother Sawyer from a vulnerable old woman to a witch with a real familiar seems to manifest a subversive stance on the conception of witchcraft in the Renaissance. Aside from the reference linking Sawyer's personal tragedy to inextricably to her persecution and her internalization of the community's brutality (Comensoli 45), the playwrights arranged to have the accusation of Sawyer's crime render Anne Ratcliff's insanity invalid. The playwrights presented to their audience the idea that Anne Ratcliff when first entering the stage, was already mad.<sup>5</sup> As Etta Onat has suggested, Anne Ratcliff's madness and her later suicide might very well have been caused by "nothing more than a coincidental madness, not the result of demonic possession at all." (94) From the monologue of Anne and the behavior of Sawyer, there are exposed mental anguishes caused by economic destitution. For Mother Sawyer, there is no means for survival nor a place to live; for Ratcliff, the trespass of her sow, and the economic loss of her family are an unshakable nightmare. The other accusation against Mother Sawyer is for a Morris dance which was regarded by the villagers as the source of the fall of the wives, daughters, and the maidservants. The Morris dance, mentioned in the second act of play, indeed reveals the male villagers' negative attitudes toward deviance and misrule. Margaret Murray and Anthony Harris refer the origins of witchcraft and Morris dancing to the celebration of May Day (Harris 93). Morris dancing, because it retains vestiges of primitive fertility rites, was also an occasion for the temporary release from the social order, a fact abhorred by the Church and patriarchal society. Sawyer, once taken as the source of women's wanton behavior, had to be disciplined and her body punished. Amussen in her *An Ordered Society* notes that in 17th century England, poverty was associated with disorder, not only in times of dearth but also in times of prosperity. Both village notables and gentry feared the disorders of the poor. Amussen emphasized also that

since late sixteenth century, there had been an increase in the prosecutions for all forms of disorderliness: "Prosecutions directed at those whose behavior disrupted both families and villages." (31) In *The Witch of Edmonton*, we find witchcraft was one of the crimes subjected to the most intense scrutiny<sup>6</sup> and Sawyer is taken as and embodiment of evil by the villagers. In the play, the teat is found and the familiar is proven to be real. Mother Sawyer, without knowing what witchcraft really is and how far she could be helped by the Devil, without really causing the death of anyone, is sent to the gallows.

The teat-finding procedure and the victimization of the ignorant and unruly women are emphasized in the contemporary drama *Vinegar Tom* (1976). In her preface to *Vinegar Tom*, the distinguished contemporary playwright Caryl Churchill ill states that she would like to expose that in the seventeenth century witchcraft existed in the minds of its persecutors so that 'witches' tended to be scapegoats in times of stress (128). To recreate and to have a historiography of the special seventeenth century atmosphere, Churchill sets her characters against the social background full of poverty, humiliation and prejudice. The most significant of all the strategies that Churchill uses in this play is to manifest how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves.

Like Mother Sawyer, Churchill's four women characters who were accused of witchcraft were socially powerless. Each of the women accused attempts to act or speak in an autonomous manner, but because of their marginal social status, their behavior is regarded as aberrant and abnormal (Merril 76). Churchill's old woman Joan shares a lot of similarities with Mother Sawyer. She is poor, old, curses all the time, and does not have a husband. She begs around always; whenever refused, she curses. Her annoyed neighbor has long suspected Joan's cat Vinegar Tom steals her cream everyday. The day after Joan curses with the words "the Devil

take you and your man and your friends and your cows and your butter and your yeast and your beer and your bread and your cider and your cold face" (scene 4, 144), Margery falls ill and then her calves shake and then bellies swell up. Margery's husband Jack is enamored with Joan's daughter Alice but is rejected. After his wife and calves fall ill, Jack believes he has been bewitched by her. When Jack goes up to Alice to force her to release him, Alice teases him by putting her hands between Jack's thighs and saying "There. It's back" (scene 13). Jack takes it as true. When the famous witch-finder Packer arrives in this village, Alice and Joan are captured. With them, two other women are accused; one is a healer of women and the other, a woman who has aborted her child because her secret lover did not marry her. The teat-finding scenes are vividly presented by Churchill. When Alice and Susan are captured, their skirts are pulled up, and they are shaved; their secret parts are poked by two women helpers with the male witchfinder supervising. The antagonism between the oppressor and the oppressed is stressed throughout the teatfinding procedure. Joan's response to this is to confirm herself a witch, a fearful figure. Susan is persuaded to believe in her own wickedness. Ellen, the healer has long understood her ambiguous status and has modded herself a helper of unruly women, while Alice's response echoes Mother Sawyer's. She says,

I am not a witch, but I wish I was If I could live. I'd be a witch now after what they've done (scene 20.75)

Alice is a counterpart of Sawyer created by Churchill. Rebellious and subversive, Alice, under the depiction of Churchill is the only person who realizes what really is going on in their community: the poor win no mercy from neighbors while the men, with their female-accomplices, prosecute and humiliate women by sending all the seemingly unruly women

to the gallows. In both plays, authors have created worlds of complexity; there are gender problems, class antagonism and the tension created by unfortunate happenings and poverty. Reading Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* has helped us to realize why contemporary sociologist Christina Lerner in her essay "Crimen Exceptum" refers the witch-hunting atmosphere to the criminalization of women, a "phenomenon that affected women of all classes at that time." (69-73)

In both plays the public torture and the public response to the punishment are significant. Especially in Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*, public scenes serve not only as a means of prosecution but also as a symbol for the ruling power. In the period when witchcraft was defined as a "Crimen Exceptum" (Lerner 49), each trial certainly evoked widespread horror, titillation and anxiety. However, the punishment of the body of witches functioned not only as a demonstration of group solidarity but also as a re-establishment of its power. Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* has demonstrated that by means of the practices of disciplinary techniques of surveillance and examination, a power system is formulated and the process of obtaining knowledge in individuals is facilitated. Hence, disciplinary practices have created divisions between the healthy and ill, the sane and mad, the legal and delinquent; the dividing system by virtue of the authoritative status "can be used as effective means of normalization and social control" (Sawicki 22). Certainly the dividing of the segments of population through incarceration or institutionalization can be very subtle in particular periods of time in human history. The dividing system by labeling one as different or abnormal has affected the deep structure of different societies. Like Dimond has indicated, the power of unseen systems controls human thought and behavior, the use of ritual spectacles of banishment helps to regulate, govern, and eliminate resistance, (195) so that the body becomes a site of disciplinary control for a turbulent population. In *The Witch of Edmonton and Vinegar*

*Tom*, we have seen the victimization of the marginalized women, the ignorant confrontation of unfortunate events and the crisis already buried in human relationships (Macfarlane 82-84). We have also witnessed the tragedy of the oppressed unruly woman transformed into rebels. The seventeenth century female critic and midwife Jane Sharp defended herself and many women involved in the *witchhunting* (Williams 122-3), but the witch-craze went on in the European continent and the British colonies in America until the early eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The two dramas, *The Witch of Edmonton* and *Vinegar Tom*, with the historiography of witch-hunting, have drawn close the gap between literature and history, leading us to explore with different perspectives the facts of power struggle and disciplinary systems in our human history.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Mother Waterhouse was taken by Selma R. Williams as a victim of religious persecution, during the time that Catholic Mary Queen of Scots plotted against England's Queen Elizabeth. The Catholic said prayers in Latin, which was forbidden by the Protestants. During the trial, the old woman confessed that she said her prayers in Latin instead of English. See Williams, 83-5.

<sup>2</sup> In his book *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), Scot claimed all tales of wonders done by witches or magicians were lies, exaggerations or misinterpretations. George Gifford's theory was close to that of Johann Weyer. He defended accused witches on the ground of their ignorance and the impossibility of a pact that would truly bind either witch or Devil. Bodin and James firmly believed in the existence of witches and both accused Weyer of being a witch, and James called Scot a Sadducee. See *Reginald Scot and Renaissance Writings on Witchcraft* by Robert J. West (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) 7-17.

<sup>3</sup> Bodin claimed he had experienced the horrors and dangers created by witches. His influential book, *De la Demonomanie des*

*Sorciers*, was published in 1580. King James' book, *Daemonologie*, published in 1597, collected the forms of familiars and the ways that witches caused death in great detail. Scot's book was considered a threat by James.

<sup>4</sup> The full title of Goodcole's pamphlet was *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch late of Edmonton, her conviction and condemnation and death. Together with the relation of the Devils access to her and their conference together*. To me, the playwrights' creation of an unsuitable place for Mother Sawyer arouses pity in the audience. In Goodcole's pamphlet, Sawyer was described as a woman with one eye. The blindness of one of her eyes was caused by a stick in the hand of a child. I suggest the playwrights captured this tragic tone in the pamphlet and recreated the violent environment. Goodcole's pamphlet was reprinted in A. H. Bullen's revision of *Ford's Dramatic Work* (1869)

<sup>5</sup> According to the text, "Enter Anne Ratcliff Mad." See Act IV. scene i, 175 of "The Witch of Edmonton," *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays* (Manchester Univ. Press, 1991), 189.

<sup>6</sup> According to Amussen, the other crime subjected to intense scrutiny was vagrancy. See Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Tien, Wei-hsin in his "*The Witchcraft Delusion*" has examined three dramas dealing with the terror caused by the witchcraze in Puritan New England. See *American Studies* XVIII. No. 1, (March 1988) 29-58.

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