The Devil You (Don't) Know

What would it take to purchase your soul? Faustian stories of human beings who sell their souls to the devil in exchange for power (in the form of love, influence, money, etc.) were "clickbait" long before social media ruled the landscape.[1] Without the social clout of Doctor Faustus, however, Renaissance women who trafficked their souls to the devil were rarely tragic heroes—instead, especially after King James took the English throne in 1603, they were called witches. And, as the monarch's version of the Bible put it, "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18, *KJV*).

Framed as a "riff" on *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), Jen Silverman's 2018 dark comedy *Witch* boils down the five-act tragicomedy based on "a known true story" into a sleek, contemporary offering told by six actors. Written by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford (among other poets) and performed by a company of at least twelve actors playing approximately thirty roles, the Jacobian tale adapted popular ballads and pamphlets from that same year, offering salacious gossip about a local woman, Elizabeth Sawyer, who was executed upon confessing to witchcraft. Silverman's play is like a stovetop reduction—by slowly simmering the sprawling 17th century play, the playwright thickens the sauce, intensifying its flavor and revealing the story's essence for present-day audiences.

With an episodic structure punctuated by soliloquies called "arias," or passages that articulate each character's most urgent truths, Silverman's *Witch* maintains the protagonists of the source, while shifting the dynamics of desire and reimagining the two characters who possess supernatural potential—Elizabeth (a reputed witch) and The Devil himself (here named Scratch). Like four centuries ago, audiences are invited to draw connections between the sins of Edmonton's residents and those of Elizabeth Sawyer, but in this rendering the devil character's connection to the witch is far less certain—here, Silverman's witch is not Satan's minion: she holds the cards. She resists Scratch's considerable charm, and in so doing upends his view of humanity and his role in (destroying) it.

There is, of course, a venerable history of offering readers and spectators sympathy for the devil—several artists have taken inspiration from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (first published in 1667), and twenty-first century stories frequently feature antiheroes and sympathetic villains. But Scratch's appeal seems different, perhaps because we get to see his transformation onstage, but also because our moral compasses themselves have changed: in the wake of the pandemic, political unrest, and climate calamities, questions of right and wrong feel more consequential now. When evil is wrapped in charisma, it is hard to resist. Part of the primal draw to love villains in spite of their flaws stems from a shared recognition of humanity's dark side—we take pleasure in seeing our shadow selves personified.

Arguably, it's precisely because life seems unsteady and uncertain today that stories featuring witches have resurfaced with such intensity: witchcraft, after all, has been called "a manifestation of a world upside down," inverting social and cultural hierarchies in ways that for some may be revolutionary but for others create deep anxiety.[2] This tension—between the known and unknown, natural and supernatural—animates both plays about the infamous witch of Edmonton, but it also mirrors the passions fueling recent polemical debates waged across social media. At the root of such disputes are questions of what and who should define

truth: if the general public no longer trusts the very institutions that base their livelihoods on defining reality (science, education), then we are all at risk being accused of witchcraft. Witch hunts thrive on fanaticism, especially when evidence is no longer material but spectral.

Outside of the supernatural, *Witch* plays on very real, and still thriving, social scenarios. Some characters have a wider range of choices than others, depending on their status, as determined (both onstage and offstage) by social class, race, gender, and sexuality. Those who live with privilege rarely recognize the range of choices it makes possible, but for those who struggle to make ends meet, the advantages afforded the wealthy could hardly be more obvious. One of these advantages is the option to take up a hobby, like Sir Arthur's son Cuddy does—he fills his leisure time with dancing. Specifically, he belongs to a Morris dance troupe.

Morris dance is a distinctly English tradition and typically features an all-male company in matching costumes, with ribbons and bells attached to their arms and legs, bringing attention to the percussive fast-paced steps the dancers make. While the exact origins of the Morris dance cannot be verified, British neopagan groups have embraced the style, noting its popularity around polytheistic holidays like May Day.[3] In this way, as some scholars have argued, *The Witch of Edmonton* poses a challenge to a society in which "one survival of pagan tradition—the Morris dance—is accepted [while] another—witchcraft—is shunned."[4]

Thus, while Jen Silverman's *Witch* thoroughly updates its source material, this riff retains several binaries and social barriers which audiences might assume we shattered four hundred years ago. Indeed, the yearning for options other than those circumscribed by socio-cultural limits for humans (and fallen angels) is palpable throughout this play. Ultimately, we wonder along with Scratch what we might have to destroy or sacrifice to discover another path forward. We are invited, in other words, to consider the devil we do not yet know.

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[1] Susan D. Amussen influenced this claim, when she suggested that "witchcraft was early modern clickbait," in "*The Witch of Edmonton*: Witchcraft, Inversion, and Social Criticism," *Early Theatre* 21.2 (2018), 167-180 (168).
[2] *Ibid*, 169.
[3] Cole Moreton, "Hey nonny no, no, no: Goths and pagans are reinventing morris dancing." *The Independent* 22 October 2011.
[4] Laura Denker and Laurie Maguire, "The 'Morris Witch' in *The Witch of Edmonton*," in *The Female Tragic Hero in Renaissance Drama*, ed. by Naomi Conn Liebler (Houndmills, 2002): 196.