The Shapes of Fancy

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3
It Takes One to Know One
Paranoid Suspicion and the Witch Hunt

A wild thing may say wild things.
—Abigail Williams, *The Crucible* (Arthur Miller, 1953)

How is a witch made? Through the process enacted in the witch trial, a scene into which tens of thousands of people throughout Europe, mostly women, were ensnared between the late sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries. This chapter analyzes the mechanism that produces a witch—the output, so to speak, of the witch trial scene: a figure characterized by her deviant desires and sexual secrets, depraved acts, and dangerous agenda. In short, the production-through-demonization of the witch has a particularly queer shape. The affectively supercharged cycle by which this occurs is projective and attributive: it constructs queerness in another, and by the paranoid logic of implication, it reveals its own secret investments.

This chapter considers two widely publicized witch hunts in Scotland and England through their popular literature: a news pamphlet about the North Berwick witch hunt, *Newes from Scotland* (1591), and *The Witch of Edmonton* (1622), a fictionalized domestic tragedy by John Ford, Thomas Dekker, and William Rowley, based on the trial and execution of a real woman, Elizabeth Sawyer, in 1621. Plays and pamphlets about witch trials constitute a distinct genre, witch hunt literature, which follows a conventional plot trajectory of suspicion, accusation, investigation, discovery, and ultimately confession and execution. I am starting from the premise that the witch
hunt and witch trial process are erotic activities. They are, like sex acts, a culturally convention-bound and goal-directed set of physical and verbal procedures, collectively performed and powered by an idiosyncratic, invisible complex of investments on the part of each participant, culminating in a scripted climax the basic form of which is foreknown, though the details vary with each iteration. The witch hunt is a collective striving whose end is not a release of energy from bodies, as in a sexual consummation, but instead an impacting of built-up social energies onto the body of the accused. And as an erotic form, it is wholly perverse in that its conventional climax is a death.

Here, at its half-way point, this book moves away from a study of the multifarious queer forms and fancies of desire in comic plots, into a discussion of negative affects that take queer shapes. This chapter and the final one deal with systems of desire that refuse any presumptive association of happy or liberatory outcomes with queerness. Instead, the remainder of the book confronts queer erotic dynamics that work in and through the apparatuses of patriarchal and colonial power. In turning a queer lens on the literature of the witch hunt, I am focusing here on what happens to sexed, gendered, and classed bodies—how they’re rendered monstrous, other, and inhuman, and how they’re crushed in the machinery of a paranoid patriarchal order that projects its own worst content onto them. One effect of queering the witch hunt is to connect the history of what has been done to women with the history of what has been done to homosexuals and other deviant-desiring actors, illuminating deep historical consonances between the affective contours of misogyny and homophobia. Another difficult and risky move this chapter makes—but an important one at this moment of public reckoning with the pervasive realities of patriarchal sexism in every stratum of our own culture—is to work out where, how, and whether sexual violence and erotic desire should ever be considered on the same map, as part of the same affective system. My reading of witch hunt literature may complicate the claim extrapolated (and perhaps overgeneralized) from Susan Brownmiller’s analysis of rape, that sexual violence is “not about desire, but about power.” I suspect that the two are not so easily separable, and I fear it impedes the project of understanding and resisting patriarchy to pretend that they are.
To that end, this chapter highlights the ways in which violent power dynamics are erotic as well as the ways in which they exploit, overlap, co-opt, and work through the erotic agendas and survival strategies of socially disempowered subjects. One of the fundamental lessons of Foucault’s model of sexuality, after all, is that power and pleasures, disciplinary violence and renegade desires, are not opposite forces; rather, they are of one discursive substance, swirling and permeating through every subject’s every moment, inciting and inviting. Aligning my aims with Foucault’s, I want to trace, in the strange and twisted corpus of witch hunt literature, “the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates [ . . . ] the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceptible forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure.”

Witch hunt literature is an epistemologically thorny archive to read for desire. These texts are fictive, made things, yet some of the events they describe really happened, to living human bodies in the world. It is seldom clear what exact relation the dramatization of a witch hunt for popular consumption bears to the lived experiences of the players (and my aim is not to reconstruct those truths). What is apparent is that, like the colonial voyage accounts that occupy the next chapter, witch hunt pamphlets and plays are narrative and aesthetic objects that are produced out of a web of individual and communal desires (commercial, theological, nationalistic, phobic/erotic, secret, and otherwise). It makes sense to me, then, to read both plays and prose tracts as dramatic literature—that is, to attend to how they stage affect and desire by staging embodied interaction, through dialogue, props, and the blocking of bodies in space. One of the most important contributions of queer theory has been to assert the real political import of imaginative forms, and the equally important aesthetic valences of political rhetorics and events. In keeping with this tradition, I emphasize the textual figuration of affect as my
object of analysis over the next two chapters, even as my texts now reach violently beyond the imagined worlds of the theater. (In previous chapters, however, the city comedies have already made this reach into real-world violence: *Bartholomew Fair* stages robbery and impressment into prostitution, and *The Roaring Girl* stages phobic, sexualized street assaults of a gender-nonconforming person.) I find in what follows that reading narrative accounts of witch trials and colonial invasions as dramatic fictions, by locating and describing (as Foucault seeks to do in his archives of discourse) their circulations of desire, violence, and identification, provides a vital methodological point of entry for reconsidering the role of eros in these much-studied sites of historical violence. And looking in particular for the complicated, perverse, and problematic circuits of *queer* affect animating them draws out new nuances in these encounters that have not been seen through other, more empirical means.

At this nexus of desire and violence, I want to be particularly precise about asking what queerness can mean in discourses of witchcraft and witch finding, what kinds of queerness are deployed in witch hunt literature and to what effect, and how queerness operates in interlocking ways with other axes of gender, class, and social status. I am calling on all of the untimely and proleptic senses of the word “queer” here, gathering up a set of associations that cluster around bodies and desires, including qualities like secret, lustful, criminal, unnatural, supernatural, duplicitous, hysterical, promiscuous, paranoid, sneaky, performative, and antisocial.

*Newes from Scotland*: “A Privie Marke”

*Newes from Scotland* locates a single woman as an origin point, a patient zero, for the North Berwick witch panics. That catalytic figure is “a maide servant called Geillis Duncane,” who lived in the house of her master, David Seaton. The story begins with a moment of suspicion that carries an occult sexual valence: Geillis Duncane “used secretly to be absent and to lye foorth of her Maisters house every other night.”5 But what Geillis Duncane may be doing with her nights is fodder for suspicion of an uncannier sort: Duncane has become a healer (a role with a set of sexual and supernatural suspi-
cions attached to it, especially for an unmarried woman), performing “manye matters most miraculous” to help the sick or infirm. Duncan’s new skill is only tacitly connected to her nighttime comings and goings, in that both habits cause her employer, David Seaton, to hold “his maide in some great suspition, that she did not those things by naturall and lawfull wayes, but rather supposed it to be done by some extraordinary and unlawfull meanes” (Br). Female servants’ particular vulnerability to sexual violation, sexual suspicion, and rumors of wrongdoing has been well explicated in the work of Frances Dolan and Laura Gowing.6 Gowing writes that “in its economic position, its sexual vulnerability and its potential for sexual crime and illegitimate pregnancy, the body of the single woman (and especially the single woman in service) was barely her own,” the object of constant scrutiny. “And to maintain a private body and a personal space, secure from the eyes of mistresses and neighbours, could appear positively threatening.”7 In light of this social reality, we might well ask how David Seaton knew that Geillis Duncane was “secretly absent” every other night from his house. Was she informed on, or did he go looking for her at night and find her unavailable to him? The mysteriously unelaborated fact of Duncane’s night-journeying habits raises the possibility that the originary secret and crime of the North Berwick witch hunt could be illicit sex—and/or the insubordinate refusal of illicit sex—between a master and an unmarried maidservant. Could Seaton’s “admiration” and “wonder” be a cover for some more private investment, his desire to use her sexually for his own purposes? We will never know; the narrative makes the causality of his “great suspition” completely inscrutable.

Out of this setup of occulted sexual suspicion grows a supposed truth-producing procedure in which Geillis Duncane is constructed as a witch. When “she gave him no answere, nevertheless, her Maister to the intent that he might the better trye and finde out the trueth of the same, did with the helpe of others, torment her with the torture of the Pilliwinckes upon her fingers, which is a greevous torture, and binding or wrinching her head with a corde or roape, which is a most cruell torment also, yet would she not confesse any thing” (Br). A relation of suspicion—aggravated, no doubt, by Duncane’s refusal to cooperate—slides seamlessly, in an instant, into torture. And this is
not even public or state torture: “With the help of others” who remain unnamed, Seaton tortures Duncane himself, in a private context, before ever bringing her to court. The suspicious energy generated in Seaton has grown so strong that the affective exchange between master and servant seems to magnetically pull in “others,” who make it into a scene of many-on-one physical violence, applying screws and ropes to try to wrench the “trueth” out of the invisible place where Duncane obdurately keeps it. The narrative makes no remark on Seaton’s transformation from suspicious employer to vigilante witch-finder; the torture follows simply and seemingly self-evidently from his “intent” to “better trye and find out the trueth”:

Whereupon they suspecting that she had beene marked by the Divell (as commonly witches are) made dilligent search about her, and found the enemies marke to be in her fore crag or foreparte of her throate: which being found, she confessed that all her doings was done by the wicked allurementes and inticements of the Divell, and that she did them by witchcraft. (Br)

With this sentence, David Seaton, whose “great suspition” is the cause of this entire undertaking, drops out of the narrative entirely, without explanation, along with whatever frustrations, passions, and prerogatives induced him to torture his servant woman in his own home. What’s left is a nameless, faceless collective of citizen interrogators, moving as if automatically through the witch hunt’s plot. It is “they” who first make the ghosting suspicion of witchcraft explicit, “suspecting” that the maidservant’s body is “marked” in a way that a “dilligent search” of every part of it will uncover. Predictably, they find something on her neck, which is determined to be the devil’s mark. As soon as this point on the surface of her skin is named as such, the pamphlet says, Duncane freely pours out the tale of her secret, “wicked” healings of her sick and infirm neighbors.8

*Newes from Scotland* quickly moves from the wayward servant girl to the other archetypal witch panic victim: an elderly country wise woman with a long history of ecclesiastical suspicion named Agnis Sampson.9 Stiffly denying the charges against her despite the
personal “persuasions” of King James and his council, Sampson, like Duncane, is ritually searched for a sign of demonic relations, “a privie marke,” which indicates, the pamphlet alleges, that “Witches have confessed themselues, that the Devill dooth lick them with his tung in some privy part of their bodye, before he dooth receive them to be his servants” (Biiv). The mark is regarded as evidence of an act of sex with the devil. As such, it demarcates a sexual identity, a sexual status, that must remain secret. It is only the invisibility of the devil’s mark, hidden under the hair on some unmentionable part of the body, that enables the witch’s silence: “Generally so long as the marke is not seene to those which search them, so long the parties that hath the marke will never confesse any thing” (Biiv). Newes from Scotland, like many other examples of witch hunt literature, fetishizes the search for the devil’s mark, dramatically drawing it out to build up to the witch’s outing. Sampson will confess nothing while having all her hair shaved off and her head “thrown,” or wrenched with a rope (“according to the custome of that Countrie, being a paine most greevous”), for an hour, “until the Divel’s marke was found upon her privities, then she immediatlye confessed whatsoever was demaunded of her, and justifying those persons aforesaid to be notorious witches” (Aiiir). The precise violence of shaving “each parte” of an old woman’s body mirrors the fetishistic function of the devil’s mark, in that both body hair and the mark visually inscribe the surface of a body in terms of its sexual status (a sexually mature adult woman, or a sexually deviant witch). Almost anything could be read as a devil’s mark, from a single freckle or pimple to the clitoris, a possibility here for Agnis Sampson. The clitoris is posthumously exposed as the devil’s mark on the hanged body of a witch in the remarkable 1593 pamphlet, The most strange and admirable discoverie of the three witches of Warboys. After an old woman, Alice Samuell, is executed, the jailer and his wife find on her body “a little lumpe of flesh, in manner sticking out, as if it had beene a teate, to the length of halfe an inch.” At first they intend to keep their discovery to themselves because “it was adjoyning to so secrete a place, which was not decent to be seene,” but in the end they show it (and strain fluids out of it) to vindicate the assembled members of the community. The truth of witchcraft produced by whatever fleshly thing is read
as the devil’s mark is as fantasmatic as the sodomitical sex act it is supposed to record. Moreover, *Newes from Scotland*’s account of what the devil’s mark is, given here as received Scottish knowledge, does not conform exactly to either the English paradigm of a teat where the witch’s familiar suckles on her body, or the Continental paradigm of a brand or scar commemorating a diabolical pact. Instead, this Scottish fantasy of the mark as a trace of the secret lick of the devil’s tongue is a fantasy of erotic legibility. The substantial dramatic energy invested in lusting after its discovery/construction indexes a wish on the part of those in power for erotic acts—especially deviant ones, like receiving oral sex (from the devil)—to be clearly marked on the body. It is an anxious investment born of the fact that the real licks of real tongues, belonging to humans of unknown gender or social station, on various parts of bodies, do not leave any such marks.

At the climax of the witch hunt’s machinations, the body of the accused becomes the body of a witch—a body defined by its seductive, antisocial, and rebellious desires—that must be abjected (expelled) from the community in death. At a social level, a witch materializes abjection in Julia Kristeva’s technical sense: a part of the communal body which is thrown out—abjected—from the rest. A vast body of scholarship exists on witch panics as this kind of abjecting, scapegoating process, describing the witch as a figure onto whom a community’s anxieties are projected, where paranoia is named as mass hysteria, expurgation of an “internal other,” and patriarchal violence against the repressed feminine unconscious. The scholarly consensus on the causes of early modern witch persecution has undergone multiple waves of revision, in which sex and gender have moved in and out of emphasis as causal factors relative to national, religious, economic, and inhuman natural forces. One of my purposes in including a queer reading of the witch hunt in this book is to return to this scene, which has been so prolifically read through the lenses of previous critical moments, in order to place sex and the erotic closer to the center of early modern witchcraft—not as a single explanatory cause of witch panics, but as a constitutive structural feature of their enactment.

Both the content of witch panics (the desires and activities attributed to witches, the communal fears they index, and the narrative
crescendo of suspicion) and the discursive forms of their production (the scenes of witch discovery, trial, and execution, and their subsequent media representations) are fundamentally powered by desire—and it shows. Though it is neither a play nor a folk ritual, the “discovery scene” in which an accused witch confesses to her crimes is a generic dramatic spectacle, with a recognizable affective economy.\(^{17}\) The scene dramatizes a deviant-desiring subject who, along with an array of suspect objects, is represented and spectated upon in an erotically invested way. In other words, a specific mood of heightened communal affect is played out through a performative, legal forum (and mediatized, onstage and in print, as popular entertainment). The transactions it stages among an accused subject and her desires (to stay alive, avoid torture, receive salvation, implicate others), other subjects (interrogators, friends, family, lovers, victims), and material things (tools of witchcraft and torture) vary widely in content but retain a basic iterable plot structure. After all, according to Peter Brooks, plot itself is erotic in structure, a goal-directed, convention-bound performance, the pleasures of which derive from its rhythms of thrust and dilation.\(^{18}\)

In order to get any closer to articulating the desires driving this plot, it is necessary to closely read what Kristeva calls abjection’s “twisted braid of affects,” which binds together suspectors, torturers, judges, and accused witches.\(^{19}\) I am indebted to Lyndal Roper’s work on torture and interrogation, to Lawrence Normand’s and Gareth Roberts’s work on witch trial records, and to Charlotte-Rose Millar’s re-theorization of emotion in witchcraft literature for their observations that the narratives (both official and popular) of the witch hunt should be seen as archives of a sadomasochistic, collaborative performance, “a collusive construction by examiners and examined.”\(^{20}\) “Collusive” is a fittingly dense word for the affect involved. It hints at a dynamic that can be inimical, even violently manipulative, but implies some mutual, possibly unspoken shared investment. “Collusion” denotes secrecy and taboo, as though the accused witch and witchfinder are cooperating in an illicit act, a forbidden relation, affectively knitted together by their need for each other in the logic of the scene. It places them in a secret, grossly unequal queer partnership, the content of which is not fully knowable even to the participants. But
“collusion” also connotes an invisible betrayal, a sin of secret cooperation in which parties’ loyalties do not lie where they purport to be. It is no coincidence that whispers of collusion cluster not only around secrets of a sexual kind but also around espionage and treason. Homosexuality and espionage have historically shared this suspicion, which extends from Christopher Marlowe through McCarthyism, in that both, like witchcraft, are superficially invisible practices that constitute deviant identities—secret loyalties, actually, to a shadowy, antisocial, alternative polis. And also like witchcraft (and homosexuality), collusion cannot be denied without projecting the shadow of suspicion back onto oneself. “NO COLLUSION—RIGGED WITCH HUNT!” tweets President Donald Trump at one o’clock in the morning.21 The president vociferously protests against the investigation—and public suspicion—of his campaign’s collusion with the Russian government to win the 2016 presidential election, spontaneously insisting in various formulations on television and social media: “Also, there is NO COLLUSION,” “There was no Collusion (it is a Hoax),” “there was NO collusion,” and, perhaps most illustrative, “Collusion is not a crime, but that doesn’t matter because there was No Collusion (except by Crooked Hillary and the Democrats)!”22 The repeated characterization of these investigations as a “witch hunt” by Trump and his supporters is also telling, despite its historical misapplication. It bespeaks how quickly the reflexive dynamic of the witch hunt lends itself to pure projection, unmoored from any truth whatsoever of what is happening, as well as how available—and desirable—it is to be claimed by those in power, in order to construe themselves as the persecuted instead.

The collusive dynamic that Roper, Normand, and Roberts observe in witch interrogations is not only a condition of historical discourse but an observable affective mode, which, along with Eve Sedgwick, I call paranoid suspicion. Paranoia is an affective mode founded in reflexive projection, in which one’s suspicions about another correspond to the thing that one unconsciously suspects in oneself—fantasy suspicions about the other’s desires that, inasmuch as they confirm a secret self-knowledge and compel others to confirm it as well, are discursively made true. Here what it furnishes is a witch, a figure materially, erotically, and epistemologically marked
as queer by the paranoid mode of her production. The witch is queer in that she is characterized by deviant desires and practices; constructed through paranoid representations of material accessories; brought into being by an interrogation animated by projective identification and desire; climactically inscribed into witch-ness via a performative self-exposure, the confession (which fulfills the ultimate goal of paranoia, the confirmation that everyone who suspected was right); and ambiguous in meaning and status: nonexistent according to some epistemologies, criminal and/or diabolical in others, uncannily loathsome, hard to pin down precisely in language or social reality, and lacking in essence right up until the moment she or he is violently essentialized as a body being killed.

“How the World Works”

Eve Sedgwick offers an enduring account of paranoia as a recursive self- and other-implicating engine of knowledge and desire in her 1997 essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You.” Engaging with the theories of Melanie Klein, Paul Ricoeur, and Silvan Tomkins in order to seek alternatives to a paranoid critical practice, Sedgwick attends to the dual nature of paranoia as both an affect and an interpretive stance. As an affective mode, it is an often unpleasant state of attunement to and investment in dangerous others, whom it seems strange to call love objects. It is envious and self-conscious, defensive, and infused with persecution anxiety. But paranoia is also, as Sedgwick points out via Ricoeur, a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” a mode of interpretation, typified by the critical orientation of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, that seeks out darker mechanisms always operating beneath the surface. It is more than just a bad feeling; it is a powerful methodology for producing knowledge, singularly focused on what is hidden versus what is shown. Generating secret truths about the other, the self, and the systems that govern both is its function. In Newes from Scotland, for instance, David Seaton’s suspicion produces what he doesn’t know, but wants to know, about Geillis Duncane; what he may not want others to know about himself and Duncane; and, finally, what Duncane refuses to
say about herself until a mark is found on her throat. One of my aims in examining the double-edged workings of paranoia in this archive is to bring together witchfinders and their techniques of violence, as well as the people (usually, but not always, women) who were their targets, into the ambit of a complex network of knowledge and investment that troubles simple distinctions between disciplined, licensed, and compelled desires.

Paranoia is inextricably connected with sexual secrets. As Sedgwick points out, “queer studies” (and, I would add, queer history) “in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative.” Twenty-first-century gay theorist Guy Hocquenghem, whom Sedgwick cites, argues that the structure of paranoia is logically, indeed constitutively, tethered to the history of homophobia, and hence of queerness. Rewriting the received heteronormative psychoanalytic association of paranoia with homosexual neurosis, he argues that queer “persecutory paranoia” is an accurate reflection of the phobic paranoia that everywhere “seeks to persecute” queerness. In Sedgwick’s summation, “Paranoia is a uniquely privileged site for illuminating not homosexuality itself, as in the Freudian tradition, but rather precisely the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it. What is illuminated by an understanding of paranoia is not how homosexuality works, but how homophobia and heterosexism work—in short, if one understands these oppressions to be systemic, how the world works.” It is on account of this imitative reciprocity, between stigmatized and persecuted queer forms of desiring on one hand and the paranoid interpretive techniques that construct the queer as a stigmatized figure on the other that Sedgwick calls paranoia a “reflexive and mimetic” kind of desire: “Simply put, paranoia tends to be contagious; more specifically, paranoia is drawn toward and tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular, symmetrical epistemologies. [. . .] It sets a thief (and, if necessary, becomes one) to catch a thief; it mobilizes guile against suspicion, suspicion against guile; ‘it takes one to know one.’” Paranoid suspicion can thus be used to implicate subjects in secret knowledge (if you know, you are as well). Or it can be levied to name names—to turn an individual confession into a collective one (if I am, I know who else is as well). But it can also turn suspicion
Reading paranoid suspicion as a queer-producing and queer-persecuting force in early modern witch hunt literature is historically and topically appropriate. Early modern witch hunts are genealogically connected to others that have deployed the same mode of erotically saturated truth production, most memorably in the twentieth-century witch hunts for communists—and crucially, inextricably, for homosexuals—staged in the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Senate hearings of Joseph McCarthy. Sedgwick’s encapsulation of the paranoid/suspicious affective stance, “It takes one to know one,” conjures a longer genealogy of political inquisitions based on covert knowledge of secret statuses and subversive affiliations, practiced throughout history against suspect types—both real categories of people and wholly imaginary figments of a paranoid, persecutory imagination—including gays and lesbians, spies, Jews, Muslims, former Jews or Muslims, heretics, atheists, radicals and revolutionaries, and all manner of participants who engage in illicit sex (promiscuous women, child abusers, devil worshippers). Taking note of these structural continuities across the continuum of paranoia’s delusions also serves to decenter the question of the historical truth of early modern witchcraft (what the witchfinder wants to know: were they really doing anything?) in favor of exploring how persecution works.

*Newes from Scotland* gives us paranoia’s reflexive and mimetic power fully formed. The first thing both Agnis Sampson and Geillis Duncane do when the devil’s mark is found on their bodies is name names. After “a season” of torture in prison, the pamphlet narrates, Duncane “immediately” provides the names that turn an individual accusation into a regional witch panic: more than a dozen people, representing a diverse cross section of low- to upper-middle class society in Edinburgh and the surrounding towns (Br–Bv). The names are thus listed, decontextualized, erasing the affective and relational histories—with each other and with Duncane—that conditioned who was named, and whom they named in turn. The pamphlet’s silence around the circumstances under which Geillis Duncane uttered or assented to these names also obscures, deliberately, the influence

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30 Or, as Ricoeur puts it, “Guile will be met by double guile.”

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of the witchfinders’ desires in implicating these people—the local interrogators and torturers who, since Duncane “was committed to prison,” have become not only nameless but suspiciously evacuated of any grammatical presence or agency in the narrative (“she [. . .] caused them forthwith to be apprehended”). The pamphlet hints at, but does not record, the inaccessible dramatic exchange between Duncane and her interrogators in which they, together, produce one of the first ingredients of a witch hunt—a list of names—through a collusive process of suggestion, desire, and terror. We also see this name-naming apparatus in how Agnis Sampson not only produces herself as a witch, but also ratifies more fodder for the witch hunt, “justifying those persons aforesaid to be notorious witches” who must be apprehended and tortured in turn.

“The Cheefest Partes”

Sedgwick insists, along with Melanie Klein, that paranoia is a position, a flexible relational stance, rather than a diagnosis: “a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one.” Delving further into Klein’s theory of paranoia, I find her notion of part-objects particularly useful for reading the erotics of witch hunt literature. Part-objects are unconscious, metonymic literalizations of desire that are based on single aspects of larger love objects (e.g., the “good breast” or “bad breast”). Through projection and incorporation/introjection, both good and bad part-objects “become installed, not only in the outside world but . . . also within the ego.” Crucially, however, the fantasized threats at the root of paranoia really do come from the dangerous objects residing within the body and psyche, and, I would add, within communal bodies. The love objects of paranoid desire are not exactly other human beings, just as the erotic objects of the witch hunt’s paranoia are not really specific accused individuals. They are partial, “phantastically distorted” approximations of the real things they represent. Klein observes that these processes can be seen at work in adult fantasy and larger symbolic systems. There is actually the suggestion of a theory of demonology in Klein, originating
in a community’s or realm’s internal persecutory violence against its internalized bad objects, projected outward and given culturally significant form: “In the infantile dread of magicians, witches, evil beasts, etc., we detect something of this same anxiety, but here it has already undergone projection and modification.” She adds, in a footnote that evokes the witch hunt’s confidence in its providential righteousness, “We have an example of this in the phantastical belief in a God who would assist in the perpetration of every sort of atrocity (as lately as in the recent war) in order to destroy the enemy and his country.” Witchcraft literature thus voices an ancient, collective “paranoid position—understandably marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety,” at the level of cultural beliefs.

One of the signal features of witchcraft is its richly detailed object world. Like The Witch of Edmonton—and like other texts such as Thomas Potts’s 1613 tract The wonderfull discoverie of witches in the countie of Lancaster; Heywood and Brome’s 1634 tragicomedy The Late Lancashire Witches; and The Wonderful discovery of the Witchcrafts of Margaret and Philippa Flower (1619)—Newes from Scotland is strewn with an array of everyday things—animals, knives, body parts, food and drink, accessories, hairs, pins, ropes, and musical instruments—that are animated with uncanny properties of metonymy, attraction, and invisible entanglement. Objects are endowed with supernatural effectiveness as instruments not only of witchcraft but witch finding, such as the “Pilliwinckes” used on Geillis Duncan; or the razor used on Agnis Sampson, the body hair it shaves, and the devil’s mark it uncovers. Previous scholarship on witch beliefs has explained the magical cosmologies underpinning some of witches’ most storied tools and techniques, and the grounding of English witch beliefs in anti-Catholic anxieties about the efficacy of performative speech acts and sacramental material rituals. But reading the object world of witch hunt literature instead as a universe of Kleinian part-objects allows a more complex view of the “phantasmatic beliefs” and symbolic resonances they transmit. Furthermore, witch hunt pamphlets and plays perform their own meta-acts of interpretation, reading these uncanny powers into seemingly mundane things, thereby charging the world with supernatural properties. In other words, witchcraft literature performs a paranoid reading of the
materials of everyday life. It projects a “terrible alertness” onto ordinary things and events, which become “hateful and envious part-objects” threatening the communal whole. These objects materialize the community’s paranoid desires, rerouting and attaching them onto the body of the accused. Everyday accoutrements then come to signify, under the specular regime of paranoia, the suspect desires of those who possess and use them.41

The weird part-object-laced drama of Newes from Scotland unfolds with unsettling spontaneity, seemingly out of nowhere. The pamphlet has one of its younger defendants, Agnis Tompson, testify that on All Hallows’ Eve, she set sail on the sea with some two hundred other witches, “each one in a Riddle or Cive;”42 and that this supernatural horde embarked together, “with flagons of wine making merrie and drinking,” to the North Berwick kirk, to commune with the devil who waited for them there.43 It is not surprising that the moment when the pamphlet’s story of the witches’ doings turns truly fantastical is also the moment it hits on the political import of the North Berwick witch hunt. The storied witches’ Sabbath at the North Berwick kirk is entangled with another shadowy, suspect, substitute-church ceremony taking place a year earlier, on August 20, 1589, across the North Sea: the marriage by proxy of the king, James VI, who sent one of his earls to stand in for him at the wedding, to fourteen-year-old Princess Anne of Denmark.44 That autumn, Anne’s attempts to sail to Scotland were thwarted by storms that struck her husband and shipmen as unnatural, the result of witchcraft being practiced against her in both Denmark and Scotland. After her ship was driven back once, James joined Anne and spent the winter of 1589–90 in Norway and Denmark. In 1590 James and Anne set sail together for Scotland on another storm-plagued voyage that seemed to prefigure the witches’ curse from Macbeth, “Though his bark cannot be lost/Yet it shall be tempest-tossed” (1.3.25–26).45

We can never know what relation Agnis Tompson’s testimony bears to public knowledge of these royal tribulations. Nor can we ever know what, if any, connection David Seaton might have perceived between Geillis Duncane’s suspicious nighttime healings and the king’s paranoid reading of his troubles at sea. All we know is that once Duncane names the citizens who become the North Berwick
witches, suspicions of a diabolical plot against the king, his bride, and the realm are swiftly mapped onto the suspicions radiating from Seaton and Duncane, and the national momentum of the witch hunt is activated. Normand and Roberts acknowledge the devilish futility of trying to trace this story’s voice up front: “Does the pamphlet reflect what the writer found in the examinations, which are probably the collusive fantasies of interrogators and interrogated? Or are these passages the invention of the writer of the pamphlet? The issue is further complicated if we suppose that [James] Carmichael [the king’s minister] was present at the questioning of the accused, and also wrote the pamphlet that claims to report their answers.” But while the origins of Newes from Scotland’s singularly fabular narrative can never be definitively known, what can be analyzed are the miniature dramas it stages among actors and part-objects—twisted figurations involving the ordinary substances of domestic life, birth, and death—that make visible a multinodal network of affective investments, unrecoverable by conventional historical methods.

Agnis Tompson confesses to a plan to bewitch the king to death via a reaction between toad’s venom and scrap of “foule linnen” cloth soiled by the king’s bodily fluids—which only fails because her friend, a gentleman of the king’s chamber, refuses to deliver the piece of linen. Another story put in Agnis Tompson’s mouth tells of a charm that is at least partially efficacious:

At the time when his Majestie was in Denmarke, she being accompanied with the parties before specially named, tooke a Cat and christened it, and afterward bound to each parte of that Cat, the cheeffest partes of a dead man, and severall joynts of his bodie, and that in the night following the saide Cat was conveyed into the midst of the sea by all these witches sayling in their riddles or Cives as is aforesaide, and so left the saide Cat right before the Towne of Lieth in Scotland: this doone, there did arise such a tempest in the Sea, as a greater hath not beene seene: which tempest was the cause of the perishing of a Boate or vessell comming over from the towne of Brunt Iland to the towne of Lieth, wherein
was sundrye Jewelles and riche giftes, which should have been presented to the now Queen of Scotland, at her Majesties comming to Lieth. (Bivv–C)

This cobbled-together fetish charm is, notably, an invention of *Newes from Scotland*'s fictional narrative voice, embellished with descriptive details not in the trials. The narrative creates a chain of uncanny material objects, each of which has some power or efficacy in relation to the next, all catalyzed by witchcraft: a cat; a christening rite; a length of twine; “the cheefest partes of a dead man, and several joynts of his bodie”; a fleet of sieves; a tempest; a foundered ship; and the “sundrye Jewelles and riche giftes” that “should have been presented” to Anne on her entry into Scotland. The paranoid imagination can run wild wondering whether the cat was cradled and baptized like a human baby—given an unknown name—in a mock sacramental ritual with overtones of bestiality. The narrative is also silent as to who the “dead man” was, and what his “cheefest partes” might be. The insinuation, combining necromancy with the sacrilegious use of relics in everyday life, is that the “joynts and members” are old bones obtained by robbing consecrated graves. Unlike in the case of the king’s fouled linen, the salient thing about these body parts seems to be what parts they are—“the cheefest”: genitals? heart? fingers?—and that they are human, rather than whose parts they were. The thing that results from all of these manipulations is a monstrous hybrid, a composite object, a blasphemously humanized cat (was the cat dead or alive?) bound up with an array of appendages, the desiccated or decaying parts of human corpses, on its body. This thing effectively wrecks a ship by raising a storm (the only act of *maleficium* in the pamphlet to cause actual destruction of property). These uncanny part-object dramas abide by a logic of metonymic substitution, where objects or fragments stand in for—and have a real effect on—a whole. Parts of a dead man are used to work magic against another man—against his “cheefest partes,” keeping them from his new queen’s body—and thus to harm the whole realm. The pamphlet’s themes of parts, wholes, jointures, and disruptions caused by witchcraft speak to an overarching political anxiety around the joining of countries by marriage and royal succession. By keeping
James and Anne apart, the mock-baptized un-baby directly interrupts their royal sexual congress and reproductive futurity. The jewels and gifts, political tokens of the queen's marriage and fertility, are displaced from their legitimating function and enlisted instead in this perverted series of witchcraft procedures, creating a threatening chain of bewitched materials linking James, Anne, their nonexistent heir, and a group of sexually and socially suspect common women (i.e., witches).

As Melanie Klein’s readings of introjected part-objects remind us, persecutory fantasies lodge most powerfully in part-objects produced, as the North Berwick witches are, from within bodies, within households, within realms. Paranoid fears, Klein says, are derived from “sadistic phantasies” of fashioning one’s own excrement into “poisonous and destructive weapons” to persecute one’s love objects: “In these phantasies [the child] turns his own faeces into things that persecute his objects; and by a kind of magic (which, in my opinion, is the basis of black magic) he pushes them secretly and by stealth into the anus and other orifices of the objects and lodges them inside their bodies.”51 Klein’s model of paranoia can explain both the maliciously animated material objects in witchcraft narratives and the violent bodily procedures that produce witches. The “kind of magic” that Klein sees transmuting a body’s solid excretions into persecutory weapons is the same paranoid interpretive magic that turns ordinary sieves, toads, traces of bodily effluvia, linen, cats, twine, and a dead man’s joints into “poisonous and destructive” weapons used to damage the king and country. Agnis Tompson, Agnis Sampson, and the others are said to use these items to perverse ends, pushing them “secretly and by stealth” into the kirk, the king’s bedchamber, the water of the harbor, and even the space of the witch trial, “lodging them inside” the body politic of the nation in their (mostly futile) “attacks” on the patriarchal body of the king. This is indeed “the basis of black magic”: the primal paranoid fantasy underpinning beliefs about what witches are and do. It makes sense, then, according to paranoia’s “reflexive and mimetic” logic, that the apparatus of the witch hunt uses this same violent “black magic” to push the material accessories of witchcraft back into the bodies of its objects—the accused witches.

The carnivalesque gathering with the devil that ensues when
the witches arrive in their sieves at the North Berwick kirk reinforces the centrality of deviant sexuality—and not just deviant acts, but deviant pleasures—to Newes from Scotland’s construction of the witch. Though descriptions of witches’ Sabbaths are rare in British sources (English witches were generally understood to practice maleficium, or material harm, in solitude or in small family groups), the Sabbath at the kirk is an idiosyncratic pastiche of gestures from English and Continental European witch beliefs. The hybridized, transnational quality of Scottish witchcraft reveals Scotland’s liminal status as a site for the penetration of Continental influences into Britain, particularly in this instance northern magic from witches in Scandinavia. In Newes from Scotland, this paranoia clusters around the Edinburgh waterfront, which figures in the North Berwick witch panic as the setting for the witches’ activities, the home and workplace of several of the accused, and the portal through which the king and queen must enter Scotland. This waterside gathering cites Continental witchcraft tropes in a perversely, even archly cheery, register. The food and drink that appear to the sieve-sailing witches is pleasurable and plentiful, unlike the rancid or loathsome food at Continental witches’ Sabbaths. They dance a sociable (possibly sexual) daisy-chain reel or round, rather than the involuntary, frantic bodily jerking of demonic possession. The whole scene has the atmosphere of a very outré secret midnight party, presided over by a blaspheming, sadistic yet charismatic nightlife guru. The woodcut on the pamphlet’s cover evokes a rather domesticated assembly of genteel-looking witches, engaged in what look like everyday, sociable activities (cooking in a cauldron, eating, lounging, signing a register), and using an array of ordinary-looking household implements. Though the decentralized look of the gathering may be due to its being a composite of pre-existing images, these activities and tools are made sinister by their framing as the doings of the pamphlet’s witches. Their maleficent effectiveness is indicated by the figures at the woodcut’s margins: the ship tossed at sea on the horizon, the silhouetted devil addressing them from his tree-stump pulpit.

The devil who waits at the North Berwick kirk is not the silhouetted monster of the pamphlet’s woodcut but “in the habit or likeness of a man” (Aiiiiv). As a character, he is a sexualized, comic foil to
167

IT TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE

patriarchal authority; the threat he represents is as much social disorder as supernatural damnation.53 He has human body parts that he uses in a human manner: “Seeing that they tarried over long, he at their coming enjoyned them all to a penance, which was, that they should kisse his Buttockes, in signe of duetye to him: which being put over the Pulpit barre, everye one did as he had enjoyned them” (Aiiiv). Sexual congress with the devil, often punitive and painful, is a common marker of the diabolical pact that is often the centerpiece of Continental witches’ Sabbaths.54 And here too, the pamphlet reports, almost as an afterthought, the witches said the devil “would Carnallye use them, albeit to their little pleasure . . . at sundry other times” (Cv). However, the sexual sign of apostasy sworn in the kirk

Figure 2. Woodcut illustration, Newes from Scotland (1592?), B4v. RB 59699, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
scene is of a very different quality from the rape of Continental accounts. The affect at play is not hellish violation but a queerer and more ambiguous one of sodomitical, scatological sadomasochism, in which the kirk and the “Pulpit barre” are just as much the objects of defilement as the witches’ bodies. In this group sex act and its attendant affects of rebellion and submission, there is the potential for perverse pleasure—or at least absurd, subversive humor—in transgressive erotic relations.

From the pulpit, the devil makes “ungodly exhortations, wherein he did greatly enveighe against the King of Scotland,” and specify that “the King is the greatest enemy he hath in the worlde” (Bivr). In the universe of Newes from Scotland’s affective politics, it becomes clear, these words are also an erotic event and a love object in and of themselves: the most gratifying thing that the king could possibly hear. James personally takes over some of the interrogations at the 1591 North Berwick witch trials, and this demonically attributed pronouncement transmits such a lasting affective load for him that he uses it in 1597 as the centerpiece of the entire system of witch beliefs in his Daemonologie. The king’s paranoid self-styling as the central object of desire in this witch hunt calls to mind the vociferous, obviously eroticized investment of Bartholomew Fair’s Puritan fool, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, in desiring while condemning the seductive Bartholomew pig. Like a queer-obsessed homophobic minister or politician of our own time, James is passionately interested in the desires of the subjects he so passionately persecutes. He delights at the news that the devil is equally interested in him as a cosmic twin, a nemesis and ur-object of desire. The king’s desiring body is also foregrounded as a dramatic coparticipant with the witches, when tales of the Sabbath at the kirk visibly excite him—“these confessions made the king in a wonderful admiration” the description says. He asks for Geillis Duncane to be brought back before him to play the “reel” or dance that she is accused of playing that night as the witches danced to the kirk, on a “Jewes Trump” or harp: “Commer goe ye before, commer goe ye,/Gif ye will not goe before, commer let me” (Aiiiiv). This strange little reel implies, in addition to a dance in the round, a round robin of sexual turn taking performed by the two hundred witches. This song, restaged for James’s viewing
and listening pleasure, becomes, in addition to a piece of witchcraft evidence, a powerful transmitter of affect, which works profoundly on the most important body in the room: the king, who “in respect of the strangeness of these matters, tooke great delight to bee present at their examination” (Aii4).\(^{56}\) His “great delight” is a sublimely paranoid pleasure: the pleasure of witnessing a performance that could risk inviting the devil into the space of the courtroom.\(^{57}\) The song also becomes a court performance that can be understood within a future genealogy of James’s predilection for court masques and witchcraft entertainments as the king of England. The insertion of a “Jewes” instrument into the gathering—and literally into the courtroom, as a theatrical prop—further augments the association, a hallmark of witch beliefs throughout Europe, between racial/national/religious otherness, sexual transgression, and demonism.\(^{58}\) Geillis Duncane’s harp exemplifies how familiar objects used in uncanny new ways become dramatic technologies in the witch trial discovery scene, taking on desires and investments from other places in the narrative and attaching them to the person of the witch. The collusive exchange of terror and pleasure with the king binds the accused witches and their demonized accessories as effectively as the dead man’s “joynts” are bound to the cursed cat. Even more literally, according to the “symmetrical epistemology” of paranoia, the witch hunt’s techniques of interrogation push, as well as press, wrench, prick, and crush, the instruments of knowledge production onto and into their bodies. (Duncane had her fingers crushed with the Pilliwinckes, remember, before she is commanded to play the harp.)

This pamphlet is a piece of political propaganda, but we can also read its narrative as a memorial reconstruction of a desperate, collaborative command performance solicited by the power apparatus in which the women are caught—a wrenching witch minstrel show. The discovery scene bears out the double bind structure of the paranoid dynamic: “Paranoia seems to require being imitated to be understood, and it, in turn, seems to understand only by imitation. Paranoia proposes both ‘Anything you can do (to me) I can do worse,’ and ‘Anything you can do (to me) I can do first’—to myself.”\(^{59}\) The accused thus imitate the cravings of their inquisitors, and the inquisitors get what they crave from the accused. The king invites
diabolical invasion by soliciting reenactments of witchcraft in the courtroom; and the accused in turn shape their performances of self-incrimination to his “delight” in a futile effort to save their own lives. (They do not succeed.)

Sexual secrets and secret knowledge function in *Newes from Scotland* as the linchpin of eroticized collusion between James and the accused witches. In the midst of his “great delight,” the king seems to have a sudden attack of skepticism: “Item, the saide Agnis Sampson confessed before the kings Majestie sundrye thinges which were so miraculous and strange, as that his Majestie saide they were all extreame lyars” (Bivr). So the “eldest witch” performs a private exchange of secret knowledge: “Thereupon taking his Majestie a little aside, she declared unto him the verye words which passed betweene the kings Majestie and his Queene at Upslo in Norway the first night of their marriage, with their answere each to other” (Bivr). This moment is unlike anything else in *Newes from Scotland* in that the accused seeks to furnish proof of her supernatural intuition. Sampson turns the witch-producing apparatus of the trial inside out. Rather than being the object of intimate sexual probing in search of a foreknown secret about her (as when she was shaved and searched for the devil’s mark), here she somehow contrives a secret of a private, sexual nature about the king, and projects it onto him, through close bodily contact, as a foreknown secret truth. Thanks to a completely impenetrable confluence of intuition, information, and investment, Sampson’s secret appears to hit its affective mark: “The kinges Majestie wondered greatleye, and swore by the living God, that he believed that all the Divels in hell could not have discovered the same: acknowledging her words to be most true, and therefore gave the more credit to the rest which is before declared” (Bivr). The “credit” this adds to Sampson’s foregoing confession of witchcraft under torture seems a high price to pay for the king’s “wonder,” and why an accused witch would do this at all seems a total mystery, until we realize that it is the particular nature of a sexual secret that provides Sampson with an opportunity to reverse the power dynamic of her interrogation and play on the king’s desires. Whatever unknowable, presumably amorous words Sampson whispers, James enthusiastically assents to them, as opposed to explaining to the assembled
court how they differ from what he and his fourteen-year-old bride, whom he had never met and with whom he had only French as a common language, actually had said to one another on their first night together. The palimpsest of sexual secrets layered into this exchange generates a paranoid impetus for the king to be hailed into confirming this highly suspect secret knowledge of his wedding night. James’s preference for men was something of an open secret even before his marriage. Here, that secret ghosts behind this one. The king’s unspeakable sexual status, or the specter of sexual deviance threatening the marriage bed, is covered over and surrogated by another, urgently public intimacy in the witch trial discovery scene—the image of an elderly country wise woman and confessed witch whispering sweet nothings from his own wedding night in the eagerly receptive ear of the witchfinder king.

The Witch of Edmonton: “Our Secret Game”

Ford, Dekker, and Rowley’s true-life domestic tragedy, The Witch of Edmonton (1621), stands out for its explicit dramatization of how another poor old woman, Elizabeth Sawyer, is made into a witch. The play’s witchcraft plot is ripped from the headlines, adapted from Henry Goodcole’s sensational pamphlet account of the real Elizabeth Sawyer’s trial and execution at Tyburn earlier that same year. But while Goodcole’s pamphlet moralizes about his interrogation of Sawyer and the confession he extracts, The Witch of Edmonton focuses to a degree not found in any other witchcraft play on the gradual process of paranoia, harassment, and framing leading up to her arrest. It makes particularly visible the paranoid machinery by which a community constructs a woman as a witch in its midst from the materials of everyday life. A play communicates paranoid affect differently from a printed pamphlet—for one thing, the erotically suspect part-objects of witchcraft are physically present before the audience in the theater, as stage properties. For another, early modern antitheatrical suspicions cluster around the theater as a site of unnatural conjuration, with stories circulating in popular legend and antitheatrical polemic about theatrical rites conjuring real devils onstage. The intimate interimplication of the uncanny objects and events
onstage with conditions and events in the real world is emphatically centered in *The Witch of Edmonton*, which bills itself even in its first print edition decades later as “A known true Story, Composed into A TRAGI-COMEDY.”

Perversely, I locate the key to this play’s construction of the witch in the substantial part of the play that seems to have nothing to do with witchcraft: the tale of Frank Thorney’s bigamy, deception, and murder to preserve his inheritance. Unlike the true-to-life witch trial, Frank Thorney and the events of the bigamy plot are all fictional, concocted (chiefly, according to scholarly conjecture, by John Ford) for the purposes of the stage play. There is relatively little scholarship addressing the relation between the two plots. Yet this inventive and fraught domestic tragedy plot is part of the same play, intercut almost scene for scene alongside Elizabeth Sawyer’s story. I argue here that the bigamy plot makes visible the affective dynamics of the witch hunt, demonstrating that something about sexual secrets—particularly secret sexual statuses—sparks or conjures suspicions of witchcraft, and vice versa. The bigamy plot also produces a queer figure—a bigamist rather than a witch—thus dramatizing a secret, nonnormative sexual identity. Reading the two plots in light of one another, then, underscores all the more vividly that the undercurrent of the witch hunt is secret sexual deviance. This requires reading the bigamy scenes with an eye to the structure of sexual secrets, and to the effects of sexual suspicion on the suspects as well as the objects of suspicion. Without any absolute, reductive one-to-one mapping of the one onto the other, the dynamics of suspicion operating in both plots model how queerness functions as a secret. The tandem relationship between sexual secrets and witchcraft ultimately highlights the community’s investments in covering over a host of other deviant and antisocial desires (including, but not limited to, master–servant rape, inheritance fraud, fornication, murder, treason, derangement, suicide, heresy, bestiality, and sodomitical sex with the devil) by projectively constructing, then executing, Elizabeth Sawyer as a witch. Sexual secrets are integral to all of my previous examples of the witch hunt’s affective structure; they are manifest in *Newes from Scotland’s* content, as well as brought out by my suspicious readings. David
Seaton’s suspicion of Geillis Duncane for spending nights out of the house causes us to suspect that his illicit sexual jealousy influences his interpretation. Agnis Sampson perversely proves her witch-power by producing a sexually and politically charged secret about the king, and communicating it to him in an intimate way that allows him to use her deviance as a cover for his own.

In the opening lines of the play, Frank tells his lover, the young servant girl Winnifride (whose problematic sexual status is marked on her body, as she appears “with child”), that she will be above suspicion now that they are legally married. However, Frank immediately relegates their marriage to the closet of secrecy, putting Winnifride up in another town. Winnifride objects: “Is this to have a husband?” But she cannot demand more of Frank because the mark of their sexual relationship (her pregnancy) leaves her powerless to insist. But for Frank and Winnifride’s former employer, Sir Arthur Clarington, the marriage is a dark opportunity: unbeknownst to Frank, Sir Arthur has had a sexual relationship (of suspect consensuality) with Winnifride. When Sir Arthur upbraids Frank for debauching and ruining Winnifride (the crime he himself has previously committed), Frank protests that they are married, then asks Sir Arthur to tell Frank’s father the opposite—that he is not married. Sir Arthur agrees to certify the lie, “Provided/I never was made privy to it,” thereby invoking one of sexual normativity’s sustaining illusions: the denial of what one hasn’t seen with one’s own eyes (1.1.147–50). Sir Arthur then reveals, in an aside, that his lie will be a cover for his own sexual depravity with Winnifride. He will make himself the facilitator of Frank’s secret marriage because it is a more public, more visible version of the same secret crime he is committing. Lying about it, and hence keeping Winnifride sequestered in secret, creates a space for the illicit sex he apparently plans to continue having with her. Sir Arthur’s exploitation of intimate scandal to extort continuing sexual favors also emphasizes, like David Seaton’s persecution of Geillis Duncane, how secret sexual deviance exacerbates existing class, gender, and power inequalities. As with queer sexual secrets, those in the most stigmatized sexual positions—which overlap with positions of the least social power—have the least recourse.
As Sir Arthur’s employee, Winnifride may technically be the wronged party, but outing herself as a victim could only harm her precarious marriage and social standing.

Frank Thorney’s second, bigamous marriage, to the daughter of his father’s creditor, is contracted so that he might save (and thus inherit) his father’s lands. It looks like an unstigmatized, economically productive, socially and sexually legitimate coupling. Only the one single secret thing the audience knows about Frank—that he has already married Winnifride—transforms this normative, patriarchally endorsed match into the monstrous crime of bigamy. The secret marriage lingering in memory from the previous scene makes Frank’s normally laudable response of filial obedience into an abomination. The words that fathers in early modern drama long to hear, “I humbly yield to be directed by you/In all commands” (1.2.152–53), become the setup to a sexual crime. The father even suspects the secret marriage but cannot prove it. Even confronted directly—“Speak truth and blush, thou monster./Has thou not married Winnifride, a maid/Was fellow-servant with thee?” (1.2.167–69)—Frank’s refusal to confirm or deny it sends his father into a rage. Old Thorney’s ranting, indignant lamentations, which echo those of his counterpart discussed in chapter 1, Sir Alex Wengrave, Sebastian’s father in The Roaring Girl, give voice to the paranoid position regarding Frank’s sexual secret. The father is subject to a “terrible alertness to the dangers” posed by the untoward sexual activities of this infuriatingly autonomous part of him—his offspring, successor, and heir—combined with a total inability to transform his suspicion into any more actionable exposure. Sedgwick observes that paranoia “places its faith in exposure,” “as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in that direction.” But then, as Sedgwick notes, just bringing a problem into speech does not bring about an end to it, or give one any purchase for redressing it. Frank effectively disarms his father’s ability to produce actionable knowledge of what he is: a bigamist.

Bigamist functions as a definite status in this play, one that shakes Frank’s identity even as he lies to conceal it:
On every side I am distracted,
Am waded deeper into mischief
Than virtue can avoid. But on I must.
Fate leads me, I will follow. (1.2.197–200)

I have called bigamy a status rather than an act because the play constructs it as the constitutive grounding of the character, the element in which Frank is fated to live and move. Even in a state of shame and acute awareness of his sinfulness, he seems to feel that it was in some sense not a choice: “In vain he flees whose destiny pursues him” (1.2.236). In that respect, bigamy functions as something more reified than an act in the play; it is something more akin to an orientation—or even, at Frank’s execution, an identity.

“Must I for That Be Made a Common Sink?”

The witch plot of The Witch of Edmonton mirrors the bigamy plot in its concern with the interplay of choice and compulsion, both erotic and social, at the moment when a subject turns from the normative world and takes up the role of a sexually deviant, queer figure: a bigamist or a witch. When the witch of the title, Elizabeth Sawyer, first appears (not until the second act; for the entire first act, Edmonton is all bigamy), her opening speech is a piece of social critique objecting to how she is seen by others:

And why on me? Why should the envious world
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
’Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,
And like a bow buckled and bent together
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself,
Must I for that be made a common sink
For all the filth and rubbish of men’s tongues
To fall and run into? (2.1.1–8)

This speech explicitly anatomizes the affective dynamics of projection on which paranoia relies: others “throw” their “scandalous malice”
(eroticized violence and/or violent sexuality) on an old woman, attributing their own dangerous feelings of envy and persecutory fantasies to her, thus construing her as envious and malicious toward others.

Elizabeth Sawyer answers her own rhetorical question, “Why on me?” She is suspected along a number of social axes: female, poor, uneducated, and physically deformed, “like a bow buckled and bent together/By some more strong in mischiefs than myself.” It is as though Sawyer’s body is being cast as a persecutory bad object, bewitched and manipulated by supernatural malice into an unnatural shape. Sawyer objects to being “made a common sink/For all the filth and rubbish of men’s tongues.” She objects, that is, to being a receptacle for anxious projections about bodies and eroticism. But “a common sink” is an image of prodigious sexual receptivity, with which Sawyer figures her body as freakishly able to absorb the sexual aberrance of others. In what may be the most self-conscious reference in all of early modern drama to how communal desires construct the witch, Elizabeth Sawyer objects:

Some call me witch,  
And being ignorant of myself, they go  
About to teach me how to be one. (2.1.8–10)

What is so unique about these lines is the idea that the construction of a witch goes hand in hand with the performance of the role. Charlotte-Rose Millar refreshingly recenters the allure of the diabolical in her analysis of English witchcraft pamphlets, arguing that witchcraft is a phenomenon of desire arising from affective states—and the unconscious urges they textualize—that invite the devil. Indeed, the idea, presented in a stage play, that an accused witch must be taught—formed, instructed, and groomed—in how to be one invites us to go back and read the pamphlet literature (including Sawyer’s interrogation by Goodcole) differently, noticing moments like Agnis Sampson’s and Geillis Duncane’s command performances, that record how the desires of accused witches are drawn out and used to teach the witch to collude in her own production. The people of Edmonton do this to Elizabeth Sawyer long before her arrest, insisting:
That my bad tongue—by their bad usage made so—
Forspeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse.
This they enforce upon me, and in part
Make me to credit it. (2.1.11–15)

Here Sawyer’s tongue becomes a bad part-object: her tongue is used, badly, in others’ delusions, to carry out others’ sadistic impulses toward their own property, household, servants, and family members. The role of a stereotypical English witch, engaging in material practices of maleficium witchcraft, is so consistently “enforced” on her that she “in part” starts to believe it herself. In fact, it is debatable whether at the beginning of the play Elizabeth Sawyer identifies as a witch in any way. Practically alone among early modern witch hunt literature, The Witch of Edmonton’s representation of demonology starts out skeptically and reaches at most ambivalence—a marked change from Henry Goodcole’s paranoid and credulous pamphlet. From the first line spoken to her onstage—“Out, out upon thee, witch!”—Sawyer’s words are reflexively turned back against her (“Dost call me witch?”/“I do, witch, I do; and worse I would, knew I a name more hateful”), incriminating but also transforming her (2.1.17–19). After cursing a neighbor, Old Banks, and being beaten by him, Sawyer seems to dare to imagine that Banks was right about her:

Abuse me! Beat me! Call me hag and witch!
What is the name? Where and by what art learned?
What spells, what charms, or invocations
May the thing called Familiar be purchased? (2.1.33–36)

Her soliloquy gets more specific as to the paranoia she faces, and what her lines and stage properties would be in the new role of witch:

I am shunned
And hated like a sickness, made a scorn
To all degrees and sexes. I have heard old beldams
Talk of familiars in the shape of mice,
Rats, ferrets, weasels and I wot not what
That have appeared and sucked, some say, their blood,
But by what means they came acquainted with them
I'm now ignorant. Would some power, good or bad,
Instruct me which way I might be revenged
Upon this churl, I'd go out of myself

[ . . . ] Abjure all goodness, be at hate with prayer,
And study curses, imprecations,
Blasphemous speeches, oaths, detested oaths,
Or anything that's ill, so I might work
Revenge upon this miser, this black cur
That barks and bites, and sucks the very blood
Of me and my credit. 'Tis all one
To be a witch as to be counted one. (2.1.107–26)

This crucial maxim, “'Tis all one/To be a witch as to be counted one,”
with which Elizabeth Sawyer comes out to herself (so to speak) as a
witch, is a corollary to paranoid suspicion’s queer-producing move:
“It takes one to know one.” Sawyer’s declaration is more like, “If I
am known as one, I might as well be one.” But even as she imag-
ines what she would know if she were a witch, “'tis all one” has the
performative effect of making her one. One feature of “'tis all one’s”
queer performativity is how it plays into the community’s paranoia.
Rejecting any distinction between false and true accusations is a
move made by suspects who do not accept that the slander against
them is a bad thing (as in the conscientious refusal to deny that one is
gay, HIV positive, a communist), or by suspects who desire initiation
into the very thing they’re accused of being, as seems to be the case
for Elizabeth Sawyer. Being the object of paranoia provides her an
opportunity for hyperbolic self-transformation. Reading her response
forward through history, we can connect it to a tradition of queer
refusal of phobic slurs by perversely embracing them—including
the reclamation of the word “queer” itself. It is a queer response to
projective demonization that replies, to a stream of insults, “I wish!,”
and “You want a witch? I’ll show you a witch.” Sawyer’s longing,
lusting solicitation of “some power, good or bad” that would allow her
to be the thing she is counted as anyway—but to really be it, with all
its attendant powers and perils—provides an alternative, queer way of imagining the desperate forms of collusion through which accused witches collude in their own production.

The little part-object produced by Sawyer’s self-conjuring is the black Dog, Tom, who walks onstage and claims her as his own. Animal familiars, a hallmark of English witchcraft, are external embodiments of desire and enchanted beings of mixed or uncertain ontology.70 Their efficacy is, like Kleinian part-object magic, a magic of feelings and desires that inheres in the interpretation of ordinary things as supernaturally animate. The Dog is an onstage embodiment of paranoia’s ability to make true what it suspects: the Dog makes her a witch, but the Dog is a materialized conjuration of a wicked desire she had, which was aroused in her by the community’s abuse. The Dog presumes that they already have an intimate relationship. He tells her he came to her out of love and pity to help her, and that all he wants is her soul and body, like a canine, diabolical surrogate Christ. He is both her servant and her master. He offers to run and do mischief to anyone she commands him to, but threatens “I’ll tear thy body in a thousand pieces” if she refuses him an unequivocal blood pact (2.1.144). He seals her to himself by suckling blood from her arm, making her a twisted, incestuous, antigenerative, pseudo-maternal figure. One of the play’s most obvious liberties with the real Elizabeth Sawyer’s story from Goodcole’s pamphlet narrative is changing her marital status from married to single and making the Dog her primary sexual object, a change that points up the centrality of erotic deviance in the witch hunt. The erotic bond between Elizabeth Sawyer and the Dog is extended and triangulated through the queer figure of Cuddy Banks. The son of one of Sawyer’s chief persecutors, Cuddy is an infantile fool who dabbles in witchcraft and bestiality while maintaining an affect of receptive, childish innocence even as he is willingly lured into an erotic relation with the Dog as a love object and familiar. Cuddy takes the Dog as his “Ningle” (a corruption of “ingle,” or homosexual boy favorite, a term with connotations of sexual service),71 declaring his love too easily and too intensely. He later naively discloses these sexual relations to his father, protesting that he has “given [the Dog] a bone to gnaw twenty times” (4.1.253–54). The title page image of the first printed edition of the play, from 1658,
depicts Sawyer, the Dog, and Cuddy Banks in a triangle of mutual address, converging toward each other with speech ribbons that display their interlocking vulnerabilities and opportunisms: “Ho have I found thee cursing” (Dog), “Help help I am Drowned” (Cuddy Banks, from a pond), and “Sanctabecetur nomen tuum” (Mother Sawyer’s bastardized Latin, which the historical Elizabeth Sawyer confesses in Goodcole’s pamphlet was taught to her by the devil).

Cuddy Banks is witch bait. He embodies the seduction and the queering orbit of witchcraft. His lovers’ quarrel with the Dog (“a pox, that morris makes me spit in thy mouth,” he cries, before coming back again) confirms the sexually corrupting effects of those desires as well as the difficulty of turning away (4.1.285–86). From the instant Elizabeth Sawyer becomes a witch, the audience is drawn in—as Cuddy is drawn in—to a voyeuristic fascination with her witchness and her bond with the Dog. This attraction raises the possibility
that, like Cuddy, what we see as witchcraft and what we do not is a function of where our desires are invested.

“Fitted Both to One Sheath”

Bigamy is legally and socially a lie, a sin, and a crime. But in The Witch of Edmonton, it is also an erotic appetite, a secret status transacted through suspicion, generating hidden deviance in whatever it touches. Besides being felt as an unchosen fate, Frank’s status as a bigamist seems to entail genuine erotic interest and affection for both his wives. When Frank is first betrothed to Susan, we initially wonder if the romantic energy of this second match is faked. But that suspicion quickly gives way to the more shocking suspicion that it is not, and that they are ardent lovers. Frank and Susan are described suggestively as a “new pair of Sheffield knives fitted both to one sheath” (2.2.41–42), a metaphor of twinning that also ominously introduces imagery of the knife, which will become a recurring figure in the play’s part-object-ridden landscape, ultimately effecting a climactic nexus between the two plots. The image of two knives going into a single sheath also evokes the specter of sexual deviance: bigamy (a marriage with an extra partner in it), adultery, a bisexual/homoerotic threesome (two phalli), and doubled sexual peril.

Frank Thorney’s interactions with his second wife at their secretly criminal wedding betray the distorting effects of bigamy paranoia on suspector and suspect alike. When Susan observes “strange variations” in her new husband, Frank’s blithe refusal to acknowledge the discrepancy between his speech and his affect is an act of passive-aggressive violence (now known as gaslighting) that drives Susan to increasingly anxious self-abnegation.73 Frank erratically attempts to placate Susan with praise, and even with a kind of honesty, almost telling her that he is a bigamist: “’Twas told me by a woman/Known and approved in palmistry,/I should have two wives” (2.2.118–20). Susan’s craving to know the source of Frank’s angst comes up against the limitations of paranoia’s faith in exposure. The specific sexual deviance that is the cause of her suspicion—the state of bigamy—is so bizarre that it sounds like a lie even when spoken outright, even to someone who is already suspicious, already
erotically invested, and thus primed and hungry to hear precisely this revelation. When Frank calls her the wrong name (“No, no, my Winnifride,” [2.2.122]), and actually discloses that Winnifride is the girl he would choose to be a second wife, the revelation functions as further concealment thanks to Susan’s normative assumption that he means a second successive wife should she die. Sedgwick makes the point that paranoia’s faith in exposure means that it often loses all purchase when the truth comes to light and nothing happens, which is why counter-hegemonic paranoias are less effectual than those with social power behind them, as in the witch hunt. So it follows that in this exchange, Frank’s barely equivocated disclosure to Susan of what he really is has, perversely, no effectual force at all. As his wife, she is still in the disenfranchised position even though he is the criminally queer figure, the bigamist; thus her suspicions are powerless. Frank’s predicament in The Witch of Edmonton is not played for comedy about women’s sexual interchangeability or objectification. Rather, his behavior—keeping his meeting with Winnifride, guiltily kissing Susan and promising to anger her no more—provokes the suspicion that he not only has two wives, but he also feels the full measure of sexual and affective investment in both of them that a husband is supposed to bear to one wife. The monstrosity of his secret seems, at least in part, to be an erotic orientation toward a different number of love objects than the normative relational structure of marriage permits. His erotic bent queers both his marriages. If Susan’s probing of Frank at their wedding echoes the schizogenic paranoia that grows out of suspecting a secret queerness in one’s spouse, Winnifride’s simultaneous terror of discovery and impotent, pessimistic longing to be publicly acknowledged is the aggrieved yet paranoid position of a same-sex partner whose significant other remains closeted.

“Would I Were!”

Just as Frank is about to leave one wife to run away with another, secret, pregnant wife, the two plots of The Witch of Edmonton come together for the first (and really only) time. The festering secret of Frank’s bigamy is suddenly materialized to the audience by the same
little part-object that has materialized Elizabeth Sawyer’s witchcraft and rebellious sexual deviance: the Dog. The Dog’s mysterious on-stage appearances with Frank Thorney, like his trysts with Cuddy Banks, embody how secret erotic deviance spreads outward—from Elizabeth Sawyer in the witch plot as from Thorney in the bigamy plot—to generate deviance in others, in a self-perpetuating feedback loop of untoward desires and illicit actions. As Frank and Susan bid a lingering farewell, the Dog inexplicably enters: “One touch from me/Soon sets the body forward” (3.3.1–3). The Dog “rubs” Frank, unseen. This rub seems to set in motion an urge to “ease all at once” (3.3.15), to annihilate the love object that is the occasion of his secret. “I must kill you,” he announces openly to Susan (3.3.20). But, like bigamy, this is one of those secrets too horrifying to be believed even when it is said aloud. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the stage directions state that “He takes a knife”—indeed he seems almost surprised to find it (3.3.24). There is no indication of where the knife might come from; presumably it is one of the witchcraft part-objects/instruments strewn throughout the play, attached to Frank (handed to him, or placed where he will find it) by the Dog’s affectionate rub. Just as the Dog declared, Frank’s body is “set forward” by the touch and the knife. Menacing her with the knife, Frank calls Susan a “whore,” construing her at her death as the thing that he in fact is. Mirroring the paranoid logic of the witch hunt, Frank projects his own deviant sexual state onto his legitimate wife, claiming that she is making him kill her: “You have dogged your own death” (3.3.40).

Though his murder of Susan seems to have been initially committed in a fugue of eroticized witch-Dog passion (“Once past our height,/We scorn the deep’st abyss”), Thorney’s agenda immediately, tellingly, turns toward secrecy (3.3.65–66). He sets about to avoid detection by “dressing” the knife in his own blood and “dressing” his body in wounds to mimic hers, wounding himself with the same uncanny knife on the “arms, thighs, hands, any place” in a performative externalization of guilt that is, at the same time, a performance to conceal it (3.3.67–68). With the help of the Dog, who has presumably been onstage silently helping the murder along, Frank ties himself to a tree with ropes of mysterious origin. “How prosperous and effectual mischief sometimes is” (3.3.74), he muses, observing (correctly)
that the projective energy of his sexual deviance, externalized in the Dog’s familiar body, works to bring forth both evil deeds and the narratives blaming them on others.

The affective convergence between the bigamy plot and the witchcraft plot comes to a head in the play’s juridical climax, where suspicion is fixed on the figures most available to hand. Frank’s “dumb-show” of a gory attack by a stranger at first appears to work, encouraging Susan’s father and his own to name two hapless young men as suspected murderers. But between the close of act 3 and the opening of act 4, Susan’s murder appears to have touched off a communal flurry of witch paranoia. The citizens of Edmonton attribute a ready assortment of domestic and sexual disasters to Elizabeth Sawyer: “Our cattle fall, our wives fall, our daughters fall and maidservants fall; and we ourselves shall not be able to stand if this beast be suffered to graze amongst us” (4.1.15–18). The piece of thatch wielded by a countryman as he runs onstage yelling the long-anticipated lines, “Burn the witch, the witch, the witch, the witch!” functions as a counterpart to the demonic, Dog-implanted knife: it is a part-object fashioned not to effect witchcraft but to test for it, to draw it out. It is metonymically part of Elizabeth Sawyer, a piece of her house being taken and used against her: “You hot whore, must we fetch you with fire in your tail?” (4.1.29–30). Other “proofs” offered by the townspeople similarly inscribe sexual secrets and forbidden desires onto the witch. Old Banks is compelled to perform oral sex acts on his cow: “Let me go thither or but cast mine eye at her, [ . . . ] I cannot choose, though it be ten times in an hour, but run to the cow and, taking up her tail, kiss, saving your worship’s reverence, my cow behind” (4.1.62–66). The paranoid affective circuit of the witch panic brings such unruly bodily desires out into the center of the dramatic action. Community members are licensed to attribute what they are moved to do by their own illicit desires to Sawyer, and to her desire to make them do such things.
Sawyer attempts to call out the mechanisms of projection behind the accusation of “witch,” moving from “I am none,” to “Would I were! If every poor old woman be trod on thus by slaves, reviled, kicked, beaten, as I am daily, she, to be revenged, had need turn witch” (4.1.84–89). This response takes her act of resistant self-fashioning earlier in the play—“‘Tis all one/To be a witch as to be counted one” (2.1.125–26)—to a more hyperbolic level of dissident witch-identification. Beyond making the point that being constructed as a witch not only is what it means to be a witch, but also actually inculcates the desire to be that dangerous, powerful thing, there are shades of a queer politics of reclamation in Sawyer’s use of the term “witch” here. She laughs at the proclamation that she is “a secret and pernicious witch” (4.1.109) and counters, “A witch? Who is not?” (4.1.116). There is a radical fantasy of power in her point that the poor old abused women who get constructed as witches actually need the powers attributed to witches, in order to have any means of responding to the constant violence to which they are subjected.

Elizabeth Sawyer is finally undone by a pair of sexual secrets, one her own and another that she may not even know. In a diatribe against the hypocrisy of witch persecution, she rails at Sir Arthur Clarington that she never robbed a maiden of her honor. Sir Arthur takes this oblique mention of the very thing he did to Winnifride as proof that, like Agnis Sampson to King James, Sawyer has supernatural knowledge of his sex life: “By one thing she speaks/I now know she’s a witch, and dare no longer/Hold conference with the fury” (4.1.159–61). In this “one thing” Sawyer speaks, the play’s two plots come together. Though the text gives no indication of Sawyer’s access to the secret sexual knowledge attributed to her—though Sir Arthur’s guilty paranoia is at least in collusive tension with the old woman’s (accurate) suspicions and intuitions about the sins of others in her community—this is enough to brand her as a witch.

The play then veers into its most graphic display of deviant eroticism. As soon as Sawyer is accused of knowing Sir Arthur’s sexual secret, her own little sexual secret, the Dog, materializes to her. He suckles on her “teat” (her nipple, or the devil’s teat on her arm), then stands on his hind legs to kiss and rub her. “Let’s tickle,” she propositions, and they presumably engage in erotic play as the Dog
recounts the acts of maleficium he has committed (4.1.173). Elizabeth Sawyer equates him to other ornaments, pets, and transmitters of pleasure, calling him “my dainty, my little pearl!” and exclaiming that “no lady loves her hound, monkey, or parakeet, as I do thee” (4.1.175.177). This is the moment where what had heretofore been occulted intimations of bestiality, demonic sex, and maleficium are performed onstage for the audience’s horrified pleasure. As if to confirm Sawyer’s transformation into the condemned, queer figure of the witch, her black Dog disappears and returns to her white—the inverse of her own transformed status—and grave in affect. He rejects her sexual games, and he informs her that he is a harbinger of her violent public exposure and death. The Dog explains how he has brought Sawyer to the gallows by acting as object, instrument, and incitement for both her and Cuddy Banks’s socially unacceptable desires. Transgressive urges materialize the devil into surrogates like himself, he says: “Thy oaths,/Curses, and blasphemies pull him to thine elbow” (5.1.137–39), in the shape of “vermin” (5.1.127), or even “borrowed” bodies, such as the reanimated cadavers of suicides and strumpets (5.1.148–51). In a form conjured by desire, the Dog works by turning illicit urges into the actions of body parts: “As thy tongue slandering, bearing false witness,/Thy hand stabbing, stealing, cozening, cheating—/He’s then within thee. Thou play’st, he bets upon thy part” (5.1.142–45).

The only crime of witchcraft actually staged in the play is the descent into madness of Anne Ratcliffe, whom Sawyer orders the Dog to “pinch” to the heart. “Touch her,” she says to the Dog; the Dog’s “touch” spurs Anne Ratcliffe to beat out her own brains, yelling, “The devil, the witch, the witch, the devil,” and ranting about the man in the moon and devils grinding grain in hoppers (a metaphor for sex). This all seems to occur just offstage, as the townspeople—presumably covered in stage blood and prosthetic brains—come upon Sawyer with a newly concrete suspicion: “You have a spirit, they say, comes to you in the likeness of a dog” (4.1.234–35). Unlike his ambiguous “rubs” of Frank Thorney, the Dog’s “touch” of Anne Ratcliffe is a direct transmission of witch-desire via a familiar. But for the townspeople, Elizabeth Sawyer’s construction as a witch is
already accomplished from what has been imputed to her by their own projective fantasies.

“What Knife?”

The play’s materialized circuits of paranoid desire reach a climax in a twisted discovery scene. Frank lies creepily ensconced in his dead wife’s father’s house, recovering from his self-inflicted wounds while being doted on with quasi-incestuous devotion by his victim’s sister, melodramatically affecting sickness and suicidal ideation as a cover for his murderous secret. Susan’s sister, Katherine, presents him with a roasted chicken, a significant expenditure of labor and care; but, having forgotten a knife to cut it, she looks in Frank’s coat for his pocketknife. As in the scene of Susan’s murder, the ontological status and location of the knife is utterly ambiguous. “Enter Dog, shrugging as it were for joy, and dances,” reads the stage direction, indicating that the Dog may bring the knife into the bedchamber, stowing it where it will be found. Katherine, discovering the still-bloody knife, immediately lies about it, but Frank knows he is found out when he checks and finds the incriminating knife left in his coat pocket. In a twist on the portentous “two knives to one sheath” figure used at the bigamous wedding, the discovery of one knife conjures two apparitions: the two women Frank has wronged. The “Spirit of Susan” manifests in two places at once on both sides of the bed; at the same time, Winnifride, in the flesh and still cross-dressed as a boy, appears at its foot. At first Frank confuses the “lost creature” (4.2.69) in the room with the strangely doubled, mocking shade that menaces him. He confesses Susan’s murder to Winnifride, describing it as a wrongful and violent penetration: that he “dipped my sad pen [penis] in blood” (4.2.98). The sexual metaphor is extended by the discoverers, when Katherine shows Old Carter “A bloody knife in’s pocket” (4.2.116).

The knife in this scene is a phallic vehicle for the sexual secret itself, and for how sexual secrets work as secret knowledge. In a thickly collusive, multiply duplicitous exchange, Frank and his suspects switch back and forth between admitting they know about the knife and pretending not to know about it, even though all know
it is there. Frank flies into a mania, crying out for “the knife, the knife, the knife!,” “to cut my chicken up, my chicken” (4.2.117–18). Katherine pretends ignorance (“What knife?”). A perverse and gruesome charade ensues, in which Winnifride cuts up the roast chicken for Frank with the bloody knife that killed Susan—“A leg or a wing, sir?” (4.2.141)—while everyone pretends that nothing has been discovered. One dead bird quickly becomes a metonymic placeholder for another dead “bird” (woman), however, as Susan’s wounded corpse is hauled onstage, her “one broad eye open” still staring at Frank, to “find out the murderer” (4.2.150–53). Susan’s corpse is no longer a person but a thing. It is brought out, like the roof thatch, to function as a technology of knowledge production through the negative affect it incites in Frank. It throws Frank into a state of disturbance in which he can be confronted with his knife, “enameled with the heart-blood of thy hated wife” (4.2.164).

Frank is outed as a murderer by the exposure of Susan’s bloody, penetrated corpse, but his outing as a bigamist requires a second exposure. In a grotesquely tragic version of what could have happened at the end of Philaster, suspicion falls on the cross-dressed Winnifride as Frank’s servant boy and possible accomplice in the murder. Winnifride then reveals herself as “his first, only wife, his lawful wife” (4.2.178). This moment exemplifies Sedgwick’s descriptions of paranoia’s “extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure,” but in this sole instance in the play where paranoid exposure actually does produce truth, the truth that it produces is deviance: the crime of bigamy. That the exposure of Frank’s originary sexual secret occurs through the exposure of Winnifride’s hidden sex highlights how bigamy functions as a queer sexual status, inhering in an improper number of “sheaths” (vaginas) for Frank’s “knife.” That Frank is outed as a bigamist by a cross-dressed (boy) actor’s removal of “her” men’s garments—over a roast chicken carved with the murder weapon, planted by a dancing devil dog—highlights that bigamy, like witchcraft, is produced through physical and affective transactions with erotically inflected material objects. But this is also the moment when the bigamist is produced as a queer figure in the phobic, disciplinary, historical sense, as an essentialized criminal type whose sexual deviance can
only be remedied by his death. When Frank’s homosocial page is revealed to be not only a woman but his wife, a monstrous double of the dead woman, the never-not-relational character of a queer disclosure changes the status of both partners. Winnifride’s only escape from certain condemnation is to pronounce Frank guilty of both murder and premeditated bigamy (“Has he done it, then?” “Yes, ’tis confessed to me” [4.2.183–84]). Turning Frank in for his crimes reestablishes Winnifride as a sexual victim rather than a sexual suspect, so when we see Frank processing to the gallows in the play’s final scene, Winnifride is not in chains being hanged with him. In fact, she is the object of love and sympathy from both Frank’s and Susan’s fathers, who offer her comfort, pity, and assurance that “’twas not thy fault” (5.3.8).

How is it possible for Winnifride, for Sir Arthur, who is only “mildly censured” for being “the instrument that wrought all their misfortunes” (5.2.1–3), and moreover for Frank, whose scaffold scene of reconciliation and forgiveness is one of the most dilated, most thoroughly reparative execution scenes depicted in early modern literature, to be so thoroughly reincorporated into the community at the resolution of the play after such transgressive sexual offenses? The answer comes in the final moments of the scene, when the two plots of the play come together for only the second time in the twinned executions of the climax. Elizabeth Sawyer is led onstage to execution alongside Frank, to cries of “Hang her! Witch!” Old Carter exclaims, “The witch, that instrument of mischief! Did not she witch the devil into my son-in-law when he killed my poor daughter?—Do you hear, Mother Sawyer?” (5.3.21–23). This is the first time Frank’s crimes, previously attributed to his own deviant desires spurred on by the Dog’s ontologically ambiguous instrumental role, are pinned on Elizabeth Sawyer as something she bewitched him to do. Sawyer has become the official repository or “common sink” for all violations of social mores—those she has nothing to do with as well as those she owns—and the Dog has become her official instrument. “Cannot a poor old woman/Have your leave to die without vexation?” she answers Old Carter, who persists: “Did you not bewitch Frank to kill his wife? He could never have done’t without the devil” (5.3.24–27). Sawyer does not dispute that the devil has been involved: “Who
doubts it? But is every devil mine?” (5.3.28). The collective piling-on of blame onto Elizabeth Sawyer as she is on her way to die effectively makes not only the devil of bigamy but every devil hers, now that she is a witch being executed for witchcraft.

Frank Thorney’s execution as a bigamist, by contrast, is ultimately more mimetic of Christ’s crucifixion or the prodigal son’s confession than of a witch hanging. He registers happiness that the law has foreclosed his licentiousness and disciplined his desires (5.3.76–87). However, he also disavows all love and desire for Susan, and he characterizes his patriarchally ordered marriage as a mercenary choice, utterly eliding the fact that his actual crime was his failure to choose at all (5.3.110–11). Frank’s failing, which has for the entire play been construed as a sexual indulgence in too many wives at once, is resignified at the last moment as a mistaken value judgment, the vastly easier to forgive crime of marrying for money (on his father’s orders). A bigamist, it turns out, can be reconstituted as a social subject in a way that a witch cannot, if the bigamist’s crimes are attributed to the witch—and if bigamy is essentially erased as one of his crimes in the final reckoning.

Frank’s gallows conversion to affective and romantic monogamy is further enabled by the fact that there are no longer two wronged wives present but only one, Winnifride, the sole object of his death-bound love. This would imply, in a horrifying irony, that murder plays an indirect role in purging sexual sin, allowing Frank’s rehabilitation from bigamy and Winnifride’s from whoredom. The discovery and resolution of Frank’s bigamy would have far trickier affective consequences were Susan not “in heaven” but rather a potentially “hateful and envious” presence at the scaffold. But because the embodied marker of Frank’s bigamy has been stabbed, purged, and now posthumously rejected as an object of affection or erotic love, the play can spend the last lines lingering ecstatically over Frank’s repentance and his effusive blessing of everyone he has wronged, who bless him in turn, in a copious outpouring of positive affect amounting to an orgy of reparation.

By the same token, once she is saddled with the blame for Frank Thorney’s bigamy, the witch’s work is done, and Elizabeth Sawyer drops out of the play’s resolution. She is led offstage for the
last time, refusing to satisfy her audience’s craving for any performative, confessional affect from her: “Have I scarce breath enough to say my prayers,/And would you force me to spend that in bawling?” (5.3.49–50). Her refusal to confess means that she is to be burned alive, but the text does not dramatize her death.  

The disturbing outcome, at the end of a play about witchcraft and bigamy, seems to be that in order for sexual normativity to be reinstated (as it is in Winnifride’s epilogue, with her “modest hopes” of attaining “good report”), it is the supernumerary wife and the witch who must be removed, made invisible, and abjected as the embodiments of impermissible desire.

“Yet Did Hee Utterly Denie”

Newes from Scotland also elides any dramatic description of the executions of the women accused and tortured in its narrative. On the last page, we find out why: “The rest of the witches which are not yet executed, remayne in prison till farther triall, and knowledge of his majesties pleasure” (D3r). This early pamphlet, unlike The Witch of Edmonton, circulates as popular media before its witch hunt is brought to its grand climax: mass hangings in the heart of Edinburgh. There is, however, a single execution dramatized in gory detail: that of a male witch, allegedly named “Doctor Fian” but using the “alias John Cunningham.” The erotic networks conjured in Newes from Scotland’s curious relation of his trial prefigure The Witch of Edmonton, with its pairing of a female witch and a male sexual manipulator. Like many others in the pamphlet, Fian is first accused by Geillis Duncane. For reasons we cannot know but may guess—because accused witches surely pursued their own secret agendas of retribution in naming names—he is the only accused man named at the North Berwick kirk witches’ Sabbath. He is said to have acted as the Register, the scribe at the desk depicted in the woodcut in figure 2, who manages the witches’ forced kissing of the devil’s buttocks (C5). Reading the pamphlet’s narrative of Fian’s confessions and tortures in light of The Witch of Edmonton’s later dramatic staging of Frank Thorney’s crimes and (revisionist) confession shows Doctor Fian in a new light: he is more than just a token male accused witch. Read next
to Frank Thorney, Fian embodies a difficult and submerged link between sexual violence and the machinery of the witch panic: the coexistence of gender violence and sexual violation perpetrated on the bodies of accused witches, with sex and gender violence perpetrated by accused witches. One of the kinds of deviant desire narrated in Fian’s case, producing him as an erotically dissident, criminalized figure, is rape. Unlike any of the female witches in the pamphlet, Newes from Scotland depicts Doctor Fian as doing harm not to the king but to other people—both adults and children—in the service of his own erotic appetites. Cases like his force the history of sexuality to confront the uneven and sometimes unknowable overlap, in paranoid sex persecutions, of what people actually did versus what they are accused of doing. These two categories are obviously not identically coextensive, but neither are they dependably separable.

The “damnable” John Cunningham/Doctor Fian wants sexual access to a young woman—or, more probably, a girl—who does not want him. He is said to bewitch a neighbor to madness “only for being enamoured” of her, “whome he loved himselfe” (Ciir). He “used many meanes sundry times to obtain his purpose and wicked intent of the same Gentlewoman,” finally turning to “conjuring, witchcraft and Sorcery” to obtain what he could not by consent (Ciiiir). His clear objective is sexual coercion: rape by witchcraft. Using his power as the schoolmaster, he calls this young woman’s brother, his student, to him and “demaunded if he did lye with his sister.” The answer being yes, he “secretlye promised the boy to teach him without stripes, so he would obtain for him three haires of his sisters privities, at such time as he should spye best occasion for it.” This is the most rapacious sort of sexual witchcraft. Like the thwarted bewitching of King James via his soiled personal linens and the toad, Fian’s plot uses bits of bodily detritus, secretly obtained, to get at the victim. The relationship it intrudes on is that between a sister and a brother who are still young enough to share a bed. Fian also seduces his student to exchange the “stripes” inflicted on his back for three of his sister’s pubic hairs, a substitution that initiates the boy as a sexual violator, an instrument as well as an object of violence. The boy vows to do exactly that, “taking a peecce of conjured paper from his maister to lappe them in when he had gotten them.” He then “practiced night-
lye to obtaine his maister’s purpose, especially when his sister was asleepe” (Cii4).

But in a fantastical plot twist, the children’s mother is a witch herself. The mother witch already holds the schoolmaster in such sexual suspicion regarding her children that her daughter’s complaint that “her Brother would not suffer her to sleepe” immediately makes her “vehemently suspect” Fian of some evil intention (Cii4). This is an amazing tossed-off revelation about the universe of Newes from Scotland and the North Berwick witch panic: that the Edinburgh area is so teeming with witches that their magic and interests collide. It is also an instance of the use of witchcraft to exact both sexual violence and revenge for sexual violence. Once the mother extracts Fian’s plan from the boy with a beating, she decides to “meet with the Doctor in his own Arte.” Taking the “conjured paper,” she goes to “a young Heyfer which never had borne Calfe nor gone to the Bull,” and clips off three hairs from its udder (Civr). The boy takes them to the schoolmaster, who, “thinking them indeede to bee the Maides haires, went straight and wrought his arte upon them.” “But the Doctor had no sooner doone his intent to them, but presentlye the Hayfer Cow whose haires they were indeed, came into the doore of the Church wherein the Schoolemaister was,” and “made towards the Schoolemaister, leaping and dauncing upon him, and following him foorth of the church and to what place so ever he went, to the great admiration of all the townes men of Saltpans, and many other who did beholde the same” (Civr).

This anecdote illuminates the structural relation between Frank Thorney’s bigamy and Fian’s witchcraft: their criminal machinations follow a structure of sexual secrecy that is the hallmark of both witchcraft and nonnormative sexuality. Both are middling men who will not take no for an answer, and who use nefarious means to circumvent social constraints on their sexual behavior. Both are liars and predators who take advantage of women’s and children’s lesser social power to satisfy their illegitimate sexual appetites. Both texts stage scenes of intimate violence committed via secret, enchanted part-objects: incestuously stolen pubic hairs and enchanted paper; a pocketknife put to sudden use as a weapon of wife murder; a quasi-gothic, epistemology-of-the-closet-laden outing involving a roast.
chicken; and strangely animated animals—an enamoured heifer and a mysterious telekinetic Dog, both of whom dance up to the offender and rub their bodies on him. To point out these structural parallels, as well as how both characters are produced as queer figures for their pursuit of antisocial sexual ends, does not mitigate the violence of these stories. Instead, it reminds us that the history of deviant and antisocial desires does not conform to a modern, liberal, purifying bifurcation of free and consensual perversions as distinct from violent and predatory ones.

The play and the pamphlet stage quite different fates for Frank Thorney and Doctor Fian/John Cunningham. But both plots treat the men’s illicit sexual agendas within a larger web of competing desires, including women’s illicit activities undertaken to counter and defend against men’s sexual manipulations. When the schoolmaster Fian finds himself humiliated by being made the love object of a cow, the narrative of Newes from Scotland shifts suddenly into a register of revenge farce. As in The Witch of Edmonton, a witch appears at the scene of gendered violence. But far from being sacrificed or incriminated to apprehend a male predator, as Elizabeth Sawyer is, this mother-witch is the discoverer of the crime. She agentively targets Fian with her magic, besting him “at his own Arte,” to punish him for his predation of her daughter (and son). By turning the love object of the spell from a woman to a cow, she makes Fian’s erotic appetites, as well as his diabolism, the target of public suspicion and ridicule, getting him “secretlye nominated for a notable Cunjurer.” She uses not only cow’s hairs but the lecherous schoolmaster himself as instruments of her desire for revenge.

But this tale of attempted rape and maternal vengeance is produced and/or sworn to by Fian under multiple waves of heinous torture, which is where Newes from Scotland’s resolution links Fian’s problematic mode of suspect male sexuality to paranoia’s intractable problem of knowledge production. Why Fian meets such an exceptionally violent fate may be in part that he causes somewhat of a gender crisis by being implicated at the witches’ Sabbath, or that he is more obdurate under torture than the rest and thus produces more gruesome results. I argue, however, that the self-serving sexual character of his witchcraft, combined with his refusal to play out the
penitence narrative as Frank Thorney does, creates a new, masculine facet of the witch as an antisocial queer figure. Further, the persecutory paranoia this figure arouses is brought out in the narrative’s prurient description of what happens to his body. Though at first, like Agnis Sampson, he refuses, and only confesses after “the rest of the witches” discover two “charmed Pisses” stuck into his tongue (Ciir), Fian appears penitent after recounting all of his diabolical seduction attempts, performatively renouncing the devil. But then, the next night, he steals the key to the prison door and escapes. Upon being swiftly reapprehended and taken before James himself, “nonwithstanding that his owne confession appeareth remaining in recorde under his owne hande writing,” “yet did hee utterly denye the same” (Diir). Fian’s retraction throws the physical, affective, and epistemological workings of the witch hunt into overdrive. James hypothesizes that he has made a new pact with the devil and received a new mark, which is searched for but never found, because the logic of the witch hunt can furnish no other explanation for his “stubborne willfulness” in refusing to agree again with his previously sworn narrative (Diir). The torture reserved for the unrepentant seducer is hyperbolic, beyond protocol, “a most strange torment”: his fingernails are “riven and pulled off,” and needles thrust in. He continues so long in the boots that, the pamphlet says, “his legges were crusht and beaten together as small as might be, and the bones and flesh so brused, that the blood and marrow spouted forth in great abundance, whereby they were made unserviceable for ever” (Diiv). Yet no confession is driven out: “Notwithstanding al these greevous and cruell torments hee would not confesse anie thing, so deeply had the Devill entered into his heart, that hee utterly denied all that which he had before avouched, and would saie nothing thereunto but this, that what hee had done and sayde before, was onely done and sayde for feare of paynes which he had endured” (Diiv).

The interpretive mechanism of the witch hunt reads Fian’s retraction as a total mystery: neither the tale of illicit love magic that Fian furnished for the court before he escaped from prison, nor its truth status, nor what was being done to his body as he narrated it, are in any way put in question. The machinery that the witchfinders (and the state, embodied in James) have enchanted with their
paranoid investment and belief in its efficacy is mysteriously refusing to work. It is possible, though, to read this as a scene that pits not only the pincers, needles, and boots but also the materiality of human flesh against the account that a person is willing to give of himself—what he desired, what he did, and why. His ultimate recalcitrance, his refusal to repent even upon being tortured to death, may be seen as a more extreme, more defiant variant of Elizabeth Sawyer’s passive-aggressive affect on being labeled a witch, “‘Tis all one./To be a witch as to be counted one.” It is rare in early modern English crime literature for anyone to attribute the pain of torture as causing a false confession (a silence that to me indicates an unspoken anxiety around the issue). Fian’s refusal, in the last instance, to satisfy the witch hunt’s desire to produce a confession out of him—he is burned alive “for example sake, to remayne a terour to all others hereafter,” without ever providing one—causes such a narrative outpouring of baffled rage precisely because it shows the production of the truth of witchcraft to be driven not by logic but by desire, and its success or failure to depend as much on temperament, interpersonal affective dynamics, and trauma as on virtue or truth.

The Witch of Edmonton, conversely, disciplines bigamy with godly purgation. The resolution stages Frank’s crime as a grave fall followed by a smoldering secret, which twists his behavior—and by paranoia’s contagious logic of implication, that of everyone around him—until he is found out in a paroxysm of horrific exposure and somber juridical retribution. But then, as Frank prays for forgiveness at his execution, it is apparent that his redemption is possible only through the wholesale scapegoating of Elizabeth Sawyer (including for Frank’s crimes) and her exclusion from the scaffold scene, as well as Susan’s erasure (by which the play colludes with Frank’s murderous impulse to eliminate her). Reparation for a bigamist, in short, requires the redoubled abjection of a witch (and, suspiciously, a wife). An alternative reading becomes visible, though, by juxtaposing the play’s bigamy plot with Newes from Scotland’s lecherous schoolmaster. As a bigamist, Frank Thorney insists on options that are normatively foreclosed to him, attempting to have it both ways. He wants to marry whom he likes (and to have however many partners he likes) while maintaining his property and respectability. As the counterpart
to the titular witch, the bigamist of Edmonton emerges as an over-reaching sexual outlaw of another kind, one who refuses to choose between sexual fulfillment and social status, and who refuses the enforced equation of marriage and monogamy, thereby resignifying marriage to his own ends so profoundly that he must hang for it. This reading of Frank Thorney’s antisocial sexual selfishness places his bigamy within a genealogy of secret rebellion specifically clustered around sexuality. The bigamist becomes the missing link in a chain of erotic suspicion that stretches from witch panic to gay panic, revealing the resonances between the paranoid affective machinery of the witch hunt and that of homophobia.
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