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ROBERTA BARKER

'An honest dog yet': Performing *The Witch of Edmonton*

At the climax of Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's 1621 tragedy *The Witch of Edmonton*, the devil treats a young morris dancer named Cuddy Banks to a discourse on the relationship between the everyday world in which Cuddy lives and the demonic realm over which he himself reigns. Demons exist at the beck and call of human sin, he declares, for

Thou never art so distant
From an evil spirit but that thy oaths,
Curses, and blasphemies pull him to thine elbow.
Thou canst never tell a lie but that a devil
Is within hearing it; thy evil purposes
Are ever haunted. (5.1.137–42)¹

Though feckless men and women commit their day-to-day peccadillos blithely unaware of the evil one's proximity, the devil is a constant participant in earthly existence. Easily able to pass as a citizen of the mortal world, he can 'borrow' and reanimate the bodies of the dead (148–51). Indeed, he can enter '[a]ny shape to blind such silly eyes as thine, but chiefly those coarse creatures, dog or cat, hare, ferret, frog, toad' (124–5). The devil not only relays this principle to Cuddy verbally but also demonstrates it in action; throughout *The Witch of Edmonton* — and even as he speaks these lines — he appears in the form of a domesticated dog.

In *The Witch of Edmonton* the quotidian and the supernatural share a common space. In its insistence on their terrifying confluence, embodied in the simultaneously homely and horrific figure of the demonic Dog, the play speaks very directly to the beliefs and anxieties of the age that gave it birth. The Dog, as Frances E. Dolan argues, represents 'an especially vivid manifestation of the early modern preoccupation with "familiar" threats and threatening "familiar"'.² He 'stands out as an unlikely dramatic character',³

the play's most 'stunning' and 'engaging' invention,⁴ precisely because Dekker, Ford, and Rowley are willing to challenge so thoroughly both the actor who portrays him and the audience who watches him, in order to convey effectively the interpenetration of the domestic and the demonic.

This essay explores the multivalent theatrical strategies by which *The Witch of Edmonton* strives to represent a reality at once prosaic and suffused with the workings of the numinous. I begin by showing how the fictional citizens of Edmonton, the actors who portrayed them onstage, and the theatrical forms in which they did so might all have worked in tandem with the figure of the Dog to create for early modern theatrical spectators a disturbing image of evil's presence in their own everyday lives. When contemporary theatre artists revive the play they face the challenge of translating its complex socio-spiritual dramaturgy into terms that have meaning for a more secularized audience. In the paper's second half I revisit my own experience of directing *The Witch of Edmonton* at Dalhousie University in 2008 in order to document one approach to this challenge. Our choices about setting, staging, acting, and textual adaptation all strove to invite Canadian spectators of the new millennium into an encounter with an alienating yet disturbingly recognizable world. In that world, evil is both produced by and productive of ordinary social interactions, and modern as well as early modern subjectivities are 'haunted' by the lure of darkness.

In a work that did more than any other to shape twentieth-century scholarship's understanding of early modern English domestic tragedy, Henry Hitch Adams defined the genre as 'a tragedy of the common people, ordinarily set in the domestic scene, dealing with personal and family relationships rather than with large affairs of state, presented in a realistic fashion, and ending in a tragic or otherwise serious manner'.⁵ Adams's view of domestic tragedy as fundamentally 'realistic' has proved enduring. Fifty years after the publication of Adams's book Viviana Comensoli concluded '*Household Business: Domestic Plays of Early Modern England*' by comparing 'the complex dramaturgy that informs early modern domestic drama' with that of 'the theatre of Ibsen and Arthur Miller' — the theatre, that is to say, of the great modern realist dramatists.⁶ Peter Brooks defines realism as 'a kind of literature and art committed to a form of play that uses carefully wrought and detailed toys, ones that attempt as much as possible to reproduce the look and feel of the real thing'.⁷ By describing early modern domestic drama as 'realistic' Adams and his heirs identify it as a form of theatre that strives accurately to represent the sights and sounds of ordinary existence.

Kate McLuskie takes up a similar line of argument when she describes *The Witch of Edmonton* as 'realist pastoral'.⁸ Her phrase suggests that the play offers not an idealized rural idyll but a convincing representation of the language, the activities, and the social organization of early modern English country society. From its first words the play-text itself strives to impress the same point upon its audiences. In *The Witch of Edmonton*'s opening scene an impoverished young gentleman, Frank Thorney, cheers the pregnant maid Winnifride, whom he has just secretly married:

Come, wench, why here's a business soon dispatched.
 Thy heart, I know, is now at ease. Thou needst not
 Fear what the tattling gossips in their cups
 Can speak against thy fame. Thy child shall know
 Who to call dad now. (1.1.1–5)

'Wench', 'gossips', 'dad': Frank's colloquial language immediately invites his theatrical auditors into a familiar relationship with his mimetic world. Winnifride complains that 'tis an hard case, being lawful man and wife, / We should not live together' (9–10); Frank retorts that they must live apart for a while 'to gain a little time / For our continuing thrift' until they can be assured of Frank's inheritance, which his disapproving father might deny him should he discover his son's alliance with a penniless woman (14–15). The key preoccupations of modern realist drama — with the minutiae of everyday life, with class and economics, with sexual relationships repressed by rigid moralism, and with the social forces that determine human subjectivity and behaviour — take centre stage in this early modern scene.

The play's second scene explicitly thematizes the link between the plainness of its language and its concern with socio-economic status. When Frank's father, Old Thorney, addresses the yeoman Carter in verse and obsequiously dubs him 'a gentleman' (1.2.1), Carter responds in prose: 'No gentleman I, Master Thorney; spare the Mastership, call me by my name, John Carter. . . . Honest Hertfordshire yeoman, such an one am I. My word and my deed shall be proved one at all times' (1.2.3–7). Carter's speech not only stresses (and accedes to) his given social status but very explicitly rejects rhetorical posturing in favour of a direct equivalence between 'word and deed'. His daughter Susan, the woman Old Thorney has chosen as his son's potential bride, forcefully reiterates her father's stance by rejecting her unwanted suitor Warbeck's effort to swear his love '[b]y the honour of gentility'. 'Good sir, no swearing',

she entreats; 'Yea and nay with us / Prevails above all oaths you can invent' (52–4). Soon after her marriage to Frank, she deflates his poetic encomium to her perfections: 'Come, come, those golden strings of flattery / Shall not tie up my speech, sir' (2.2.110–11). Susan's language, like her father's, strenuously draws its hearers' attention to its own transparent and prosaic nature in a manner that strongly affirms the speaker's own yeoman-class rural identity.

The sins of the citizens of Edmonton — fornication, lying, bigamy, murder, false accusation, and witchcraft — are considerably less ordinary than the speech and social positions of the sinners. Even so, the play's authors go out of their way to represent these sins as stemming largely from the same carefully detailed social structures that shape their language. Frank is driven to his double marriage first by the machinations of his master, Sir Arthur Clarington (who has impregnated Winnifride but lets Frank take responsibility for her ruin) and then by his father's need for money, which pushes him toward Susan. Low status and poverty place Frank's neighbour, Mother Sawyer, in an even more desperate position, as she is scapegoated by a community unable to meet her need for charity. She turns to witchcraft only after she has been ostracized by the town, declaring, 'tis all one / To be a witch as to be counted one' (2.1.125–6). Outrageous though they seem at first sight, the crimes of both characters form an integral part of the play's mimesis of a convincingly 'real' environment.⁹ Indeed, the title page of the first quarto edition stresses that this tale of witchcraft is based upon 'a known true story'.¹⁰

The play's very basis in this famous 'true story' introduces a supernatural element into its carefully naturalistic mimesis. The key source of *The Witch of Edmonton* is *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a witch late of Edmonton*, a pamphlet in which the minister Henry Goodcole records his interviews with the real-life Elizabeth Sawyer before her execution.¹¹ Goodcole assures his readers that Sawyer was indeed a witch who engaged in familiar congress with the devil; he quotes her disturbingly earthy and concrete descriptions of her demonic visitor 'put[ting] his head under my coates' in order to suck blood from 'a place ... a little above my fundament'.¹² According to Goodcole, the historical Sawyer's devil was very much a part of the palpable physical world. It materialized in that world, moreover, in the form of an ordinary domesticated animal; when Goodcole asks Sawyer about the shape in which her devil came to her, she responds, 'Alwayes in the shape of a dogge'.¹³

For some modern readers, the figure of the Dog poses a challenge to the 'realistic' nature of *The Witch of Edmonton*. In *Dekker and Heywood:*

Professional Playwrights, for example, Kate McLuskie writes that Elizabeth Sawyer's opening speech 'vividly realises [her] position as the outsider in a community which firmly polices aberration and gives a kind of credibility to the otherwise ridiculous business with the diabolical black dog who seduces her into witchcraft'.¹⁴ Viewed from within a framework that privileges social over supernatural determinants, the tempting power of the canine familiar offers a less convincing source of motivation for Sawyer's sins than does her oppression at the hands of her fellow citizens. David Stymeist describes this apparent clash between motivating forces as the result of 'a consistent strategy of representational ambivalence' in *The Witch of Edmonton*, arguing that the play's 'exploration of marginality's link to social and judicial victimization runs up against the playwrights' desire to promote themselves by way of ... sensationalist stereotypes of demonism'.¹⁵ In both of these intelligent and historically informed modern readings of *The Witch of Edmonton* the Dog's role appears as a 'sensational' element at odds with the play's nuanced depiction of hegemonic power relations and their tragic results.

Such a separation between social and supernatural forces did not, however, necessarily hold sway in the period of the play's creation. As David Nicol has argued, *The Witch of Edmonton* is the product of a society where firm belief in the devil's real spiritual and physical presence in the world was the rule rather than the exception.¹⁶ For many of the play's first spectators, the devil's presence would have been far indeed from posing a challenge to the play's effective and critical mimesis of ordinary life. Proof of this assertion is offered by no less a personage than King James, before whom the tragedy appears to have been played in December 1621.¹⁷ More than twenty years before, James had prefaced his *Daemonologie* (1597) with the affirmation that 'such assaults of Sathan are most certainly practiced'.¹⁸ For such early modern spectators, the devil was an active agent of temptation constantly ready to take advantage of the sins produced by social pressures. Demonic and social forces worked together, 'closely bound in a reciprocal system', in order to bring about the damnation of human souls.¹⁹

For most early modern spectators of *The Witch of Edmonton*, the question raised by the 'known true story' of Elizabeth Sawyer would likely have been not *whether* the devil-dog could be represented onstage as part of a believable social microcosm but rather *how* he — and the microcosm itself — could be represented in a convincing manner. In his 1607 preface to *Volpone*, Ben Jonson had dismissed stage devils (along with fools and 'all other ridiculous, and exploded follies') as 'antique reliques of Barbarisme':²⁰ throwbacks to

old-fashioned forms of theatre such as the Catholic mystery plays, the moralities with their Vice figures, and even Marlowe's once cutting-edge *Doctor Faustus* with its frolicking demons and barn-storming rhetoric. Undeterred by Jonson's criticism, the public stage continued to represent devils well into the seventeenth century,²¹ but most plays featured new riffs on the ancient theatrical figure. Jonson himself spoofed old morality conventions in *The Devil is an Ass*, which begins with an extravagantly cackling Satan charging his underling Pug with the damnation of humankind but proceeds to expose Pug's evil as mere child's play in comparison with the venality and corruption of modern-day London.²² When a traditional devil costume complete with black coat and horns surfaced in seventeenth-century drama it often featured *as* a costume, as in Fletcher's *Monsieur Thomas* or Brome's *The Queen's Exchange*, where characters appear disguised as devils.²³ Elsewhere, demons take on human guise; in Dekker's *The Virgin Martyr*, for example, a demon assumes the semblance of Harpax, secretary to the leading persecutor of Caesarea's Christian community.²⁴ Jonson's Pug, too, disguises himself as an impoverished gentleman in search of service in order to worm his way into the affections of Fitzdotterel (1.3.2–4). Pug only admits his true diabolic nature when the demon-loving fool expresses no interest in his servant persona. Even then Pug dismisses old superstitions; when Fitzdotterel declares that Pug cannot be a devil because his feet are not cloven he retorts, 'Sir, that's a popular error deceives many: / But I am that I tell you' (30–1). Visibly integrated into the material human world, these were what we might now call 'realistic' devils.

Such an approach was scarcely feasible when Dekker, Ford, and Rowley came to adapt the story of Elizabeth Sawyer. The canine form of Sawyer's familiar seems to discount any attempt at 'realistic' mimesis. As Anthony B. Harris writes, an actor disguised as a dog is not obviously qualified to 'sustain the essentially sinister qualities that a malevolent devil should possess'.²⁵ Even in the old performance genres Jonson mocked as ridiculous, actors rarely took on the roles of animals; the brief appearance of the many-headed speaking dog Cerberus in Heywood's 1613 play *The Silver Age* is highly exceptional.²⁶ One has to reach back to still more ancient theatrical forms such as mumming and morris dancing to find a consistent tradition of animal impersonation in English performance.²⁷ If the hellhound's disguise resembles that of a morris hobby-animal then putting the devil onstage might seem to pull away from any form of 'realist' mimesis and toward a more presentational and symbolic

mode. The imperatives of performance threaten to obviate any sense of continuity between the everyday social world and the demonic realm.

Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's play-text approaches this potential problem by stressing the fact that the devil's doggy appearance is as much a costume for him as it is for the human actor who plays the role. As the Dog tells Cuddy Banks, a demon can enter 'those coarse creatures, dog or cat, hare, ferret, frog, toad' (5.1.125) but a demon's own spirit — presumably fashioned in the image of God before the fall from grace — remains intact. The play's characters consistently fail to understand this point. Some, like Mother Sawyer and Cuddy Banks, miss the Dog's diabolical nature until he explains it to them but most are totally unaware of his presence. For example, the Dog partially instigates Frank's murder of Susan while remaining invisible to his victims. The crimes of Edmonton's citizens are thus caused not only by social determinants but also by their inability to perceive the concrete presence of the devil in their own lives. Such a vision of the sources of sin squares with historian Nathan Johnstone's recent insistence that '[s]ixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestants ... were afraid, not that the Devil might convince man that he did not exist, but that he would persuade them that he was absent from their everyday lives'.²⁸ Dekker, Ford, and Rowley encourage their theatrical spectators to avoid this fatal pitfall, inviting them not only to perceive the Dog and his machinations as driving forces in the play but also to see *through* the presentational animal disguise to the devil beyond. That devil wears a human face, as if in embodiment of the close links between mortal and immortal agency. The penetrability of the devil's canine masquerade does not break the continuity between social and supernatural determination in *The Witch of Edmonton*; rather, it clinches it.

The potential echoes of ancient theatrical traditions in the Dog's disguise link to other elements in the play's mimesis to further emphasize the porous boundary between everyday human existence and demonic power. *The Witch of Edmonton* deals very self-consciously with its relationship to older performance forms by placing a village morris dance at the very heart of its narrative. Anthony B. Dawson, one of the few scholars to pay serious attention to the morris's role in the play, views it primarily in positive terms. For him, the morris is first and foremost 'a sanctioned, if old-fashioned and unsophisticated, social ritual', both 'communitarian and integrative',²⁹ which 'serve[s] to relieve anxiety about social change'.³⁰ Dawson admits that certain factors, such as the Dog's fiddle playing at the morris, militate against its coziness, but argues that in the morris even the Dog is fundamentally 'harmonized' and

'domesticated as a magic folk figure, a talking beast'.³¹ To arrive here, Dawson confesses discounting 'the content [and] meaning of the morris itself' as well as much of the scene in which it appears in favour of the morris's 'instrumental function'.³² Looking again at these excluded factors yields quite a different perspective. The morris's chief patron, after all, is Sir Arthur Clarington, the corrupt gentleman described by Frank Thorney's judge as 'the instrument that wrought all [Frank's] misfortunes' (5.2.2–3). Sir Arthur's condescending attitude toward the morris dancers in rewarding their obsequiousness with draughts of beer appears to be less a sign of community cohesion than a demonstration of Edmonton's rigid social hierarchy.

The jolly, time-honoured morris ritual actually reinforces the patterns of social oppression that lead to crime elsewhere in the play. Laura Denker and Laurie Maguire note that 'Morris witch' is 'one of the many synonyms for Morris dancer';³³ they remind us that 'anonymity (often to the extent of performers blacking their faces) is key to the ceremonial nature of the performance' and consider the possible derivation of the name 'Morris' from the Middle English *Moreys* ('Moorish').³⁴ They propose that 'Cuddy Banks, as Morris dancer, is literally a black (Moorish) witch' and that the play deliberately critiques the cultural binary by which '[o]ne survival of pagan tradition — the Morris dance — is accepted [while] another — witchcraft — is shunned'.³⁵ Denker and Maguire's willingness to look askance at the morris is salutary, but an even more sinister reading of the morris is possible. Although the morris's content is not directly specified by the play-text, its leader, Cuddy Banks, does specify that 'a witch' should be part of it (3.1.11). Far from viewing 'witch' as a general name for a morris dancer, his companions respond that their morris has no witch at all (3.1.9–10). When one wishes that Mother Sawyer 'would dance her part with us' (16), Cuddy suggests instead that his morris-mates 'get Poldavis, the barber's boy' to play the witch's part (67–8). Sure enough, the name 'Poldavis' appears in the play's original cast list, where it is routinely ignored or dismissed by modern editors.³⁶ Would the authors devote so much space in act 3, scene 1 to Poldavis and the witch if they intended no pay-off in the morris scene? No textual evidence eliminates the possibility that Poldavis appears among the 'morris' the original stage directions describe in act 3, scene 4. If Poldavis does perform as a witch in the morris we can reasonably guess that the dance may represent — and perhaps even attempt to exorcise — a version of Edmonton's real witch, Elizabeth Sawyer.³⁷

If so, then just as social and interpersonal conflicts exist in the everyday world of the play, they also exist in the morris. Here as elsewhere in the play they offer the devil an opening through which he can infiltrate the community, playing the fiddle while Edmonton burns. If the Dog's costume recalls that of a folk creature or morris hobby animal, the actor's body underneath reminds spectators that the very real force of demonic agency can manipulate even the most apparently innocent forms of communal celebration. Those celebratory rituals in their turn figure less to remedy the community's social cruelties and injustices than to exemplify them. *The Witch of Edmonton's* fusion of traditional performance forms with more 'realistic' mimetic modes thus serves as a physical manifestation of its thematic insistence upon the fusion of quotidian and supernatural realms.

The final key component of Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's socio-spiritual dramaturgy in *The Witch of Edmonton* is the metatheatricality which insists that the play's urban audience is just as vulnerable to the combined threats of social injustice and demonic temptation as are Edmonton's yeomen and morris dancers. When Cuddy Banks bids his fellow morris dancers 'get Pol-davis, the barber's boy, for the witch, because he can show his art better than another' (3.1.67–8), his words recall the tradition of female impersonation characteristic of many versions of the all-male morris dance.³⁸ At the same time, they work metatheatrically to remind the playhouse audience that they themselves are watching a boy apprentice 'showing his art' in the role of Elizabeth Sawyer. The performers of the up-to-date 'realistic' representation cannot be glibly separated from those of the ancient morris dance; the urbane spectators of such representations cannot maintain a fully comfortable distance from the rustic characters they observe.

Accused of witchcraft, Mother Sawyer retorts hotly: 'A witch! Who is not?' (4.1.116). She goes on to cite examples to prove her point: 'painted things in princes' courts' who entice men to their damnation; 'city-witches' who waste their husbands' revenues on high living; lawyers who grow rich on their clients' ruin; rakes who steal virgins' honour and then refuse them any recompense (117–59). These are not country sins but city sins, endemic to the social settings of court and the exclusive indoor playhouse in which *The Witch of Edmonton's* first recorded performances took place.³⁹ Those who attend these venues cannot afford to look down at Mother Sawyer and Frank Thorney from a vantage-point of secure moral righteousness. They, too, may be attacked by the devil, who departs from Edmonton for London in the play's final moments with the declaration, 'I am for greatness now,

corrupted greatness' (5.1.196). Satan lies in wait at the very performance the early modern audience is watching just as he is present at the apparently innocent morris dance in Edmonton. The evil forces the play exposes are also at work in the audience's own lives. The theatre can only offer them a greater understanding of those forces and the social factors that feed them. As for rising above the sinners they have seen onstage, the spectators must achieve superiority by their own deeds in the everyday world, which they have seen reflected in the mirror of the play.

A contemporary audience's relationship to the mirror constructed by *The Witch of Edmonton* is quite different. While the play's detailed depiction of class hierarchies and social oppression speaks very directly to spectators schooled in the realism that dominates so much late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century performance, its emphasis on the concrete presence of the devil in human lives may prove alienating to a largely secularized society. As Nicol writes,

The play is appealing to modern audiences partly because of ... its apparent understanding of the scapegoating phenomenon that modern social historians have observed in witchcraft accusations. But these materialist implications of the story are of course undermined when the Devil appears, and when Mother Sawyer becomes a real witch. Jacobean audiences may have seen no contradictions here, but in a modern production, played to an audience for whom devils are fictional, the entrance of the Dog risks trivialising the play's serious issues and diminishing its power to disturb.⁴⁰

Some recent productions of *The Witch of Edmonton*, such as Peter Hinton's highly successful 1993 staging for Toronto's Equity Showcase Theatre, have dealt with this challenge by emphasizing the Dog's difference from the rest of Edmonton. In Hinton's stylized and evocative production women played all of the play's characters apart from the Dog, who was portrayed by Greg Kramer.⁴¹ This choice effectively implied a correlation between the Dog's power and the power of patriarchy, between the Dog's evil and the evil of gender inequity. At the same time, it separated the supernatural Dog from the rest of Edmonton, breaking the symbiosis between demonic and quotidian realms that might have obtained for an early modern audience.

Other recent productions of *The Witch of Edmonton* have experimented with approaches that bring the Dog and the citizens of Edmonton into more direct proximity with one another. In Simon Cox's 2000 staging for Enter

the Spirit productions at London's Southwark Playhouse, the 'costumes were timeless, the women wearing simple dresses, and the men wearing tunics with corduroy trousers'.⁴² In the role of the Dog, Paul Panting wore a 'simple black costume' that eschewed any 'overtly dog-like' elements.⁴³ For at least one spectator, the result of these choices was 'an enjoyable fairy-tale' that did not strive to represent a 'realistic' microcosm.⁴⁴ Dog and townspeople alike inhabited a fabulous realm in which socio-economic structures had little apparent bearing upon demonic activity.

The most celebrated contemporary production of *The Witch of Edmonton*, Barry Kyle's 1981 staging for the Royal Shakespeare Company, conversely emphasized the 'realistic' nature of the work.⁴⁵ Spectators of this revival entered a workaday world when they entered the intimate space of the RSC's Other Place Theatre. Actors clad in the rough dress of pre-Industrial rural England went about daily tasks: lugging sacks, sorting vegetables and grains, churning butter, hanging laundry. The props were sturdy and practical, the reality of hay and vegetables apparent to smell as well as to sight. Prosaic activities went on for some time before the cast began the play proper by singing together a period setting of the twenty-third psalm. Far from destroying a sense of realist mimesis, this interlude of sung prayer worked to set the action of the play firmly in a culture of fervent religiosity and clearly established rituals.

Miles Anderson's Dog was both terrifying Other than and terrifyingly continuous with this apparently orderly rural culture. On his first appearance he writhed suddenly out of a burlap sack that had long lain inert on a cart like a newborn animal breaking the amniotic envelope; the effect was of a blandly ordinary bag of potatoes suddenly giving birth to an uncanny offspring. Naked apart from a loincloth and leather harness, Anderson's body was painted black. 'Tailed and on all fours', he 'lick[ed] and crawl[ed] like a dog but sp[oke] in chillingly cultured tones',⁴⁶ the animal and the human, the demonic and the aristocratic came together in his frightening figure. Most reviewers expressed surprise at the convincing effect of Anderson's Dog within Kyle's realist *Edmonton*. 'It would be easy to make the dog funny or silly', remarked B.A. Young in the *Financial Times*, 'but as Miles Anderson plays him ... he is a constant menace'.⁴⁷ Gareth Lloyd Evans concurred: 'It would have been very easy for Miles Anderson to have embodied a kind of pantomimic horror but he evades the obvious as he persists in being a black emblem of evil'.⁴⁸ The *Daily Telegraph's* reviewer, however, balked at the incredible nature of this 'doggy familiar'.⁴⁹ Even Anderson's celebrated

performance could not convince all contemporary spectators of the devilish Dog's integral place within a realistically drawn Edmonton.

The Witch of Edmonton's fusion of the natural and the supernatural remains a challenge and a source of fascination for contemporary theatre artists.⁵⁰ I joined the ranks of those responding to this challenge in the fall of 2008 when I worked alongside a wonderful team of actors, designers, and technicians to create a new production of the play at Dalhousie University. A Canadian audience in the twenty-first century will make its own real-world connections to the notion of a witch from Edmonton ('I think I used to teach with her', remarked many of my colleagues). Once we had finished explaining to spectators that the play was not a new Canadian commission and that the Edmonton in question was not the capital city of Alberta, we strove to realize *The Witch of Edmonton* in a manner that would convey to contemporary Haligonian spectators its sense of the devil's implication in ordinary life both within and beyond the stage fiction.

Like many before us, we began by assailing the eyes and noses of our audience with organic substances. Kyle had strewn his stage with hay; Simon Cox had used bark.⁵¹ The floor of our stage (designed by Katherine Jenkins) was spread inches thick with finely-ground mulch that stuck to the rough woolen clothing of Edmonton's citizens. Like Kyle and Cox, we hoped in this way immediately to give our spectators the sense of entering a tactile, three-dimensional realm. We strove to add a sonic dimension to the play, too, by incorporating choral, vocal, and instrumental folk music performed live by the cast. Two hymns from the Shape Note tradition formed the musical cornerstones of the production. In the opening moments of the production the cast intoned the haunting 'And Am I Born to Die?' (Idumea); moments before its ambiguously retributive final scene the citizens of Edmonton encircled the Dog and sang 'Passing Away', with its fearful chorus contemplating 'that great judgment day'. Although Shape Note singing in its present form emerged a century after the writing of *The Witch of Edmonton*, we hoped that the forceful popular idiom of these hymns would justify their inclusion by viscerally conveying communal belief in the reality of the devil, sin, and divine judgment. For similar reasons, assistant director Grace Smith and dramaturge Claire Leger created a programme that replicated early modern religious pamphlets, crammed with texts warning of the devil's power. Upon entering the theatre, audience members received copies of this programme from a countryman (Sebastian Labelle) and a maid (Katie MacDonald) who admonished them to 'beware the devil'. By such means the production attempted

to plunge its spectators into a folk culture for which the spiritual was as real as — and indeed inextricable from — the secular.

Our central aim was to communicate the notion of the Dog as a demonic figure of terrifying, earthy reality whose jocular animal disguise was penetrable by the theatrical audience if not always by the play's dramatis personae. We chose to transform Kimberley Cody into the Dog not by decking her in such accoutrements as Miles Anderson's harness and tail but by masking her. In their fashioning of the mask, Katherine Jenkins and props mistress Melinda Robb took inspiration from a range of folk art forms including morris hobby animals. The resulting creation boasted disturbingly blank eyes and a toothy grin that appeared eager and friendly from some angles but revealed itself as leering and vicious from others. The mask covered Cody's head, eyes, and nose but left her human mouth and chin fully visible. We hoped that this approach would encourage the audience to glimpse the quasi-human face of the devil under the dog (Fig.1).⁵²

Praised by one reviewer as 'both earthily concrete and terrifyingly supernatural'⁵³, Cody's performance explored in depth the jouissance between the



Fig. 1. Elizabeth Sawyer (Chrissi Forte) and the Dog (Kimberley Cody) in *The Witch of Edmon-ton*, Dalhousie Theatre Productions, October 2008. Photograph by Ken Kam, reproduced by kind permission of the photographer.

Dog's puppyish façade and the sadistic demon behind it. Her Dog barked, yipped, howled, growled, and panted with abandon; he wagged his 'tail', rolled on his back for a belly rub from Cuddy Banks (Nick MacInnes), sniffed enthusiastically at the ground, and even lifted his leg to scent-mark a post.⁵⁴ Underneath the canine exterior lay an equally carefully imagined portrayal of the proud Lucifer who had deigned to don so humble a disguise. When Cuddy asked Cody's Dog why he could not 'become an honest dog yet' and leave his rampages of killing and destruction, the Dog sneered back: 'Why? These are all my delights, my pleasures, *fool*' (5.1.163–8, emphasis Cody's). The actor often straightened from her crouching position on all fours to her full imposing height without warning and with a chilling smoothness punctuated only by a slight shudder of patrician disgust. Her Dog's relationship to Chrissi Forte's defiant and lonely Mother Sawyer was that of an abusive and manipulative lover to a frightened but love-starved partner. Even as Cody's ebullient canine mannerisms linked the Dog to the play's quotidian domesticity, her implacable hauteur insisted upon the overwhelming presence and power of the demonic within its hierarchical world.



Fig. 2. The Dog (Kimberley Cody) and Cuddy Banks (Nick MacInnes) with the morris in *The Witch of Edmonton*, Dalhousie Theatre Productions, October 2008. Image by Ken Kam, reproduced by kind permission of the photographer.

Our production aimed to stage the central morris dance scene in a manner that would emphasize the symbiotic relationship between the Dog and the everyday life of Edmonton. The stuffed, roughly shaped head of Cuddy Banks's beribboned hobby-horse deliberately recalled the totemic mask worn by the Dog; on Cuddy's entrance, the two nestled nose to nose like brothers (Fig.2). Choreographed by Veronique Mackenzie to the tune of 'Bonny Green Garters', the morris dance itself was joyous and exuberant. Audiences laughed at the gawky adolescent Poldavis (Tyler Miedema), who danced disguised as a ludicrous travesty of Mother Sawyer. We chose, however, to place the entrance of the Constable who announced the murder of Susan precisely at the moment in the dance when Cuddy and his friends 'exorcised' Poldavis/ The Witch with thrusts of their staffs. The Dog, who had been gleefully conducting the dance, laughed delightedly: the moment was as he had wished it. The underlying cruelty and intolerance of the community, apparent even in their May Day amusements, called down destruction upon them. By such choices we tried to actualize onstage the frightening continuity between the demonic and the quotidian we saw in Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's play-text.

Most challenging of all was the effort to suggest a similar degree of demonic presence within the lives of the contemporary theatrical audience. The final dialogue between Cuddy Banks and the Dog — in which Cuddy imagines the demon dangling from Tyburn Gallows, 'stealing in by Thieving Lane', and rubbing up against lawyers in Westminster Hall (5.1.210–13) — might have been sufficient to chill the blood of early modern spectators with the reminder that devil was a real and threatening presence in their own London lives. Inciting contemporary Nova Scotian auditors, for many of whom devils are purely imaginary figures and for whom London place names refer to exotic foreign locales, to consider the malign forces represented by Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's Dog as proximate to their own lives proves less simple.⁵⁵ Even so, it appeared to us to be an important goal, for we believed that only by implicating the audience within the play's action in this manner could we restore to *The Witch of Edmonton* an unsettling moral dimension that the presentation of a mere museum piece would lack. In its final moments our production departed from the written play-text in an effort to encourage self-questioning and even unease in our spectators' minds.

As our production of *The Witch of Edmonton* closed, Winnifride (Nessa Trenton) delivered the epilogue's final plea for compassion with deep emotion, inviting both the remaining citizens of Edmonton and the theatrical audience to behave with more kindness and decency than had marked the action of the

play. All, it seemed, had learned their lesson — or had they? As Winnifride ceased speaking, the audience heard the sound of a single pair of hands clapping as if to provide the applause she had begged. Back into the space came the Dog, grinning beneath the black mask and clapping ironically as if at a pitifully amateurish performance of forgiveness and retribution. Edmonton, his gesture strove to imply, had changed in word only; had they not just rejected Mother Sawyer with the same intolerance that had helped to bring him among them in the first place? Never mind; he had had his fun with them and was ready for new prey. In the last moment of the show the Dog turned toward the theatrical audience as the house lights came up on them. He gazed at them appraisingly as if assessing their capacity for corruption. Then, very deliberately, he climbed the steps of the risers on which they sat and seated himself among them. Their space — *our* space — was his space now.

The final moment of Dalhousie's 2008 production of *The Witch of Edmonton* privileged the interpretation of the play's central performative goal that this essay has advanced over any strict notion of faithfulness to its literary text. It tried to break down the 'fourth wall' protecting spectators from the action onstage and thereby encourage contemporary subjects to consider the possibility that the devil, or at least the potential for evil he represented, remained immanent within their own everyday realities. Like Anderson's performance in Kyle's production, our decision provoked a range of spectatorial reactions. Some audience members murmured; some shivered; some laughed as at an amusing punch-line. One night a spectator reached out and stroked the Dog's head. 'You're not supposed to pat *the devil*', hissed his seat-mate.

Such a range of reactions might exemplify the historical discontinuity between the assumptions of the play's early modern and its modern auditors. For most of the former the notion of the demonic as a constant and ineluctable part of ordinary reality must have been a familiar premise if not an article of faith. For many of the latter it is the stuff of fiction. At the same time, the variable responses of modern audiences to *The Witch of Edmonton* echo the multiplicity of reactions the devil-dog receives from Edmonton itself within the play-text; the murmurs of contemporary spectators recall the fearful attraction of Mother Sawyer (2.1.130), their shudders the uncomprehending terror of the countrymen (4.1.271), their laughter the blinkered jokiness of Cuddy Banks (3.1.130). To modern audiences as to the dramatis personae of the play the demonic dog appears both absolutely Other and disconcertingly 'familiar'. After seeing the Dalhousie production of *The Witch of Edmonton*, one spectator wrote to me that its ending provoked him to consider 'how we are

no different from the characters in the play, and the devil is in a sense — just like us — the audience ... [:] watching the play — and observing and enjoying humanity — with all their/our loveliness and ugliness'.⁵⁶ This audience member identified both with the denizens of Edmonton *and* with the devil; his reaction, like the play itself, broke down clear boundaries between the 'realistic' and the fantastical, the commonplace and the uncanny, the human and the demonic. The early modern devil is 'an honest dog yet', an abiding theatrical reality; his destabilizing power haunts us still.

Notes

An early version of this paper was delivered at a session on 'Crime, Theatricality, and Early Modern Domestic Drama' at the 2008 meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Chicago. My sincere thanks go to M.J. Kidnie, who organized the session, and to Cheryl Marie Dudgeon, my co-presenter. I should also like to express my gratitude to those others who offered invaluable feedback both on that first draft and on subsequent versions of the paper: David Bevington, Laurie Maguire, Lucy Munro, Helen Ostovich, David Nicol, Paul Yachnin, and *Early Theatre's* anonymous reader. I should like to dedicate this final version to the creative team, cast, and crew of the Dalhousie Theatre production of *The Witch of Edmonton*.

1. William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*, ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester, 1999). All subsequent references to *The Witch of Edmonton* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
2. Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1700* (Ithaca, 1994), 220.
3. Ibid.
4. Meg Pearson, 'A Dog, A Witch, A Play: *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Early Theatre* 11 (2008), 89, 107.
5. Henry Hitch Adams, *English Domestic Or, Homiletic Tragedy, 1575 to 1642* (New York, 1943), 1–2.
6. Viviana Comensoli, '*Household Business*': *Domestic Plays of Early Modern England* (Toronto, 1996), 149.
7. Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, 2005), 3.
8. Kate McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Atlantic Highlands, 1989), 69.
9. For astute analyses of *The Witch of Edmonton's* depiction of sin and crime as socially determined, see especially McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, 68–73; Anthony B. Dawson, 'Witchcraft/Bigamy: Cultural Conflict in *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Renaissance*

- sance *Drama* 20 (1989), 77–98; Comensoli, ‘Household Business’, 121–31; and Sarah Johnson, ‘Female Bodies, Speech, and Silence in *The Witch of Edmonton*’, *Early Theatre* 12.1 (2009), 69–91.
- 10 *The witch of Edmonton a known true story, composed into a tragi-comedy by divers well-esteemed poets, William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, &c.* (London, 1658).
 - 11 Henry Goodcole, *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a witch late of Edmonton* (London, 1621).
 - 12 Goodcole, *The wonderfull discoverie*, C3r–v.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, C2v.
 - 14 Kate McLuskie, *Dekker and Heywood: Professional Dramatists* (New York, 1994), 146.
 - 15 David Stymeist, “‘Must I be ... made a common sink?’: Witchcraft and the Theatre in *The Witch of Edmonton*”, *Renaissance and Reformation* 25.2 (2001), 47–8.
 - 16 David Nicol, ‘Interrogating the Devil: Social and Demonic Pressure in *The Witch of Edmonton*’, *Comparative Drama* 38 (Winter 2004–5), 426. For Nicol’s key sources, see Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997) and John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642* (Cambridge, 2000).
 - 17 For *The Witch of Edmonton*’s likely appearance before the king, see transcriptions from ms. 515 No.7, Inner Temple Library, in John Tucker Murray, *English Dramatic Companies, 1558–1642*, (New York, 1963), 2.193, and from the accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber in *Dramatic Records in the Declared Accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber, 1558–1642*, Malone Society Collections 6 (Oxford, 1961), 75–6. Stymeist, “‘Must I be ... ?’”, 47, sees *The Witch of Edmonton* as in part ‘pandering to James’s fascination with demonism’.
 - 18 King James VI and I, *Daemonologie* (London, 1597), A2r.
 - 19 Nicol, ‘Interrogating the Devil’, 441.
 - 20 Ben Jonson, *Volpone, or The Fox* (London, 1607), 3.
 - 21 Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 211.
 - 22 Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*, ed. Peter Happé (1994; Manchester, 1996). All subsequent references to *The Devil is an Ass* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
 - 23 John Fletcher, *Monsieur Thomas A Comedy. Acted at the Private House in Blacke Fryers* (London, 1639), L1r; Richard Brome, *The queenes exchange a comedy acted with generall applause at the Blackfriars by His Majesties servants* (London, 1657), F2v.
 - 24 Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger, *The virgin martir a tragedie. As it hath bin diuers times publickely acted with great applause, by the seruants of his Maiesties Reuels* (London, 1622), A1v.

- 25 Anthony B. Harris, *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century English Drama* (Manchester, 1980), 97.
- 26 Thomas Heywood, *The siluer age including. the loue of Iupiter to Alcmena: the birth of Hercules. And the rape of Proserpine. Concluding, with the arraignment of the moone* (London, 1613), K2r. See Pearson, 'A Dog', 93, for further comment on the relationship between *The Silver Age* and *The Witch of Edmonton*.
- 27 See E.C. Cawte, *Ritual Animal Disguise: A Historical and Geographical Study of Animal Disguise in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1978).
- 28 Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2006), 1.
- 29 Dawson, 'Witchcraft/Bigamy', 91.
- 30 Ibid, 92.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid, 91.
- 33 Laura Denker and Laurie Maguire, 'The "Morris Witch" in *The Witch of Edmonton*', Naomi Conn Liebler (ed.), *The Female Tragic Hero in Renaissance Drama* (Houndmills, 2002), 196.
- 34 Ibid, 195. Both Alex Helm in *The English Mummers' Play* (Bury St. Edmunds, 1980), 50, and John Forrest in *The History of Morris Dancing, 1458–1750* (Toronto, 1999), 6, cast doubt upon the derivation of 'Morris' from 'Moreys/Moorish'.
- 35 Denkers and Maguire, 'The "Morris Witch"', 196.
- 36 Corbin and Sedge, 27, include Poldavis in the cast list of their edition but remark that he is clearly 'a "ghost" character who ... makes no appearance in the play'. Martin Wiggins (whose excellent edition was unfortunately published too late to be cited extensively in this article) eliminates Poldavis from 'The Persons of the Play' altogether. See Martin Wiggins (ed.), *The Witch of Edmonton in A Woman Killed with Kindness and Other Domestic Plays* (Oxford, 2008), 130.
- 37 Nicol, 'Interrogating the Devil', 439, similarly hypothesizes that 'the morris involves some kind of dumb-show in which the witch-figure is symbolically banished by Cuddy and the hobbyhorse'.
- 38 Helm, *English Mummers' Play*, 51.
- 39 See Stymeist, "'Must I be ...?'" , 47, for a helpful discussion of the possible early modern performance venues of *The Witch of Edmonton*.
- 40 David Nicol, 'Review of *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 7.1/ Special Issue 8 (May 2001): 19, 1–12 <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/07-1/revnicol.htm>>, par.9.

- 41 See Jon Kaplan and Glenn Sumi, 'Scenes: Women's Work', *Now Magazine Toronto* 27.48 (29 July-5 August 2008) <<http://www.nowtoronto.com/stage/story.cfm?content=164209>>.
- 42 Nicol, 'Review', par.8.
- 43 Ibid, par.3
- 44 Ibid, par. 10.
- 45 Many of my observations of Kyle's production are based upon the archival video held by the Shakespeare Centre, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon. I should like to thank Sylvia Morris and the staff of the Centre for their assistance.
- 46 Christopher Hudson, review of *The Witch of Edmonton*, dir. Barry Kyle at the Barbican Pit, London, *Standard*, 29 September 1982.
- 47 B.A. Young, review of *The Witch of Edmonton*, directed by Barry Kyle, The Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *Financial Times*, 20 September 1981.
- 48 Gareth Lloyd Evans, 'Vivid Slice of 17th century life', review of *The Witch of Edmonton*, directed by Barry Kyle, The Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 25 September 1981.
- 49 'A Jacobean Airing', review of *The Witch of Edmonton*, directed Barry Kyle, The Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 September 1981.
- 50 Other notable recent productions of *The Witch of Edmonton* include the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School's production in 1984; Barry Kyle's return to the play for Washington's Shakespeare Theatre in 1987; and Helen Fry's 1992 staging for Pro productions. A new production is planned for the autumn of 2009 by London's Periwig and Monkey Theatre Company.
- 51 Nicol, 'Review', par.6.
- 52 In our production, the spirit who appeared 'in shape of Katherine' (3.1.82 sd) and the double ghost of Susan who haunted Frank (4.2.69 sd) were both similarly represented by actors in masks inspired by folk art; here, too, the presentational disguise half concealed, half revealed the human face of the demon underneath.
- 53 Ron Foley MacDonald, 'The Witch Of Edmonton: Astonishing theatre by any measure', 16 October 2008 <<http://halifax.infomonkey.net/nova.scotia.news.events.php?e=a-wild-witch>>.
- 54 In true realist fashion, Cody reached these heights of dogginess by careful study of her own pet Shih-Tzus.
- 55 Simon Cox's production approached this problem by having the Dog '[kick] open the fire exit and [step] out onto the courtyard outside the Playhouse' on his final exit so the audience last saw him 'standing in our world'. See Nicol, 'Review', par. 11.
- 56 Shi-Eun Kim, Personal electronic communication with the author, 20 October 2008.