Marginalizing Women:
Forced Marriage, Witchcraft Accusations, and
the Social Machinery of Private Landownership

in The Witch of Edmonton*

Elyssa Y. Cheng
Department of Western Languages and Literature
National University of Kaohsiung, Taiwan

Abstract
Though critics have endeavored to explore the roots of Mother Sawyer’s being named a witch and the social conditioning of Frank Thorney’s domestic tragedy in The Witch of Edmonton, little attention has been paid to the relationships between forced marriage, witchcraft accusations and the development of private landownership in the play. This article argues that with the breakdown of neighborliness, the increased social stratification of the village society, and the bureaucratization of the enclosure movement, elderly, poor, deformed, and uneducated women were stigmatized as witches and transgressors of capitalist landlords’ properties. Yet, they were not the only victims. The wealthy gentry heiresses also had to bear the consequences of these rapid socioeconomic changes. They were seen as economic instruments for financially depleted aristocratic males to marry so that these impoverished men could retain their wealth and social status. Therefore, the formulation of private landownership, along with witchcraft accusation and forced marriage, further marginalizes women as the scapegoats of patriarchal economic and class pressures.

Keywords
forced marriage, witchcraft accusations, private landownership.

The Witch of Edmonton
On April 21, 1621, Elizabeth Sawyer of Edmonton, accused of murdering her neighbor Agnes Ratcliffe, was tried and executed. During her imprisonment in Newgate prison, she was visited and examined by Henry Goodcole, an Anglican minister who attempted to extort confessions from the condemned and to present the “truth” of cases in his pamphlets as evidence against what he saw as the false, popular version of events in contemporary ballads or plays. His transcription of Elizabeth Sawyer’s confession, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch, Late of Edmonton* (1621), excited a great deal of attention because Edmonton’s geographical closeness to London labeled Sawyer as one of the few London witches. Goodcole’s tract became the immediate source of *The Witch of Edmonton*, a collaborative work by Thomas Dekker, William Rowley, and John Ford, which was first staged in December of the same year. As opposed to Goodcole’s repentant criminal, Dekker, Rowley, and Ford’s semi-journalistic play gives us an astonishingly sympathetic portrait of the suspect. Also different from Goodcole’s pamphlet, the playwrights added the subplot of Frank Thorney’s murder of his wife in conjunction with Elizabeth Sawyer’s witchcraft accusation. Though critical studies in the past have examined the cultural contexts of Frank Thorney’s bigamy and Elizabeth Sawyer’s witchcraft accusation, none of them attempted to explore both issues in terms of the gradual development of private landownership. In considering the interconnections of forced marriage, witchcraft accusations, and the development of private landownership, this article seeks to demonstrate that the early modern changing concept of land as commodity not only deprived the poor, elderly women of the communal resources from the common fields, but also enclosed rich gentry-class heiresses into even stricter patriarchal domination.

In the play, the witchcraft accusations against Mother Sawyer originate from her transgression into the private property of Old Banks, a prosperous local landowner in her neighborhood. Unlike Goodcole’s pliant prisoner, Dekker, Ford, and Rowley’s Mother Sawyer is aware of the socioeconomic conditions that

---

*I am deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and criticism. I also want to dedicate my greatest thanks to those who read and commented on this article before its submission: Professor James Holstun (Department of English, SUNY at Buffalo), Professor Barbara Bono (Department of English, SUNY at Buffalo), and my best friend, Judith Chen.  
2 For the past criticism of the play, I am indebted to: David Atkinson, Leonora Leet Brodwin, Larry S. Champion, Viviana Comensoli, Anthony B. Dawson, Francis E. Dolan, Richard W. Grinnell, David Nicol, David Stymeist, and I-Chun Wang (for more details, please refer to Works Cited).*
marginalize an impoverished, old woman as a criminal, and she is highly critical of them:

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? Some call me witch;
And being ignorant of myself, they go
About to teach me how to be one: urging
That my bad tongue (by their bad usage made so)
Forespeaks 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. (2.1.1-15)

Sawyer laments that her marginal status as an impoverished, deformed, elderly, and uneducated woman makes her a social threat in her community. She cannot understand why she, as an elderly charity-receiver, provokes resentment in her village neighbors, nor does she understand why her dependence on poor relief should make her an easy scapegoat. However, she clearly understands that it is the socio-economic machinery around her that criminalizes her as a witch. For Sawyer, her status as a witch does not emanate from her personal choices, but rather from the internalization of communal pressures; that is, her village neighbors are making her a witch to relieve their own guilt for refusing charity. In such circumstances, a marginalized woman can easily become a scapegoat for her richer neighbors, who feel burdened with the responsibility for poor relief.³

Witchcraft studies by early modern English historians such as Keith Thomas, Alan Macfarlane, and J. A. Sharpe, conclude that early modern witchcraft

³ The dramatists’ powerful portrait of Sawyer is totally different from Goodcole’s pliant prison convict. His tract presents Sawyer as a typical victim of witchcraft accusations—an elderly, crippled, and impoverished woman whose body “was crooked and deformed, even bending together.” Yet, the pliant stance that Sawyer assumed during Goodcole’s examinations might be a direct response of any convict that hopes to cope and comply so that their crimes can be alleviated. See Henry Goodcole.
accusations tended to criminalize old, uneducated, and impoverished women from the lower social strata (Stymeist 33-34; Sharpe 1996, 172; Macfarlane 33-34; Thomas 561; Larner 72-73). Their research shows that England experienced a rapid population growth in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This population increase brought in growing pressures and competition for economic resources that inevitably led to tension and hatred toward the more dependant members of the community—especially old and poor women (Macfarlane 147; Thomas 555-61; Sharpe 1996, 172). Typically, witchcraft charges originated from material and class conflict: a wealthier member of the community refused to give alms to a poorer member; the rejected party left cursing or threatening retaliation; then some inexplicable accidents or diseases struck the family of the one who refused to give charity and the poorer person was accused of practicing witchcraft (Marfarlane 173-74; Thomas 449; 522-23; 554; 561-64; Dawson 83). Keith Thomas argues that witchcraft accusations reflected early modern people’s tendency to transfer their sense of guilt when they refused to “uphold the traditional obligations of charity and neighborliness” (564). The supposed victims understood that it was their Christian duty to give charity to the poorer members of the community in times of necessity, but hated doing so when under economic pressure. Witchcraft accusations allowed them to escape their “Christian” duty as well as to relieve their sense of guilt (Macfarlane 161, 173, 196-97, 206; Dawson 83-84; Sharpe 1987, 12; Thomas 522-23, 553-64, 582). The marginal position of the accused witches allowed the wealthier members of the community to use them as social scapegoats (Stymeist 34; Thomas 564). Such is the dispute between Sawyer and her landlord neighbor, Old Banks.

As an elderly, impoverished, single woman, Sawyer trespasses on Old Banks’ property in order “to gather a few rotten sticks to warm” her (2.1.20). When she refuses to return the firewood she collects, Old Banks brutally beats her. In response to Old Banks’ unnecessary brutality, Sawyer resorts to the only weapons she possesses, threats and curses: “Dost strike me, slave? Curmudgeon, now thy bone aches, thy joints cramps, and convulsions stretch and crack thy sinews” (2.1.27-29). The playwrights show that Sawyer threatens to seek her revenge out of self-protection; however, her landlord neighbor reads her curses as evidence with which he can incriminate her as a witch.

It is important to recognize the political significance of Sawyer’s act of collecting some bits of firewood from Old Banks’ property because, as Keith Thomas notes, in early modern England witchcraft accusations coincided with the bureaucratization of enclosure which “broke up many of the old co-operative
Before the legislation of the enclosure movement, the poorer members of rural communities could pasture animals and gather firewood in the common lands to supply their household needs (Manning 18); however, with the bureaucratization of the enclosure laws, the marginal members of rural communities were deprived of their means of subsistence from the common lands and became more dependent upon their neighbors’ charity (Stymeist 37). Mother Sawyer’s supposed trespass onto Old Banks’ private property manifests this conflict between traditional Christian neighborliness and a growing sense of exclusive ownership of private property. Thus, this episode powerfully demonstrates the intricate link between witch-making and the bureaucratization of the enclosure movement. The curtailing of common use rights affected poor and elderly women most because their dependence on alms-giving would incur their neighbors’ displeasure, and witch-making was the easiest excuse for the reluctant neighbors to escape their social obligations.

In The Origin of Capitalism, Ellen Meikins Wood observes that in the early modern period landowners became preoccupied with the concept of “improvement”—the enhancement of the land’s productivity for profit (106). She points out that “[t]he word ‘improve’ itself, in its original meaning, did not mean just ‘make better’ in a general sense but literally meant to do something for monetary profit, especially to cultivate land for profit” (106). Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, there were various ways for landlords to make productive and profitable use of their lands. Among them, the most socially disputable was enclosure. Although enclosure is often thought of as simply a physical fencing of common land for increasingly lucrative sheep farming; in reality, it is the extinction of common and customary rights for those whose livelihood depended upon it (Wood 108). Private landownership, the idea of turning common land into the exclusive private property of a single landowner, was supported by John Locke, who argues that it is a God-given natural right for men to own private, individual property. Based upon this belief, Locke considers the common fields as waste and supports landowners to turn common lands into exclusive private property by means of enclosure (Locke 285-302; Wood 114-15).

As David Harvey argues in The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Exchange, the capitalist conception of space is one which fragments land “into freely alienable parcels of private property, to be bought and traded at will upon the market” (254). In Renaissance England, significant numbers of newly-risen capitalist landlords sought the opportunities afforded in this period of transition from feudalism to capitalism to profit from the fragmentation and
commodification of land. In the play, Old Carter, whose daughter is murdered by Frank Thorney, is one of the benefactors of this changing concept of land use. As a wealthy landlord, Carter is not shy about using his land as an instrument to negotiate a marriage bargain for his daughter, Susan.

The marriage negotiation between the two fathers resembles a business talk at a realtor’s, with only the slight difference that the commodities to be transacted are a woman and her inherited land. The fathers talk directly about the monetary bargain without considering whether the young couple are in love or concerned about each other or not. The prospective bride’s father, Old Carter, first displays his genuineness to the Thoreys as well as his fatherly love by reassuring Old Thorney that he is not going to use any credits or bonds for Susan’s dowry; instead, he is going to make a present sum (1.2.1-19). The words the fathers use, such as “security,” “bonds,” “bills,” and “present payment,” are similar to those financial terms people employ in modern-day business negotiations (1.2.1-19). In addition to this business talk, the audiences should also be alert to the financial necessity of this wedlock. As Old Thorney frankly tells his son:

Wherein
If you should falter, I shall have the shame,
And you the loss. On these two points rely
Our happiness or ruin. If you marry
With wealthy Carter’s daughter, there’s a portion
Will free my land. All which I will instate
Upon the marriage to you. Otherwise,
I must be of necessity enforced
To make a present sale of all. (2.1.132-41)

Obviously, the Thoreys rely on Susan’s dowry to secure their land; otherwise, they have to make a present sale of it, and the father is promoting their alliance by pointing to the son’s self-interest. The father-and-son talk displays no joy about this marriage; rather, the audiences can sense the pressing economic need for it. Even if Old Thorney knows that his son does not love Susan, he still covets the dowry that Frank may receive even before his “wedding-shoes can be pulled on” (1.2.230). Susan’s affections as well as her happiness are completely ignored. Only men are eligible to sit at the negotiation table. Women can only wait for the highest bid and then be sold by their fathers to their husbands.
In fact, Susan is not the only victim of exchange-marriage in this play. Winifred, Frank Thorney’s first wife, has also served as an object of exchange—an object to confirm man’s power, authority, and hierarchy. Frank Thorney had to marry Winifred, a maid-servant with him in the household of Sir Arthur Clarington of Edmonton, in order to give a name to the child she carried. Yet, it was Sir Arthur, not Frank Thorney, who first seduced the girl. Realizing that the marriage of these two would free him from the scandal of impregnating his maidservant and knowing nothing of Frank and Winifred’s secret wedding, Sir Arthur offered to make the girl a marriage portion (1.1.96). The marriage bargain between Sir Arthur and Frank resembles a typical loan or mortgage negotiation in the bank. When Sir Arthur proposes that he is going to give Winifred a portion, Frank keenly pursues the deal:

So you promised me
Before, in case I married her. I know
Sir Arthur Clarington deserves the credit
Report hath lent him; and presume you are
A debtor to your promise. But upon
What certainty shall I resolve? Excuse me
For being somewhat rude. (1.1.97-102)

By using such words and phrases as “promise,” “credit report,” and “debtor,” Frank immediately establishes this marriage negotiation as a man-to-man business talk in which Winifred is commodified as an object of exchange. Within this exchange, her personal inclinations as well as affections are totally ignored; she is simply a piece of merchandise on the market for bidding. When learning his potential buyer, Frank, is interested in this marital bargain, Sir Arthur straightforwardly offers his price, “Well, Frank, what thinkest thou of two hundred pound and a continual friend?” (1.1.104). And what is even more important here for Frank and Sir Arthur is not the two hundred pounds for the exchange of Winifred, but the continual friendship between them.

The trafficking of Winifred between Frank and Sir Arthur was undeniably a business negotiation with darker motives on both sides. Sir Arthur sought the marriage of both his household servants to buy his way out of the scandal, and Frank was happy to take the marriage portion of two-hundred pounds. What is more, he deemed this marriage bargain a good chance to ask Sir Arthur to write Old Thorney a letter to help him clear the rumor that he is secretly married (1.1.135). This is purely a men’s bargain, without considering Winifred’s will. In this bargain,
she is treated as if she were a domestic animal: Frank “cannot keep her without a daily charge” and Sir Arthur has to make a “present payment” so that this domestic animal can be kept (1.1.118; 1.1.120). Winifred neither possesses her own agency in this transaction nor is able to make her voice heard. Her existence is obscured because her newlywed husband intends to deny this marriage to his father who threatens to disinherit him (1.1.139). Her voice is silenced when she bluntly turns down Sir Arthur’s proposal for further secret games after her marriage and shows her determination to change “from a loose whore to a repentant wife” (1.1.192-93). The bargain between Frank and Sir Arthur shows how powerless women were in early modern marriage negotiations. They were deprived of their agency, and their voices went unheard. They were objectified as salable commodities to be traded and transacted upon men’s will.

In *The Elementary Structure of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss builds his theory upon Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift exchange and asserts that marriages are the most basic form of gift exchange. He argues that if women are the objects to be transacted and exchanged, then it is the men who make the transaction are linked. In this exchange, the woman is deemed as a conduit of a relationship, rather than a partner to it. For Lévi-Strauss, only the partners who participate in the reciprocal exchange confer it quasi-mystical power of social linkage. Since women are to be exchanged, they are in no position to realize or profit from their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the products of such exchanges (Lévi-Strauss 52-68).

In early modern England, there were at least two social conditions that facilitated men’s exchange of women. First, early modern English society was basically patriarchal. Keith Wrightson observes in *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* that the early modern household was primarily male-dominated, where the authority of decision-making was concentrated in the hand of the male head of the family. The husband was supposed to be the head of the household, and the wife only assumed the role of the helpmate (30-38). Wrightson’s observation shows that early modern English households were primarily patriarchal, with virtually no space for women to participate in decision-making. Second, the

---

4 Marcel Mauss argues that in societies where giving and receiving gifts serves as a reciprocal ritual, all sort of things, such as food, spells, rituals, words, names, ornaments, tools, and power, circulate in exchange. Gift giving expresses, affirms, or creates a social link between the partners of an exchange. Gift giving confers on its participants a special relationship of trust and mutual aid. One can solicit a friendly relationship by offering the other a gift; similarly, accepting one’s gift implies a willingness to return a gift and a consolidation of the relationship. For Mauss’ theory of gift-exchange, see *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies.*
early modern English property laws were biased and partial to the benefits of men. According to Amy Louise Erickson, under the common law a woman’s legal identity was eclipsed by that of her husband. The property a woman brought to marriage—her dowry or portion—all came under the direct control of her husband (24). Especially after the enclosure movement and the introduction of new cartography and surveying technologies, the daughters of newly-risen gentry landlords began to emerge as desirable targets for the degenerated aristocratic males with diminished means to seek their hands in marriage so that these impoverished men could retain their wealth and social status.  

In the play, this is the reason why the rich yeoman’s daughter, Susan, becomes the victim of Frank Thorney’s bigamy and wife murder.

As soon as Frank and Susan are married, the bride notices erratic behavior in her husband. When she asks him about this, Frank tells her that he had once been told by a palm reader that he should have two wives. Though he sometimes commits a slip of the tongue in calling Susan “Winifred,” Susan’s love for him persuades her to ignore his erratic behavior. Yet, for Frank, Susan’s devoted love is by no means a good sign, as he finds out it is impossible to get rid of Susan in order to run away with Winifred. Unable to endure the duplicity of his bigamous situation any longer, Frank determines to end his second marriage by running away with Winifred. Taking the money he gets for selling Susan’s dowry and disguising Winifred as a page boy, Frank determines to seek happiness with Winifred abroad. Pretending that he is only going on a long journey, he tries to take leave of his second wife. However, she clings to him, refuses to part with him, and makes one pretext after another to accompany him farther on his way. Unaware that Winifred is a woman in disguise, Susan delivers her long and extended parting to Winifred first, and then another long and extended one to Frank with only two short intervals to beg kisses from him. Her verbose assertion of her role as a wife infuriates Frank, who badly wants to take a hasty leave. He tries to persuade her to leave, but Susan will not listen to him.

At last, Frank feels a dog rub against his leg, and he instantly makes up his mind to murder his second wife. As she proposes to go on the journey with Frank,

---

5 In *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, Lawrence Stone points out that the aristocracy’s conspicuous consumption led to their growing financial embarrassment, and by the end of the sixteenth century, their impoverishment drove them to change their marriage patterns. Instead of marrying poor heiresses with titles, they would rather choose rich London citizens’ daughters or gentry heiresses with huge marriage portions (282-87).

6 In the later part of the play, the dog rub is attributed to the working of Sawyer’s familiar spirit, Tom, and Sawyer is forced to take the responsibility for Susan Carter’s murder because of this
he immediately draws his knife and tells her that he married her simply because he coveted her dowry; however, he had not planned to kill her:

Your marriage was my theft.
For I espoused your dowry, and I have it.
I did not purpose to have added murder;
The Devil did not prompt me. Till this minute
You might have safe returned; now you cannot.
You have dogged your own death. (3.3.35-40)

His words reveal that land is the primary reason for his bigamy. Yet, as he gradually grew tired of the adulterous marriage and could no longer bear it, he wanted to run away from Susan, rather than murder her. However, since she does not want to leave and intends to follow him on his long journey, he is forced to commit this murder. He stabs her to death, wounds himself, and with the dog’s assistance, binds himself to a tree so that it will appear that the couple has been assaulted by highway robbers. When he is found by Old Thorney and Old Carter, he refuses to describe his assailants but insinuates that the suspects are Warbeck and Somerton, Susan’s disappointed suitor and his friend.

What draws together the double plots of bigamy and witchcraft accusations here is the changing concept of land and the patriarchal constraints on women’s agency and speech. Susan has not done anything wrong to Frank; her only apparent transgression is to assert her right as his wife. Yet, is her voice so threatening as to lead to her murder? Peter Stallybrass explains in “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed” why woman’s speech was so threatening by comparing the openings of her body to those of the grotesque body that interrogates and subverts the classical “male” body (124). A woman alerts us to the subversive nature of her body by calling attention to its openings—its mouth and vagina. And because the wife was taken as an exclusive “possession” of her husband, it was not surprising that “the surveillance of women concentrated upon these specific areas: the mouth, chastity, and the threshold of the house” (Stallybrass 126). Thus, the mouth’s openness, especially when accompanied by an excess of speech, echoes the openness of the vagina. “The connection between speaking and wantonness was common to legal

“dog rub” that Frank claims to feel before he decides to murder his second wife. However, as I will argue in the later part of this article, the liberal forgiveness that Frank receives from Susan’s family and other members in the village community and the unnecessary brutality that Sawyer experiences from her village neighbors further demonstrates the early modern English society’s implacable hatred toward women of marginality.
discourse and conduct books. . . . Silence, the closed mouth, is made a sign of chastity. And silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to woman’s enclosure within the house” (Stallybrass 126-27). Thus, Susan’s assertiveness is abhorred because it poses direct threat to the system of patriarchy. Sawyer’s scolding tongue is also feared because her speech authorizes her power to assert that she is not a witch; on the other hand, if she is seen as one, it is not her personal will, but the social and economic circumstances that force her to be so.

Despite Old Banks’ witchcraft accusations, Sawyer realizes that it is her marginal status in the community that makes her “shunned and hated like a sickness, made a scorn to all degrees and sexes” (2.1.99-101). At the same time, the audience can also note that both Old Banks and other members of the village community are chiefly concerned with the sexual transgression that witchcraft empowers: “Rid the town of her,” says one countryman, “else our wives will do nothing else but dance about other country maypoles” (4.1.10-11). Another countryman agrees that Sawyer’s presence endangers women’s chastity and men’s patriarchal authority: “Our cattle fall, our wives fall, our daughter fall, and maid-servants fall; and we ourselves shall not be able to stand if this beast be suffered to graze amongst us” (4.1.1-14).

This sexual transgression is also manifest in the appearance the black dog, Tom, a familiar spirit, who comes to assist Sawyer in seeking revenge on her enemies. To get revenge for Old Banks’ brutality, Sawyer wishes for the supernatural power of a witch. To her surprise, her wish is granted by the appearance of a black dog named Tom. Tom has the power of speech, and he tells Sawyer that he is a familiar spirit who has pitied her sufferings and comes to help

---

7 Literary critics in the past have noticed the patriarchal authority to suppress early modern English women’s voices. In “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” Lynda Boose shows that in Renaissance England women who spoke in order to complain would be taken as scolds and receive public humiliation, such as being led through the streets in the scold’s bridle or ducked into the water (190-212). According to Lynda Boose, “[t]he punishments meted out to women are much more frequently targeted at suppressing women’s speech than they are at controlling their sexual transgression” (184). The mocking ritual of the scold helps restore the male authority threatened by the scold’s subversive discourse (190). In The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama, Catherine Belsey argues that “to speak is to possess meaning, to have access to the language which defines, delimits and locates power. To speak is to become a subject. But for women to speak is to threaten the system of differences which gives meaning to patriarchy” (191). Both of their researches reveal that the male surveillance of women’s voices lies in men’s fear that women’s speech may locate power and pose direct threat to the patriarchal authorities. See Lynda Boose, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” and Catherine Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama, especially 191.
her seek revenge. The only pact that Sawyer has to make with Tom is to sign a contract in blood, showing her willingness to sell her body and soul to the devil. Sawyer immediately orders Tom to kill Old Banks, only to find his power is disappointingly circumscribed. He can kill cattle and damage corn, but he cannot take life unless he finds his intended victim cursing and swearing. The limitation of Sawyer’s “witchcraft” and Tom’s supernatural power ironically shows that the harm from hostile social conditions can be far more destructive to a poor, elderly woman than the harm she can do to her community. It is far easier for a community to burn a convicted witch to death than for a witch to take any intended victim’s life.

As Old Banks and the other villagers conduct their witch hunt by setting fire to a handful of thatch from Sawyer’s hovel, the helpless old woman has to appear to fight back at her tormentors. What can the aged Sawyer do to fight against this brutality? The only weapon left to her is her ability to articulate her anger. Three times she denies to the Justice that she is a witch, and she defiantly tells her tormentors that “if every poor old woman be trodden on thus by slaves, reviled, kicked, beaten” as she daily suffers, any one of them would be forced to turn into a witch (4.1.79-85). To counterattack her wrongdoers, Sawyer tells her accusers that she is victimized because of her marginal status in society; however, those who possess rank, power, and wealth are much more crooked than she (4.1.95-98).

In Goodcole’s tract, the minister claimed that Sawyer bore malice towards her neighbors who refused to buy the brooms she sold, while emphasizing that in Agnes Ratcliffe’s case there had been a more specific quarrel. Ratcliffe hit a sow of Sawyer’s which had eaten some soap of hers, and Sawyer vowed to seek her revenge. Ratcliffe fell into sudden illness. In her sickness, she accused Sawyer as her murderess, and died four days later. In the play, although the name “Agnes” is changed into “Anne,” the character’s sudden illness and death remain the main cause for Sawyer’s witchcraft accusation.

The double plots of the play merge in the end, as Susan’s sister, Katherine, accidentally finds in Frank’s coat pocket the bloody dagger that he used to kill her sister. Realizing that the whole family has been cozened, she immediately informs her father of her findings. To test their suspicion, Old Carter brings in Susan’s

---

8 Sawyer’s ability to articulate her anger unfortunately becomes her fatal weakness for the villagers to victimize her as a suspected witch. Both Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane observe that most of the witchcraft accusations examine suspects for their conduct and social situations, rather than their physical ugliness or deformity, and “a scolding tongue” is one of the most common social phenomenon for a suspect to be accused as a witch (Thomas 568; Macfarlane 158). Frances Dolan also notes that the border between tongue-lashing and witchmaking was perceived to be narrow, and “the criminalization of women often focused on their speech” (198-99).
coffin; the wounds on her dead body instantly bleed afresh in the presence of her murderer, and the angry father sends for officers to arrest his son-in-law. In the meantime, Sawyer is also seized by Old Banks, Ratcliffe, and other villagers and carried off to Tyburn for execution. The playwrights highlight early modern English society’s cruelty and mercilessness toward the accused witch by having her bear the blame for Susan Carter’s murder as well. Instead of blaming Frank for his cruelty in murdering his daughter, Old Carter accuses Sawyer of witching the Devil into his son-in-law (5.3.21-23). The injustice and brutality waged against the accused witch, Sawyer, contrasts strongly with the forgiveness and love accorded to the wife-murderer, Frank, when both face their executions. In doing so, the playwrights present a society that is profoundly hostile toward marginal women.

At the very end of the first volume of *The Capital*, Karl Marx attempts to inscribe the English Renaissance within the prehistory of capitalism. For him, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries formed a period in which the English government used forcible and violent methods, such as the expropriation of agricultural land through enclosure and engrossing or the dissolution of monastic holdings, to dispossess significant numbers of peasants and artisans from their means of economic production, thus forcing them into the state of property-less wage-laborers (Marx 788-805; Halpern 63; Wood 63-80). For Marx, serfdom had ceased its existence in late fourteenth century. In the fifteenth century, most agricultural labor was conducted by free peasant proprietors who actually possessed the pieces of land surrounding their houses and co-possessed the common land that gave pasture to their cattle and furnished them with firewood and timber. These peasants worked on the large estates under the title and administration of the manorial lords but also enjoyed the benefit of using common land. However, this system was facing drastic changes because of the rise of the Flemish wool manufactures and the corresponding rise in the price of wool in England.

Due to the tremendous benefits that the feudal lords could derive from enclosure and increased pasturing, they forcibly drove free peasant proprietors from their land and usurped the common lands despite the fact that the latter had the same feudal rights as the lords themselves. Furthermore, in the English civil wars, the old feudal lords were replaced by new, capitalist-leaning ones who expected to transform their agricultural land into sheep-grazing fields (Marx 784-99). The process of forcible expropriation was accelerated after Henry VIII’s clash with the Roman Catholic Church and the dissolution of monasteries. The Roman Catholic Church possessed a large amount of land in England. Under Henry VIII, the estates of the church were given away to the royal favorites or sold at a nominal price to
speculating farmers and citizens, who drove out the hereditary tenants and deprived them of their property rights (Marx 792-93). Thus, the significance of land changed during the course of primitive accumulation. “Land was profitable to feudal landowners mainly because of the tenants who occupied and worked it. With the rise of markets for land and wool and with the development of improved methods of agriculture, however, land became transferable and in some cases more profitable when stripped of its customary inhabitants” (Halpern 71).

Interestingly, though Marx attempted to explain the process of primitive accumulation and its consequent displacement of the male peasant proprietors, he ignored the place of English women in this transitional period from feudalism to capitalism. He did not mention the economically marginal women who depended upon the communal common fields for their living, nor did he note that the bureaucratization of enclosure and the transaction of lands could further turn rich yeomen’s daughters into easy prey for impoverished aristocratic males. Yet, Dekker, Ford, and Rowley’s play undoubtedly leads its audiences to realize how marginal women suffered from the bureaucratization of the enclosure movement and how rich yeomen’s daughters were used to trade for men’s pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige. The link between Susan and Sawyer is their assertive agency to articulate their opinions. In doing so, they are judged by men as unruly, rebellious women whose existence demonstrates a direct threat to the patriarchal authority of their society. Indeed, they both pay a fatal price for being heard.

Work Cited


Goodcole, Henry. The Wonderfull Discoveries of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch of Late Edmonton. 1921. STC (2nd ed.) Reel Position: 838: 05.


**About the Author**

Elyssa Y. Cheng (Ph.D.—English—SUNY at Buffalo 2003) is Assistant Professor of English in the Department of Western Languages and Literature, National University of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, where she teaches Shakespeare and early British Literature. She has published articles (in Chinese and English) on the struggles of women and the laboring-class in early modern English drama. Her current research focuses upon the relationship between drama and consumption culture in early modern city comedy.

Email: elyssacheng@yahoo.com.tw

[Received 29 Dec. 2008; accepted 28 Jan. 2010; revised 22 Feb. 2010]