

# Hunting the Comic Witch:

Humorous Representations of  
the Witch Figure in England,  
1580-1620

Julia Bourke  
Third year undergraduate,  
University of Melbourne

For many, the term ‘witch-hunts’ in its historical sense conjures up an image of medieval ignorance and panic, villagers readying their pitchforks, and almost certainly burnings. Such is the emotive power of the witch hunts that it is difficult to remember they were not medieval, and not usually ‘hunts,’ but rather a steady stream of prosecutions maintained over a long period, which in England reached its greatest intensity between around 1560 and 1620.<sup>1</sup> Historical evidence of witch persecution relies on the records of legal, state-sanctioned violence and court proceedings.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most surprising is the discovery that English witches were not burned for their imagined crimes, but hanged.<sup>3</sup>

One word unlikely to be associated with witches is ‘comic.’ Yet we need to examine the role of comedy in early modern representations of the witch, and consider ‘whether ... comic depictions of witchcraft [are] less valid and, if so, in what senses.’<sup>4</sup> Literary criticism of witches in Renaissance texts has overwhelmingly interpreted them as figures of horror, gruesome diabolism, or the embodiment of male fears.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, only a few historical studies of witchcraft have

---

1 Excluding the anomalous Matthew Hopkins trials of the 1640s. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), 451.

2 Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

3 *Ibid.*, 16.

4 Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 139-40.

5 See, for example: Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*, (London: Routledge, 1985). Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). V. Comensoli, *Household Business: Domestic Plays of Early Modern England*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

---

challenged this assumption by examining the presence of a comic witch figure.<sup>6</sup> This essay will examine comic constructions of the witch in a variety of texts produced between 1580 and 1620, a period representing high numbers of English witch hunts, and therefore a time when humorous representations of the witch seem most unlikely and historically incongruous.

The study of these texts demonstrates constructions of the comic witch that fall loosely into two categories or types. The existence of the comic witch in two forms at a period of persecution raises new questions for the study of the witch hunts, and invites historians to reconsider the relationship between the discourse of witchcraft and the hunts themselves. Assumptions about this relationship have shaped most readings of Elizabethan and Jacobean texts in the past. All comedy relies on an 'outsider,' a 'them' to the 'us' included in the audience of the joke.<sup>7</sup> In the first type of comic witch narrative, the outsider is the deluded witch. Not privileged with the audience's superior scepticism towards village witchcraft, she is mocked for claiming supernatural power to rival God's. Texts of this type dominate the surviving material, and usually engage consciously with the discourse of scepticism established by Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Texts which fall into the second category of comic treatment are fewer, but represent genres with a large audience, such as pamphlets. They are characterised by their transferral of 'outsider' status onto the victim of witchcraft, usually through a process of inversion similar to that studied in other parts of Europe as 'World Upside Down.'

This essay will focus on the creation of humour in Scot's treatise as the primary example of the first type of comic witch, and on a small selection of pamphlets that suggest the existence of a second type. There are, of course, many texts that could be included in such a discussion, but, rather than an exhaustive catalogue, a brief sketch of types will be given here through representative samples with the aim of establishing a paradigm within which such works can be read. This article also argues that, for an early modern audience confronted by a fictional witch, laughter was as appropriate a response as fear.

### Scot's *Discoverie* and Delusions of Grandeur

A Kentish squire with an interest in witchcraft, Scot wrote his treatise *Discoverie* in response to both a specific witch trial in England and continental treatises such as the now well known *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). Scot is famous for taking a sceptical position on witchcraft, arguing that witches are either old women mistakenly accused, or frauds. Less celebrated or studied is his use of – and dependence on – comedy. Sydney Anglo has published a valuable essay on the *Discoverie* which summarises its argument, but no one has yet undertaken a serious analysis of Scot's use of comedy.<sup>8</sup> Scot's humour relies on his construction of the witch as a figure not necessarily laughable, but always ridiculous. His mockery, though at times sympathetic, is employed only in order to strip power from the witch and restore it to religion. By manipulating his readers' perception of power

---

6 Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations*, (London: Routledge, 1996). Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*.

7 D. Brewer, 'Prose Jest-Books Mainly in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries in England,' in *A Cultural History of Humour*, eds. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 90.

8 Sydney Anglo, 'Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*: Scepticism and Sadduceeism,' in *The Damned Art: essays in the literature of witchcraft*, ed. Sydney Anglo, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 106-139.

relations, Scot renders the trivial cruelties of the village witch absurd beside the miracles wrought by his God.

This sustained attack against witches centres on a pattern of imagery consistently associating the witch with powerlessness. Thus, a witch in the *Discoverie* is never just a witch; she is always also 'old,' 'lame,' or 'melancholic.' Scot's stereotyping is often difficult to see because the stereotype is now so well known, and because of its apparently proto-modern scepticism Scot's treatise has often been accepted as an accurate account of witch persecution.<sup>9</sup> However, not all those accused of witchcraft were old, poor, widowed, or even female. In fact, what seems to be reported is deliberately rhetorical construction. The treatise is littered with similar descriptions that constantly yoke the idea of the witch to images of impotence: old age and physical decay, poverty, and womanhood. 'They are women that never went to schoole in their lives, nor had any teachers: and therefore without art or learning; poore ... and commonlie lame, and therefore unapt to flie in the aire, or to danse with the fairies; sad, melancholike, sullen, and miserable.'<sup>10</sup> Nothing about these women is frightening, except perhaps their helplessness.

Scot's witches also encapsulate the concept that an imbalance of humours in the body – in this case, an excess of black bile – could result in disturbances of the mind and the medical condition referred to as melancholy. Scot devotes considerable time to melancholy and its effects, using as one example the story of Ade Davie which the margin informs us results in a 'comicall catastrophe.'<sup>11</sup> Plagued by melancholy, Davie becomes convinced that she has made a pact with the devil and bewitched her family. Confiding in her husband, they spend the night keeping the devil at bay with prayers and psalms, but hear him rumbling angrily outside their window. Scot, however, soon explains that Davie was suffering from an imbalance of humours, leaving her vulnerable to her own imagination. The rumbling of the devil was nothing but a dog devouring the carcass of 'a sheepe, which was flawed, and hoong by the wals,' and Davie 'being now recovered, remaineth a right honest woman, far from such impietie, and shamed of hir imaginations, which she perceiveth to have growne through melancholie.'<sup>12</sup> In this way, Scot repeatedly reinforces to his readers that old women accused of witchcraft – 'the aptest persons to meete with such melancholike imaginations' – cannot master their own bodies, let alone those of their neighbours. Scot shows that for Davie, like all pious women, the grotesque body in which humours lack regulation should not be a source of pride or strength but of shame. In all aspects of their lives – age, appearance, wealth, happiness, religion, gender – the witches described in the *Discoverie* are disempowered. This is particularly evident when their belief, such as Davie's absolute conviction of her own guilt – 'she sawe not anie one carrieng a faggot to the fier, but she would saie it was to make a fier to burne hir for witcherie' – is neatly juxtaposed with Scot's explanation of events.<sup>13</sup> When

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. For an opposing view, see Purkiss, *The Witch in History*.

<sup>10</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, (London: Henry Denham for William Brome, 1584), 219. Scot's first description of witches is often quoted and equally deliberate: 'old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious, and papist.' Ibid., 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55-57.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 57. Although English witches were hanged, belief that they were also burned was a popular misconception even at the time of persecution.

Scot contrasts 'reality' with melancholic-induced delusion, fantasies of supernatural power, and diabolical pacts, these 'poore old witches' become absurdly pathetic.<sup>14</sup>

Play on expectations, such as the surprising end to Davie's story, is another of Scot's comic devices. He does not merely rebut myths, but repeats them at length before exposing their failings. This play and transformation of expectation is typical of comedy, which establishes an apparently simple situation before a punchline reveals a double meaning.<sup>15</sup> The pattern recurs in Scot's exposure of conjuring tricks. Book II includes accounts of crimes, confessions, and methods of interrogating witches, but only the last three chapters of the book dispute the claims of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and of Jean Bodin's *Démonomanie des Sorciers* (1580). Margin notes referring to the text often make statements (for example, 'a wise law of pope Innocent and Julie') before undermining them with sarcasm ('were it not that they wanted wit when they made it').<sup>16</sup> Descriptions and explanations of supposed *maleficium* (harmful acts), such as the common accusation of witchcraft when butter did not come from churned cream, are similarly organised:

If you put a little sugar or sope into the cherne, among the creame, the butter will never come: which is plain witchcraft, if it be closelie, cleanlie, and privilie handled. There be twentie severall waies to make your butter come ... but your best remedie and surest waie is, to looke well to your dairie maid or wife, that she neither eat up the creame, nor sell awaie your butter.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, specific words become units whose assumed meaning can be twisted. If God would permit witches to be powerful, then their works would indeed be 'miraculous' rather than wicked.<sup>18</sup> The 'bewitched' are not those whose cattle or children die, or whose butter will not come, but anyone gullible enough to believe old wives' tales.<sup>19</sup> The 'joke' structure of expectation and overthrow, set-up and punchline produces an atmosphere of sarcastic wit, encouraging scepticism in the readers themselves. By constantly tempting his audience to guess the key to the magic trick before it is revealed, Scot cultivates the suspicion of the supernatural and desire for truth which he is famous for advocating.

In *Discoverie*, power or its lack is dependent on deception, illusion and trickery. Those who can create the illusion of power and status – jugglers, conjurors and cozeners – are powerful; any who, like witches themselves, mistake these illusions for reality are doomed to ridicule. Witches are those 'in whose drousie minds the divell hath gotten a fine seat; so as, what mischeefe, mischance, calamitie, or slaughter is brought to passe, they are easilie persuaded the same is doone by themselves; imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination hereof.'<sup>20</sup> Not only have they misunderstood the nature of illusion, but they have also failed to convert pretended power into material gain, as others have: 'whereas witches being poore and needie, go from doore to doore

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Douglas, 'Jokes,' in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 295.

<sup>16</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 223.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 471.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 471.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 7.

for releefe, have they never so manie todes or cats at home, or never so manie charmes in store: these conjurors ... have them offices in the church of *Rome*.<sup>21</sup> More successful conjurors, aware of their own trickery, obtain wealth and status, and are constantly gendered male. Meanwhile, old women deluded into thinking themselves witches, unable to distinguish and exploit the gap between illusion and reality, remain completely exposed to the mocking, knowing eye of Scot and his sceptical readers.

Engaging directly with the beliefs of his contemporaries, Scot's *Discoverie* is a seminal text in the English discourse of witchcraft. Unfortunately its role as literature has been neglected by historians, subsumed by the desire to claim it as a voice of reason from a time of so much unreasonable persecution. Scot's empiricism, so familiar to the post-Enlightenment reader, should not blind her to his bias. His construction of the witch, for all its entertaining scepticism, is still a construction. As a literary representation of witchcraft at a time of persecution, *Discoverie* is just as valuable as any text that confirms the historian's expectation of terror, repressed fear of the maternal, or diabolism. It is also just as partial, and should be approached with the same care as a document describing witches' revelry at a Sabbath.

Though it has been neglected by scholars, the comic witch established by Scot had significant influence, particularly among playwrights such as Jonson, Middleton and Shakespeare. *Discoverie* began a discourse and a tradition of representation that tied together witchcraft and humour in the service of scepticism. Most surviving texts featuring a comic witch draw on this sceptical discourse, centring on the figure of a deluded, powerless old woman. The evolution of this discourse continued even as accusations of witchcraft resulted in executions. While this form of sceptical humour seems predominant in terms of surviving sources, there is also evidence suggesting the existence of alternative comic witch constructions.

### Witches on Top

Some representations do exist of powerful comic witches whose moral and social status is fluid. In a number of comic texts, especially pamphlets, the supernatural ability of the witch is unquestioned. The power these witches possess is neither imagined nor necessarily evil. Rather, it is the comic power of the antihero or carnival King; their world is a 'World Upside Down.' In a culture of witch persecution, it is the existence of this second type of comic witch that seems most alien.

'World Upside Down,' or WUD, was a common topos throughout Europe in the early modern period. Though cultural historian Stuart Clark has examined its relationship to demonological beliefs, it is an idea usually applied by historians to continental sources.<sup>22</sup> WUD broadsheets imagined an inverted universe in which hares hunted hounds, babies rocked their parents in the cradle, oxen slaughtered and skinned butchers, and husbands span while their wives bore arms.<sup>23</sup> This inversion is evident in the well-known story of Phyllis riding Aristotle, in which Phyllis, wife

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 451. Emphasis in original.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft,' *Past and Present*, Issue 87, (1980), 98-127. Clark, *Thinking with Demons*.

<sup>23</sup> David Kunzle, 'World Upside Down,' in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. B. Babcock, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 39-94.

of Alexander the Great, tricks the famous philosopher into kneeling on all fours and carrying her on his back. Cultural play with gender roles was common, and often carried within it an implicit criticism of the established social order. The temporary carnival rule of the 'woman on top' both confirmed male dominance and encouraged resistance to it.<sup>24</sup> Such representations could reach beyond the broadsheet, tale or play to provide women with an alternative model of behaviour, presenting an unorthodox method of structuring experience and responding to patriarchal control.<sup>25</sup> This potential to criticise or even alter the cultural system is particularly interesting when it overlaps with representations of witchcraft, already a deviant behaviour. The label 'witch' can serve in these representations as a justification or explanation for further deviance, or, as with Phyllis' ride, give license to a woman as social critic.<sup>26</sup>

Clark has undertaken extensive research on the reversible world in relation to witch beliefs, and especially demonology.<sup>27</sup> However, he does not consider why some inversions, such as the Feast of Fools, could be 'festive,' while any involving witchcraft are described as threatening.<sup>28</sup> In fact, there are a number of sources in which the principle of WUD in witchcraft is celebrated for its comedy. This form of inversion is most common in witchcraft pamphlets, which show a trend towards genuinely powerful and entertaining witches whose inversions of hierarchical norms are presented as comic narratives. Surprisingly for what is generally a moralising genre, almost all jokes or attempts at comedy in the pamphlets are directed not at witches themselves, but at the slow-witted victims of witchcraft attacks. At least three of the surviving pamphlets – *A Most Wicked Worke of a Wretched Witch* (1592), *The Severall Practises of Johane Harrison and Her Daughter* (an extract from a longer pamphlet of 1606) and *Witches Apprehended* (1613) – contain comic narratives.

The first, G.B.'s *A Most Wicked Worke*, tells the story of Richard Burt, servant to a gentleman, who is spirited away by witchcraft.<sup>29</sup> Although the witch herself remains a peripheral character, this pamphlet is significant as the first to frame a comical witchcraft narrative. Furthermore, perhaps because the witch is hardly present, the humour is directed at the maladroit victim, Burt, establishing a precedent for later pamphlets. 'Poore' Burt is confronted in the middle of his lunch by witch Mother Atkyns' familiar spirit who takes the form of a black cat. Burt is pointedly instructed to abandon his meal and 'come away' with the spirit.<sup>30</sup> 'Poore simplicity keeping his applepy stil in his hand,' Burt is whisked away to 'a place which was all fire,' filled with the cries of tortured devils. The terrifying fires (presumably of Hell, although this is not explicitly stated), which Burt affirms to be 'exceeding hot,' arouse in him not fear but such a thirst that 'minding a

---

24 Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe,' in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. B. Babcock, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 147-190.

25 Ibid.; see also Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003).

26 Davis, 'Women on Top,' 162-163.

27 Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft,' 98-127. Clark, *Thinking with Demons*.

28 Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft,' 101.

29 G.B.'s identity is unknown.

30 Burt, 'being agast start up with his applepie in his hande (for it had byn pittie a poore hungrie thresher should have lost such a good repast),' before being told to 'come away.' G.B., *Most Wicked Worke of a Wretched Witch*, (Gratious Streat: printed by R.B. for William Barley, 1592), A3.

pennie hee had in his purse: [he] looked round about for an Alehouse where he might spend it.<sup>31</sup> This is a comically inappropriate reaction to the eternal torment that surrounds him. Eventually escaping from the fires, Burt employs a similar method of recovery after his ordeal: 'he first repaired to a ditch to drink.'<sup>32</sup>

The focus of the story on Burt himself, rather than Mother Atkyns, is a feature of this second type of comic witch narrative. The crucial factor differentiating these stories from Scot's construction is the power relation that shapes the comedy. Mother Atkyns, unlike Scot's witches, is indisputably powerful. No reader of this pamphlet could mistake the power of witches for delusion, or doubt the need to punish them: 'O rebels towards God: enemies to mankinde: catterpillers of a common wealth, the fire is too good for them.'<sup>33</sup> As a result of the witch's power, humour is deflected away from her and onto hapless Burt.

Because Burt does not adhere to the social duties expected of him – he is not a dedicated servant, not pious, and not heroic or manly – his world is reversed. His 'great mastive dogge,' instead of chasing Mother Atkyns' hare, begins to 'whine pittifully'; where previously Burt spoke and Mother Atkyns was silent, on being released from Hell Burt has his tongue 'doubled in his mouth'; after the world is righted, Burt 'mended reasonable, and nowe goeth to the Church.'<sup>34</sup> WUD is used here as a punishment and a lesson to Burt. If duties to God and the community are not fulfilled, Satan and his representatives will take control as lords of misrule until the lesson of obligation is learned.

The section of the anonymous 1606 murder pamphlet which reports on the witchcraft case of Johane Harrison ends with an anecdote: 'How the Witch Served a Fellow in an Alehouse.'<sup>35</sup> This story, in which a foolish man insults a witch and is humorously punished, is quite different from the discussion of witchcraft preceding it. The tale retains the gossipy tone of the rest of the report, but prepares the audience for a lighter, less moralising conclusion to the pamphlet by informing them that when told at the trial, 'though but a homely tale ... it made al the Bench to laugh.' Historian Marion Gibson suggests that the comic story was used as filler when the writer exhausted other material.<sup>36</sup> She also discusses the process by which a possibly real event is turned into a 'typical jest': from the pun in the title and the story-like opening sentence – 'there was an honest Fellow, and as boone a companion dwelling in Royston' – the anecdote is recognisable as a constructed account whose primary function is to entertain.<sup>37</sup>

The focus of the story – as in *A Most Wicked Worke* – is on the victim of witchcraft, despite the emphasis on Harrison's individual actions in the earlier section of the pamphlet. Indeed, the witch

---

31 Ibid., A3v.

32 Ibid., A3v.

33 Ibid., A4v. G.B.'s bombast glosses over the hanging, rather than burning, of English witches.

34 Ibid., A2v, A3v, A4.

35 'The Severall Practises of Johane Harrison and Her Daughter,' in *The Most Cruell and Bloody Murther Committed by an Inkeepers Wife, called Annis Dell*, (London: printed for William Firebrand and Iohn Wright, 1606), C4. Johane Harrison is a name invented by the author(s). This along with the comic structure of the final anecdote, certainly a deliberate authorial creation rather than a report of 'real' events, allows the 'Alehouse' section to be treated as a semi-fictional construction.

36 Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, 155.

37 Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, 155. 'Johane Harrison,' C4.

is unnamed throughout the entire comic conclusion, becoming instead a generic witch figure. Mirroring Burt in the 1592 pamphlet, the victim is a clownish drunk: 'one that loved the pot with the long necke almost as well as his prayers; for (quoth he) as I know one is medicinable for the soule, I am sure the other's phisick for ye bodie.'<sup>38</sup> It is the combination of foolishness, bravado and drink that leads the 'fuddle cap' to repeatedly insult the witch, who threatens that he 'throwst in ... drink apace, but shall not find it so easie comming out.'<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, when the victim soon after attempts to relieve himself, he discovers 'a top of his nose [a euphemism] a red lump as big as a cherry.' Bawdy suggestion is humorously juxtaposed with the victim's alarm and dismay, and in standard comic style his cry of 'help, the Witch' is interpreted by those around him as an instruction to 'help the witch.'<sup>40</sup> Both the 1592 and the 1606 pamphlets employ WUD in order to punish those appointed dominant – men – for their failings through a witch figure who establishes a temporary state of inversion. Such inversion is only possible when the previously dominant figure misbehaves, especially if that misbehaviour involves impiety and a love of alcohol.

The pattern of comic witchcraft focusing on a blundering victim is repeated a third time in *Witches Apprehended*. The anonymous 1613 account of Mother Sutton's attack is enlivened by a chase scene in which the victims struggle to rein in horses, a cart and a demonic black sow. The humour here owes less to WUD than to the image of horses harnessed to a cart carrying corn who, at the sight of Mother Sutton's bewitched sow, took fright, and 'drewe away the Cart, and corn, and left the Wheeles, and Axeltree behind them.'<sup>41</sup> The two drivers' attempts to catch their horses only worsen the situation, which is repeated on the return journey, 'onely the horses [the second time] were better furnished then before, for where at first they left both Wheeles and Axeltree behinde them, they now had the Axeltree to take their part, leaving the Wheeles in the high way for the servants to bring after.'<sup>42</sup> Although this pamphlet is not as concerned with a reversal of power structures as the two which precede it, there is still a sense that the witch is licensed to punish, even if the punishment is disproportionate to the crime. Mother Sutton's son was given 'a little blow or two on the eare' by the owner of the cart, which provoked the first witchcraft attack.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, one of the drivers of the cart spends his evening in town and relates to his drinking companions the strange events of the day as a comic anecdote: 'some wondered, all laughed.'<sup>44</sup> Comic tales of witchcraft that use the witch as a figure of power are careful to direct laughter only at the victims, and it is tempting to see Mother Sutton's second attack as a response to one victim's lack of respect.

This recurring comic form, in which the (often drunk) male victim of a powerful witch is mocked and taught a lesson reflects many of the criteria established by literary critic Pamela Allen Brown for assessing whether a joke is aimed at a female audience, including a male as the butt of a joke brought about by the agency of a woman.<sup>45</sup> As Allen Brown has demonstrated, women could

---

38 'The Severall Practises of Johane Harrison and Her Daughter,' C4.

39 Ibid., C4v.

40 Ibid., C4v.

41 *Witches Apprehended, Examined and Executed, for Notable Villanies by them Committed both by Land and Water* (Printed at London: for Edward Marchant, 1613), Bv.

42 Ibid., B2.

43 Ibid., B.

44 Ibid., B2.

45 Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep*, 9-10.



function effectively as an audience in early modern England, and in particular could use humour to structure alternative responses to a world dominated by men.<sup>46</sup> The role played by a gendered audience of witchcraft pamphlets is entirely unexplored, but certainly merits further research.

There is evidence, then, for two different types of comic witch figure in this period. The first type of comic witch exemplified in Scot's *Discoverie* constructs the witch as the 'outsider'; the audience shares the sceptical delusion joke with the author. The second type of comic witch text places the victim of witchcraft attack in the role of 'outsider,' and by doing so implicitly unites the audience with the witch as 'insiders.' There are fewer of these texts, but given the presence of this category of comic treatment in the wide-reaching pamphlet genre, it is not unreasonable to assume a substantial audience. There is a great deal of room for further study on the interaction between the discourse of witchcraft and the social dynamics of persecution, but the existence of comic witches at a time of witch hunts in England suggests that the relationship is more complicated than a simple mirroring. It remains to be seen how comic witches relate to a real fear of witchcraft, but it is important to acknowledge that such comic figures do exist, and that witches in early modern England may have been as much an object of fun as of fear.

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

---

---