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The Older Woman on the Early Modern English Stage: Fixed Stereotype or Mobile Signifier?

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Most of the roles assigned to the older woman on the early Tudor stage are unattractive. These range from old drunkard hags along the lines of Skelton's gossips in "The Tunning of Elinour Rumminge" (1517) to the witches, fortune-tellers, lecheresses, bawds, go-between nurses, and garrulous scolds of dozens of plays, including a number by Lyly, Gascoigne, Udall, and Shakespeare. This essay purports to investigate the extent to which the staged stereotype of the older woman is made a subject of debate in the early modern English drama, and to what extent the stereotype becomes a mobile signifier. This figure inherits the negative characteristics built into the patriarchal culture, often in an exaggerated form verging on caricature. Most of these characters are only superficially developed and serve as agents to move the plot along, but a brief survey will reveal how, in spite of obvious distortions, the drama of the period illustrates a number of different prevailing attitudes toward the older woman.

In George Gascoigne's *Supposes*, translated from Ariosto, drunkenness, scolding, a turn for invective, gossiping, are attributed to Psiteria, the "old hag", as she is described in the *dramatis personae*. At various points in the play, she is insulted as "rotten whore … olde witche" (IV.ii.1), when greeted by Crapino, a servant; as "olde

kallat … tatling huswife"—the same word, of course, as "hussy"—[V.vi.1-2]) by Damon, the father of Polynesta. Indeed, her tattling in the streets almost causes harm. Damon dismisses her from the play with the following threat: "In at dores, olde whore; I wil plucke that tong of thine out by the rotes one day" (V.vi.23-25). Here we see how this character belongs to a long tradition of women stigmatised for being out of the house, on the move, independent of men, outside male control and likely to cause trouble.

Marianne Hester reminds us that scolding appears in the criminal courts of Tudor times as a specifically female offence (p. 299). "Scold" was a strongly negative term, in destructive impact second only to "whore" as a pejorative label applied to women. It was also redolent of female strength and power, as it was traditionally supposed that a scold was capable of outfacing the devil. The cluster of insults hurled at Psiteria makes it easy to understand how the stereotypical old hag could develop into the fully-fledged witch figure of plays of the late sixteenth century, a period when witchcraft persecutions were on the increase.

Again in *Supposes*, Balia the nurse (incidentally, one of the forerunners of Shakespeare's Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*) is portrayed as an elderly bawd arranging for her charge to have a "supposed" servant-boy as a lover. When accused of accepting bribes and rewards for doing this by Polynesta, she maintains that she did it as "a deede of charitie to helpe the miserable yong men, whose tender youth consumeth with the furious flames of love" (I.i.50-53). All we hear of her later on in the play is that she is given over to scolding and cursing, and that she has called Psiteria "too bade" names and was incapable of keeping secret the visits paid by Dulipo to Polynesta. For this Psiteria insults her, calling her "baude" (III.v.23-26). She remains a lightly sketched character, who helps resolve one of the plots involving "supposed" identities.

Examples of older women portrayed in a favourable light in the early Tudor drama are relatively few. *Misogonus*, however, shows that the stereotype had the capacity to cater for more wide-ranging dramatic functions. The elderly Alison actually becomes the play's instrument of redemption, providing as she does the essential information regarding the existence of a unsuspected son and heir. This does not mean that the conventional characteristics of the scolding wife are discarded. We relish the interpolated scene of a stereotypical squabble between her and her husband Codrus, in which he insults her in standard terms, referring to her sporadic scolding moods and hurling insults such as "crow-trodden whore" "'bomination gom" (abominable old woman) and "jade" (III.i.200, 202, 205). She,

in turn, seems capable of giving him a duster: “Ay, li’est thou me, cuckoldly knave? I’ll ha’ thee in my memorandum. / I may chance make thee lie i’th’ dust ere long for thy lying” (198-99). In Alison, then, we find a character who is capable of standing up for herself and who knows her rights, threatening to report her husband to the officials (203). This play presents the husband as the talkative “fool” whose “bolt is soon shot”, whereas Alison, the one-time midwife, pursues her tale of her “mistress’ deliverance” (213), thereby restoring to Philogonus a vital aspect of his lost identity, his elder son. She does so, nevertheless, against her will: her desire was to keep the secret that she had solemnly sworn to maintain, as goes contrary to the stereotype of the loose-tongued woman. The “gossips” (245) that will confirm her story, moreover, are not like those of Noah’s wife in the Wakefield pageant, but “true and trusty” (253).

One of these gossips is the stereotypically named Madge Mumblecrust, who, like her companion Isbell, also behaves generally in the expected scolding manner. Again, a scene (IV.i) is inserted to make the point. Yet these gossips were capable of keeping their mouths shut regarding the crucial information. Indeed, once her toothache seems to be palliated by the Vice Cacurgus, Madge reaffirms her determination to keep the secret, which she swears she will never disclose, “and’t were to th’ Great Turk” (III.ii.232). It is notable, too, that in Madge, even the conventional image of the tooth-troubled old woman is lent a subjectifying force by having her convincingly communicate the pain of her toothache. She experiences and transmits something about herself across this cultural marker. Her name thereby becomes self-reflexive: this old woman becomes a mobile signifier, then, not something static and fixed.

It is tempting to see in this development a precursor of the broad phenomenon described by Jean Elisabeth Gagen as the emergence of a “new woman” in early seventeenth-century English drama. This “new woman” insists on the right to study, to think for herself and to make decisions without what Gagen calls “constant surveillance of a male overlord” (p. 10). The misogynistic representation of women tends to be mitigated, possibly because of the success of Elizabeth as a ruler, especially as acknowledged in retrospect. Already in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare had shown a gossip-like relation between women as a positive force, one which came to the defence of social order. Then again in *The Winter’s Tale*, the young shrewish Paulina, who is quite the opposite of the Paulinian ideal of the silent obedient woman, undergoes a sea-change whereby, over the sixteen years that follow Hermione’s supposed death, she becomes the mechanism of

redemption in the play. Her unruly tongue, which forbids the penitent Leontes to remarry, is the instrument of restoring order. As with Alison in *Misogonus* or the Abbess in *The Comedy of Errors*, in a kind of inversion of the traditional stereotype, it is the older woman who performs a role similar to that of a mid-wife in bringing to the light of day what was shrouded in ignorance, obscurity and the shadow of death. In the case of *Epicoene*, it is knowledge of a different kind that characterises the "new woman" on the stage. In Jonson's city comedy, even though the author, as usual, adopts an ambiguous stance and has it both ways, there is as much satire at the expense of misogynistic stereotypes as there is at the expense of the new learned women represented by the Collegiate Ladies, who set themselves up as social leaders and arbiters of taste and fashion.

The association of old women with witchcraft is a constant in many cultures, and the Tudor drama offers numerous examples of this. Indeed, it is to John Bale's *Comedy Concerning Three Laws, of Nature, Moses, and Christ* that George Lyman Kittredge turns for a stereotype in *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, expressing gratitude to Bale for the "explicit" and "abundant" (p. 34) information that he gives on the subject of what an old witch of the times was like. The character named Idolatry is to be "decked lyke an olde wytche", as Bale instructs in the notes about the costumes of the vice-characters at the end of the play. The exact nature of the costume is a thing for conjecture nowadays, but various woodcuts of the day, and verbal descriptions of and allusions to the physical ugliness of elderly women assimilated to witches, enable modern readers to picture Bale's Idolatry in a loose gown and "thrumm'd hat" made of coarse cloth, like the clothes worn by the "Witch of Brainford" (that is, Brentford) to whom Mistress Page and Mistress Ford refer when disguising Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (IV.ii.75-78). Like many an opponent of Roman Catholicism, Bale conflates it with witchcraft: Roman Catholic prayers and rituals in his plays are equated with the magical charms and practices supposedly used by witches.

Bale's old witch Idolatry can boast of having a long list of occult powers. She can tell fortunes; by saying her Ave Mary, which is likened to "other charmes of sorcerye" (l. 414), she can stop toothache, cure men of the ague and pox, recover lost property, fetch the devil from hell, draw drink out of a rotten post—all this "Without the helpe of the holye Ghost" (l. 423), we are told by her partner Sodomismus, who stresses the fact that "in workynge she is alone" (l. 424). Idolatry is a good midwife and can protect children from harmful spirits with her charms, use holy oil and water for all kinds of devious ends, work wiles in battles,

keep corn and cattle from thriving, kill poultry and make ale in the vat lose its head and body. If she wishes, she can also cause unsuccessful baking, make wells dry up, trees and plants wither. If she is not crossed, she will use her powers to speed the plough and make the cows produce abundance of milk. She will not interfere with the functioning of the mill, the cradle or the mustard-quern, if she is favourably disposed. She boasts of playing tricks like turning the tables, and can make stools dance and earthen pots prance just by throwing down her glove. Folk practices of curing and cursing animals and human beings are listed, many of which involve using the formulas of the traditional religion and calling upon certain saints. Such practices become associated with sorcery, showing how easily paganism and Roman Catholicism, with its rites and incantations, became conflated in the scurrilous minds of playwrights like Bale. (The latter may have taken his lead from an earlier poet: Chaucer's Wife of Bath seems to have thought along similar lines when beginning her tale in *Canterbury Tales*; she speaks with a kind of primitivist nostalgia of the days of King Arthur, when the land was full of fairies, and not the present-day "lymytours and othere hooly freres … / Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures", who have replaced the elf as the "incubus" that lay in the bushes threatening to dishonour passing women (ll. 857-81).

Furthermore, as Gillian Tindall reminds us, the word "witch" denotes different things in different eras: " 'Witchcraft' is whatever the standard, established cult is *not*" (p. 31). Witches in the ancient world were not persecuted for their participation in local fertility cults, since they were part of the established religion. The truism that the god of one religion becomes the devil of the next applies here, since Idolatry shows the signs of being the god of an older religion, transformed by Bale into the devil of the new. Tindall even suggests that witchcraft might be viewed as "a decayed version of an older faith" (p. 35); however, she adds the cryptic remark that the faith was fairly corrupt and meant no good to anyone. Inevitably, Christianity, being an ascetic and antiphallic religion, tried its utmost to get rid of fertility cults. "White witchcraft" (which should more accurately be called "folk medicine") was also considered unacceptable during the seventeenth century, when the peak-period for persecution was reached, since deliberate witchcraft became associated with blighting and making barren, sterility replacing fertility as the goal.

Significantly, Idolatry is also guilty of sexual transgression, in that, as Infidelitas tells us, she was once a "he" (l. 425), working in close partnership with

Sodomismus, who works outwardly at defiling humanity as an image of the Divine, whereas Idolatry aims at inward perversion of the soul. The gender discourse of the period perceived women as more likely to be sexually deviant than men: the age-old construction of women on the model of Eve was still intact.

Bale's allegorical figure is both a white witch and a black one, depending on whether one enjoys her favour or attracts her hostility, and the attributes given her accord with experience and with the everyday beliefs of the populace. She functions in the play as an agent of the devil, and as an instrument of Bale's anti-Catholic propaganda. By amalgamating the black and white witch, Bale makes his point more strongly about the corruption of all superstition and its association with Roman Catholicism. We find other elderly female characters portrayed as black or white witches in the Tudor drama, but none combine in one single figure all the characteristics of Idolatry, and, furthermore, none are painted in such a derogatory manner, with even their health-promoting talents being condemned as evil practices.

On the contrary, there is at least one example of a highly sympathetic witch-figure. Mother Bombie, the well-known fortune-teller of John Lyly's eponymous play, may even be based on a real or legendary person known to Lyly, who grew up near the character's supposed home-town of Rochester. When the idiot girl Silena consults her to have her fortune told, we learn that, while old Mother Bombie is generally called a witch, she prefers to be called a "cunning woman" (II.iii [p. 256]), the equivalent of a white witch, which at various stages in the culture was not necessarily considered to be an evil status. When the servants Halfpenny, Lucio and Dromio consult her to have their bad dreams interpreted, they stand back at first, scared by her appearance. Halfpenny exclaims, "Cross yourselves, look how she looks", and Dromio counters this by advising them not to make her angry for fear of being turned into an ape (III.iv [p. 265]). When they leave the old woman, they express gratitude for the predictions that she makes. It is notable that these are all in doggerel, which serves to enhance the magical aura that surrounds the soothsayer, who, as she herself says, takes "no money, but good words. Rail not if I tell true; if I do not, revenge" (III.iv [p. 267]). Lyly recuperates even the magical spells that white witches, including midwives, were wont to employ in their non-malefic art. Another elderly character in the play, Vicinia, the nurse who substitutes her own idiot children for the children of her master Memphio, points out the beneficial influence of Mother Bombie's witch-like powers of clairvoyance, which prevent the incestuous match of Accius and

Silena, the idiot children of the elderly nurse Vicinia, from taking place. In the final act of the play, Mother Bombie is in fact endearingly referred to by Vicinia as “the good old woman Mother Bombie” (V.iii [p. 282]).

While Mother Bombie is portrayed as a positive character, Lyly’s aged sorceress, Dipsas, in *Endimion* is quite the opposite. This malefic enchantress uses her art to send Endimion into a death-like sleep from which he cannot be awoken. She is ascribed a plethora of loathly characteristics in the parodic love story told by the braggart soldier, Sir Tophas. Supposedly inspired by Ovid’s *De Arte Amandi*, which causes him to break out into Latin verse, Sir Tophas spouts an anti-blason in honour of his loathly lady, in which all the normally negative aspects of old age are transformed into erotic attractions:

> Oh what a fine thin hair hath Dipsas! What a pretty low forehead! What a tall and stately nose! What little hollow eyes! What great and goodly lips! How harmless she is, being toothless! Her fingers fat and short, adorned with long nails like a bittern! In how sweet a proportion her cheeks hang down to her breasts like dugs, and her paps to her waist like bags! What a low stature she is, and yet what a great foot she carrieth! How thrifty must she be in whom there is no waste! How virtuous is she like to be, over whom no man can be jealous! (III.iii [p. 167])

Lyly’s treatment of Dipsas pokes fun at the didactic role usually assigned to the ugly old hag, that of discouraging amorous desire by a horrific evocation of all that’s most sordid and repellent about an ageing female anatomy. At the same time, Lyly provides a parodic illustration of Circean unmanning. This *miles gloriosus* lays down his armour at the feet of the enchanting old hag, whose powers of seduction make him lose his mind.

Circean seduction was viewed as a form of rebellion in the witchcraft treatises. This is because the word “seduce” in Tudor times was used with its primary political sense: “to persuade (a vassal, servant, soldier, etc.) to desert his allegiance or service” (*OED*). Circean transformation, rebellion, threats to male ordering, dominance and rationality all form part of witchcraft’s language of inversion and misrule. In the late sixteenth century, at a time when Protestant propaganda was rife and as witchcraft persecutions were on the increase, the older woman was cast in more and more plays as a witch. However, as Diane Purkiss points out, instead of strengthening belief in the existence of real witches, the more witches there were on stage, the more sceptical the London populace became (p. 181). The sensational witch stories that sceptical dramatists transformed into plays

gradually played a part in transforming the figure of the witch into a "muddled signifier" (p. 207), as Purkiss aptly describes the early Jacobean stage type.

In Middleton, Dekker and Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton*, for example, Elizabeth Sawyer, modelled on the real-life witch of that name, while retaining the conventional traits of her predecessors, is presented as a victim of her community. She illustrates the pattern outlined by Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, whereby recourse to witchcraft was provoked by the devil's seductive offer of success, revenge, sexual gratification, an easier life if poor, or just a promise of food in cases of extreme poverty (Thomas, pp. 519-26). Witchcraft seemed to many to be a seductive alternative to a hard Christian way of life. The stage role becomes more consequential, and the suffering of the victimised, marginalised old woman is presented in a less misogynistic way. Elizabeth Sawyer's motive for reluctantly taking on the ready-made role of witch constructed for her by the community of Edmonton is presented in the play as a means of recuperating some measure of power over her persecutors, albeit at her own expense.

Finally, Purkiss's "muddled signifier" is perhaps better termed a mobile one, and it joins the other manifestations I have identified of stereotypes of older women that are complicated in ways that serve to enhance dramatic functionality. Pre-existing misogynistic attitudes interact with new social and religious developments, and the old stereotype is opened to debate and undergoes many transformations resulting in more fully rounded characters, who, true to their real-life counterparts, play more determining parts in the action.

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