

**The Cauldron and the Threat of the “Other” in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,
Middleton’s *The Witch*, and Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta***

CLARE MERRICK

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

As a theatrical element, the cauldron is perhaps most famously associated with the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (c.1606) and Middleton’s *The Witch* (c.1613–1616). However, this essay proposes that the cauldron in the early modern theatre is not merely a physical signifier, or even an innate trope, of witchcraft; rather, the cauldron is an object that more generally illustrates the perceived threat that marginalised figures could pose towards early modern society, those who might be considered as the “other.” For example, Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (c.1590) effectively utilises cauldrons for symbolic and dramatic effect, even though these cauldrons are not explicitly suggestive of witchcraft or magic. Marlowe’s cauldrons are instead the murderous tools, and ultimately the divine punishment, of Barabas—a Jew.

It is an unfortunate aspect of human nature that, as summarised by Penny Roberts, individuals or groups who maintain “certain types of behaviour, appearance or lifestyle which differ from the prevailing norms” are often identified by society as suspicious and threatening, and are “marginalised, ostracised or actively persecuted” as a result.¹ Jews and witches were amongst the frequently targeted groups in the early modern period, often being accused of deviant and violent, heretical behaviour.² This ultimately meant that “such groups or individuals were believed to pose a direct threat to respectable, law-abiding Christian society,” giving rise to Jews and witches being commonly viewed as, in the terms of this essay, the sinister “other.”³ It is also important to note that witches were often, albeit not exclusively, thought to be “disorderly women who failed to, or refused to, abide by the behavioural norms of their society”⁴ and who “rebelled against the traditional role of wife and mother,” becoming incongruous to “masculine stereotypes of the good woman as the obedient, silent, and submissive wife and mother.”⁵ Certainly, as emphasised through the use

¹ Penny Roberts, “Marginals and Deviants,” in *The European World 1500–1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History*, ed. Beat Kümin (Routledge, 2014), 69.

² Roberts, 69.

³ Roberts, 69.

⁴ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (Norton, 1987), 118.

⁵ James R. Keller, “Middleton’s *The Witch*: Witchcraft and the Domestic Female Hero,” *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 4, no. 4 (1991): 40.

of their cauldrons, the witches in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* are indicative of subversive women, portraying the potential threat that could be posed to established societal norms by either a malign housewife or a wild, independent, undomesticated woman. This essay accordingly proposes that the object of the cauldron was integral to such a representation of the destabilising and dangerous nature of marginalised figures on the early modern stage, and will aim to demonstrate that the cauldron signifies the threat of its accompanying characters through a threefold symbolism. Firstly, the cauldron has a long-established iconographic association with death, the underworld, and evil. This, in turn, highlights the villainous, un-Christian or even demonic disposition of those who utilise it on the early modern stage. Secondly, the cauldron is a familiar household object which becomes metaphorically inverted when in a theatrical context as it is deployed for murder and destruction, instead of its usual, real-world function in the preparation of a nourishing meal. Indeed, in these plays, one only sees the cauldron misused for nefarious and deadly purposes, while the characters who do so are exclusively already-marginalised figures: Jews and witches. In this way, the misuse of the cauldron on the early modern stage accentuates the alien nature of the “other” while visualising their potential threat; through their aberrant use of the cauldron, these characters are tangibly shown to not only depart from expected societal behaviours, but do so in a way which acts in direct opposition to society itself, undermining and endangering it. The immediacy of this threat is emphasised by the familiarity of the object of the cauldron; much as how the cauldron is deeply yet discretely embedded within the everyday life of the early modern household, and thereby society as a whole, so too is the potential and perpetual threat of the “other.” Finally, the cauldron is a distinctly feminine object which feeds into gendered aspects of marginalisation, either reinforcing patriarchal and misogynistic perceptions of femininity within the female characters who utilise it or seeming to degrade the masculine identity of their male counterparts. Through examination of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Middleton’s *The Witch*, and Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, this essay will argue that the cauldron is used to visually identify and emphasise the threat of the “other” on the early modern stage.

It is important to recognise the significance and the established symbolism of the cauldron in the early modern period. The cauldron, or cooking pot, was at the core of domestic life at this time; as one of the most important vessels for the preparation of food, the cauldron was the source of meals and nourishment for the family and was thereby seen as integral to their survival. However, the symbolism of the cauldron is multi-faceted and paradoxical: while the cauldron was integral to sustenance and therefore life itself in the

The Cauldron and the Threat of the “Other”

material world, its symbolism was often inverted to become associated with death, evil and the supernatural. This symbolic inversion reflects that the cauldron was a powerful yet liminal object, representing the unknowable proximity of good and evil, life and death, as it had the power to orchestrate either; a cauldron could just as easily boil a stew or a person, prepare a hearty soup or a lethal poison. Consequently, the cauldron had been incorporated into the iconography of Christian demonology by the early modern period and was frequently depicted as both integral to the conception of the hellmouth, and as a hellish tool of the Devil. For example, illustrations show the cauldron as an instrument by which the souls of the damned could be tortured (see figures 2 and 3), and in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a cauldron even acts as the crown of the Prince of Hell himself (see figure 1).

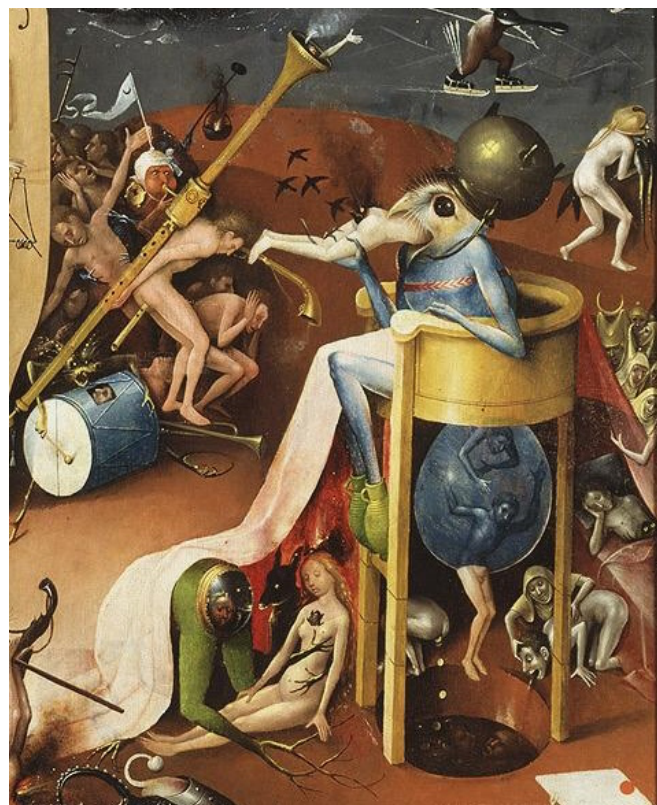


Figure 1. Detail from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Wikimedia Commons,

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Bosch_the_Prince_of_Hell_with_a_cauldron_on_his_head.JPG

Perhaps one of the most iconic hellish images which incorporates the cauldron is that within the Office of the Dead in *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*.⁶ Two large, flaming cauldrons sit on top of towers while demons rip apart the limp bodies that they force inside. A third fiery cauldron lies within the central hellmouth, transporting the dead to—presumably—even greater eternal punishment. It should briefly be noted that, while many of the images that appear for illustrative purposes in this essay originate from continental Europe, with several also having been produced long before the plays in discussion had been written, their influence would certainly not have been limited to the vicinity of their production. Certainly, there are also many examples of imagery associating the cauldron with Hell from the English tradition, for example Gary D. Schmidt refers to York Minster and the Holkham Bible, amongst others.⁷ Nor was the staying power of these images short-lived. Dirk H. Steinforth, Bryony Coombs and Charles C. Rozier provide a useful overview of the ways in which Britain has long been influenced by continental culture and ideas, due to lines of communication, travel, war, and trade.⁸ Furthermore, as Peter Marshall comments, early modern “Catholic and Protestant hells often drew on the same sources of inspiration. Some Protestant writing on the theme, for example, displays a remarkable indebtedness to medieval texts and motifs” and “There is little suggestion [...] that the sometimes lurid physicality of traditional Catholic descriptions of hell failed to appeal to Protestants’ sensibilities.”⁹ As such, the iconography of the cauldron discussed in this essay would certainly have endured in the public consciousness to the post-Reformation England of *The Jew of Malta*, *Macbeth*, and *The Witch*. These plays adapt this familiar iconography as those who utilise the cauldron are villainous and can be associated with such evil demons. In this way, the plays reinforce the prevalent rhetoric that marginal members of society—such as Jews and non-conformist women—are devilish figures and are worthy of damnation. Indeed, the evocation of this symbolism reinforces the “concept of witchcraft as a manifestation of diabolical power,”¹⁰

⁶ *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, c. 1440, Pierpoint Morgan Library, MS M.917/945, ff. 168v–169r. <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/hours-of-catherine-of-cleves/259>. Accessed 4 October 2023.

⁷ Gary D. Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century* (Associated University Presses), 154, 155.

⁸ Dirk H. Steinforth, Bryony Coombs and Charles C. Rozier, “Britain and its Neighbours: Contacts, Exchanges, Influences. An Introduction,” in *Britain and its Neighbours: Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Dirk H. Steinforth and Charles C. Rozier (Routledge, 2021), 1–14.

⁹ Peter Marshall, “The Reformation of Hell? Protestant and Catholic Infernalisms in England, c. 1560–1640,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, no. 2 (2010): 282, 283.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Macmillan Education, 1992), 5.

and the staging of the “other” together with the object of the cauldron serves to emphasise this fact to the audience.



Figure 2. Detail from *Anger (Ira)* as part of *The Seven Deadly Sins* series by Pieter van der Heyden, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1558, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Met Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/383073>. Reproduced in accordance with Open Access at the Met operating under Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

Cauldrons have long been associated with the afterlife. Multiple depositions of ancient cauldrons have been discovered in northern Europe and across Britain, suggesting their potential use in ritualistic offerings to spiritual beings and thus their role in “establishing relationships between people, gods, and ancestors.”¹¹ Indeed, the conceptualisation of the cauldron as a formidable object, but one that is closely linked to both life and death—or even more literally the world of the living and the world of the dead—frequently recurs within Celtic legend and literature. For example, as C. Scott Littleton summarises, there is “the tenth-century Welsh poem, traditionally, albeit incorrectly, attributed to the sixth-century poet Taliesin, entitled *Preiddeau Annwn* (or *Annwfn*), or *The Spoils of Annwn*. In it, Arthur,

¹¹ Jody Joy, “Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble’: Iron Age and Early Roman Cauldrons of Britain and Ireland,” *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 80 (2014): 327, 331, 334, 343.

not yet described as a king, leads a raid on Annwn, the Isle of the Dead, and in the process obtains a magical cauldron.”¹² While it is worth noting that this cauldron possesses supernatural qualities, distinguishing the cauldron as a great object with the potential to harbour special powers, it is particularly significant that it was originally located in Annwn, the Isle of the Dead, and brought back into the mortal realm by Arthur. This not only shows that the cauldron is an object which has strong associations with the underworld, but also that it has the ability to move between the world of the dead and the world of the living, transcending and blurring the traditional boundaries of life and death. In this way, the cauldron signifies a potentially threatening object due to its liminality, magical faculties, and association with the afterlife. Equally, one of the “foremost” Irish gods, the Dagda, possessed a “cauldron which could never be emptied and from which no one ever went away unsatisfied.”¹³ The Dagda, also known as “*Eochaid Ollathair*, father of all” and “*Ruad Rofhessa*, lord of perfect knowledge,” was “lord of life and death.”¹⁴ It is again evident that the cauldron is recognised as a magical object of pronounced capabilities, and is associated with extremely powerful, otherworldly beings, especially those who have provision over life itself. Moreover, the story of Branwen in the second “branch” of the *Mabinogi* includes *y Pair Dadeni*, translated as “the Cauldron of Rebirth.”¹⁵ As explained in the text, “the property of the cauldron is that if you throw into it one of your men who is killed today, then by tomorrow he will be as good as ever except that he will not be able to speak,” and this cauldron originated from “the Lake of the Cauldron” where “a large man with yellow-red hair [was seen] coming out of the lake with a cauldron on his back. He was a huge, monstrous man, too, with an evil, ugly look about him.”¹⁶ Not only does the Cauldron of Rebirth possess a mystical control over life, death and the soul, specifically acting as the site at which life and death are brought together and thus where the boundaries of life and death become blurred and altered, it is implied to be a dangerous object with strange, otherworldly and—most notably—evil origins. As the person who originally possessed the Cauldron of Rebirth was “a huge monstrous man [...] with an evil, ugly look about him,” one may compare this imagery to Christian conceptions of the Devil.¹⁷ Similarly, the fact that this man bearing the cauldron

¹² C. Scott Littleton, “The Holy Grail, the Cauldron of Annwn, and the Nartymonga: A Further Note on the Sarmatian Connection,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 92, no. 365 (1979): 330.

¹³ John X. W. P. Corcoran, “Celtic Mythology,” in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, trans. Richard Adlington and Delano Ames, ed. Felix Guirand (Hamlyn, 1975), 226, 227.

¹⁴ Corcoran, 226–27.

¹⁵ *The Mabinogion*, trans. Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2008), 32.

¹⁶ *The Mabinogion*, 25, 26.

¹⁷ *The Mabinogion*, 26.

came “out of the lake” implies that he is not of the mortal world and came into it from a lower realm, which can be compared to the Devil emerging out of Hell.¹⁸ Indeed, this comparison is further supported as the Celtic “otherworld” was thought to lie beneath the sea.¹⁹ Evidently, the object of the cauldron is one which, across cultures, has powerful yet diabolical connotations, brings together life and death, and is associated with both the world of the living and the underworld. It therefore follows that such a connection of the cauldron to the spiritual world as is in pagan, Celtic folklore was incorporated and refashioned into Christian theology by the early modern period, as the cauldron also became integral to the iconography of the hellmouth. The hellmouth is a vivid visualisation of the opening or entrance to Hell and is usually depicted as the gaping mouth of a monster or beast. Schmidt claims that “The oldest elaboration of the hell mouth image is the addition of the boiling cauldron, the pot in which souls are tormented [...] Pictured in combination with the mouth of hell, [the cauldron] represented all the torments to which that entrance led.”²⁰ Indeed, Schmidt goes on to suggest that the association of the cauldron with the hellmouth may even derive from scripture, echoing descriptions of the monster Leviathan.²¹ Not only does the void-like structure of the cauldron echo the hellmouth itself (see figure 3), but medieval and early modern illustrations commonly portrayed condemned souls being fed to the hellmouth via a cauldron (see figures 4 and 5).

Developing from pictorial and descriptive to more palpable presentations, gates and portals to hell—sometimes even the hellmouth itself—appear as theatrical elements within medieval drama and continue to thrive, as well as develop in sophistication and complexity, until well into the sixteenth century.²² Although it is clear that “by the end of the sixteenth century [the hellmouth as a direct stage convention] had run its course,” it appears that the symbolic conceptualisation of the hellmouth persisted on the early modern stage, perhaps evolving to show more subtlety, in the object of the cauldron.²³ Certainly, in *The Jew of Malta*, *Macbeth*, and *The Witch*, the cauldron can be interpreted as the physical embodiment of the link between the material world and the satanic underworld. For example, Barabas sees his “treachery repaid” (*The Jew of Malta*, 5.5.73) by being killed inside a cauldron where he

¹⁸ *The Mabinogion*, 26.

¹⁹ Corcoran, “Celtic Mythology,” 228.

²⁰ Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 153.

²¹ Schmidt, 153–54.

²² Schmidt, 165–75.

²³ Schmidt, 178.

feels “the extremity of heat / To pinch me with intolerable pangs” (5.5.86–87).²⁴ This description connects the material cauldron as a heated cooking vessel with the excruciating, fiery torture of hell, such as is depicted in figures 2 to 5. It is therefore implied that the cauldron is the object in which Barabas, a murderous and un-Christian figure, is transported into the hellmouth for his divine punishment and eternal suffering. Furthermore, Barabas states “Here have I made a dainty gallery, / The floor whereof, this cable being cut, / Doth fall asunder; so that it doth sink / Into a deep pit past recovery” (5.5.32–36). This lower-level placement of the cauldron would emphasise the connotations of the cauldron as the transportation into the hellmouth below the ground and the phraseology of “a deep pit past recovery” is suggestive of Hell itself. Similarly, the poisoned cauldron or “pot of rice” (3.4.49) with which Barabas murders the nuns in the nunnery is given to them via “a dark entry where they take it in, / Where they must neither see the messenger, / Nor make enquiry who hath sent it them” (3.4.79–81). This imagery of the death-bringing cauldron coming to the nuns via a “dark entry” is indicative of depictions of the hellmouth, through which a cauldron is shown to transport the souls of the dead into Hell (see figures 3, 4 and 5). The cauldron thus becomes a satanic object which links the material world and the underworld as it is both literally and figuratively the object which causes the nuns to move from life to death; the cauldron not only contains the meal which fatally poisons them, but also symbolises the vessel in which their souls are taken into the underworld. The cauldrons in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* also act as the hellmouth in that they appear to connect Hell to the material world. The “apparitions” in *Macbeth* 4.1 seem to materialise as a direct result of the witches’ interaction with the cauldron, suggesting that these spectres—or even devils—have emerged from the hellmouth. The cauldron also appears to descend below the stage—“Why sinks that cauldron, and what noise is this?” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.105)—again using a spatially low positioning of the cauldron to invoke a clear point of connection between the cauldron and the hellish underworld.²⁵ Similarly, “A Charm Song, About a Vessel” in *The Witch* dictates that “All ill come running in, all good keep out” (*The Witch*, 5.2.66) of the cauldron, implying that the cauldron is either the hellmouth itself or is the vessel of transportation into the hellmouth.²⁶ Thus, the characters who are associated with the cauldron are implied to also

²⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, ed. James R. Siemon (Bloomsbury, 2020). All quotations from the text refer to this edition.

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (Bloomsbury, 2020). All quotations from the text refer to this edition.

²⁶ Thomas Middleton, *The Witch*, ed. Elizabeth Schafer (A & C Black, 1994). All quotations from the text refer to this edition.

be associated with Hell, distinguishing them as not only outside the norms of society but particularly as villainous figures of damnation who provide a distinct threat to the established Christian community.



Figure 3. Detail from *De la Joie de Paradis*, c.1290-1300, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Français MS 1838, fol. 76r, Gallica, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84516017/f157.item>. Reproduced in accordance with the gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France conditions of use.



Figure 4. Detail from *Le Chevalier Errant* by Thomas de Saluces, 1403-1404, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Français MS 12559, fol. 192r, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10509668g/f385.item>. Reproduced in accordance with the gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France conditions of use



Figure 5. Detail from *De Civitate Dei* by Saint Augustine of Hippo, c.1350, translated into French by Raoul de Presles, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Français MS 22912, fol. 2v, Gallica, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8447874d/f10.image#>. Reproduced in accordance with the gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France conditions of use.

The common household object of the cauldron also became inextricably associated with women and femininity as the early modern housewife was “responsible [...] for the survival of herself and her household,”²⁷ and “both men and women regarded [...] the preparation of meals [...] as exclusively the woman’s duty.”²⁸ However, the use of the cauldron in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* suggests that the witches in these plays are representative of what Diane Purkiss calls the “antihousewife,” a female figure who misuses and overturns the stereotypical domains of the household, “who causes pollution where there should be order, who disrupts food supplies which must be ordered and preserved, who wastes what is necessary.”²⁹ In these plays, the witches invert the usual and virtuous use of the cauldron by the early modern housewife, representing the threat of women who did not conform to the role attributed to them by society. Such fears partially stemmed from the view that there was a certain fragility to “the submissive role of women in a restrictive male-dominated social structure”³⁰ as, by maintaining the domestic household, women themselves were “responsible for preserving the boundaries of social and cultural life.”³¹ Indeed, the early modern woman became a discreetly powerful figure as she was at the epicentre of domestic intelligence; women were not only “nominated in print to oversee a complex set of knowledges called ‘housewifery’,” but were obligated to utilise this knowledge effectively and appropriately to ensure the wellbeing of their households.³² The underlying potential threat of the early modern housewife thereby lies in the fact that she possessed and refined specific skills and knowledge which men often did not, but which were crucial to their survival and consequently to the overall stability of society. Moreover, as domestic labour was fundamental to the socioeconomic system in early modern England, the housewife was integral to the prosperity of both the nation and the family;³³ the housewife is thus rendered a powerful figure as both the microcosms and macrocosms of society are reliant upon her functioning productively and constructively. Even on an operational level it can be

²⁷ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (Routledge, 1997), 97.

²⁸ Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England 1540–1640* (University of Illinois Press, 1985), 63.

²⁹ Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 97.

³⁰ James R. Keller, “Middleton’s *The Witch*: Witchcraft and the Domestic Female Hero,” *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 4, no. 4 (1991): 38.

³¹ Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 97.

³² Wendy Wall, *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 7.

³³ Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22.

considered that, if the structure of the household—with domestic care under the domain of the housewife—came undone, so too would society at large.

It is then perhaps no surprise that one can see contemporary commentaries, such as the writing of James I, “connect witchcraft to an inversion of the prevailing power structures.”³⁴ James R. Keller argues that “The witch [in the early modern period] represents the empowering of the traditionally helpless female; thus she became a threat to patriarchal authority and was, subsequently, demonised.”³⁵ However, this essay considers that the witches and their cauldrons in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* are designed to be a recognition and a stark reminder of the pre-existing, subliminal, power of the traditional female figure—particularly that of the housewife. As previously noted, the male gaze idealised the traditional woman as submissive, while the housewife paradoxically wielded a strong domestic power of her own. The threat to patriarchal authority that is demonstrated by the witches is founded in this liminality; the witches illustrate the perpetual, potential misuse of the housewife’s established power, using her skills maliciously and independently to—or even directly against—the world of men. The witches can therefore be seen as somewhat didactic figures, demonising transgressive women and wayward housewives to ultimately caution against such a deviation from traditional societal roles and reversal of power structures. This rhetoric is then visualised on stage by the object of the cauldron, and the witches’ abuse of it. The cauldrons in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* undo all notions of nurture and survival, the obedient and productive housewife, replacing them with subversion and destruction. The object of the cauldron thereby allows for a visual exploration of the fragility of the existing patriarchal social order, and its potential to be undone, due to its dependency on the cooperation and functionality of the women over which it attempts to assert dominance. The cauldron is effective in conveying this message as it is such a familiar object, one which clearly signifies the connection between femininity, the home and hearth, and social stability. The cauldron also emphasises the immediacy of the threat posed by subversive women towards society as it unnervingly suggests that danger can lie within the home itself; there is little way to escape this potential peril. In this way, the object of the cauldron on the early modern stage maintains what Frances N. Teague terms a “*dislocated function*,” as it “has a function, but it is not the same function as it has offstage (though it may imitate that ordinary function)” and “Its ordinary function [...] is simply displaced onstage by the object’s function in the

³⁴ Stephanie Irene Spoto, “Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 45 (2010): 54.

³⁵ James R. Keller, “Middleton’s *The Witch*,” 38.

performance.”³⁶ While the cauldron could theoretically still prepare a stew on stage—nourishing or otherwise—it is not genuinely used to do so. Instead, “everything on a stage conveys meaning to an audience” and the primary function of the cauldron on stage is as a symbol.³⁷ The use of the cauldron on the early modern stage remains reminiscent of its ordinary function of a household object, but takes on a far more complicated and powerful meaning when placed in a theatrical context.

One of the ways in which the cauldron is a decidedly feminine symbol and—as per its presentation on the early modern stage—is a signifier of the threat of atypical women, is through its iconographic association to the uterus. It is notable that “medieval medical discourse [...] describes the uterus in terms of a cooking vessel” and “In at least twenty manuscript versions of Muscio’s widely circulated redaction of the text [of the ancient medical treatise, *Gynaecia*], the uterus is depicted as an upside-down, cauldron-like vessel completely dissociated from the body.”³⁸ As a further example, the conceptualisation of the uterus as a cauldron-like object is effectively illustrated by Bodleian Library MS. Laud Misc.724, a medical treatise from c.1400 (see figure 6).

However, the cauldrons in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* are linked to death rather than life, amplifying the themes of inappropriate, destructive, or incomplete motherhood that are so often associated with witches.³⁹ Echoing the ideas of infanticide suggested by Lady Macbeth in 1.7—“I have given suck, and know / How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me. / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out” (*Macbeth*, 1.7.54–58)—the witches in *Macbeth* actually reverse this notion by placing ingredients related to already-dead progenies into their womb-like cauldron: “Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab” (4.1.29–30) and “sow’s blood that hath eaten / Her nine farrow” (4.1.63–64). Not only does this abnormal behaviour highlight their antithesis to traditional femininity, an idea which is compounded by the observation that “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3.44–46), but it depicts a particularly violent image of the witches as being actively anti-motherhood and thus as a subversive force. This is emphasised by the nature of these ingredients as the “birth-strangled babe” and “nine farrow” were essentially, whether

³⁶ Frances N. Teague, *Shakespeare’s Speaking Properties* (Associated University Presses, 1991), 17–18.

³⁷ Teague, 22.

³⁸ Amy C. Mulligan, “‘The Satire of the Poet is a Pregnancy’: Pregnant Poets, Body Metaphors, and Cultural Production in Medieval Ireland,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108, no. 4 (2009): 483, 497.

³⁹ Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 7, 141, 137.



Figure 6. Illustration from *Chirurgia* by Albucasis, c.1400, England, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Laud Misc. 724, fol. 097r, Digital Bodleian, <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/a6e02525-9d5b-4637-a01a-c5862001e895/surfaces/b34d430b-7c4c-4202-89b9-da93022eea57/>. Reproduced in accordance with the Digital Bodleian terms of use under Creative Commons licence (CC BY-NC 4.0).

intentionally or otherwise, killed through the birthing process or by their own mothers. In this way, the witches' cauldron represents a threatening reversal of the natural order; it highlights their supposed depravity and abnormality as they revel in their barrenness, taking advantage of infanticide and the death of children while they themselves do not appear to bear any. Disturbingly, the witches' womb-like cauldron absorbs dead babies, instead of generating live ones. Indeed, Deborah Willis notes that the cauldron in *Macbeth*

becomes the locus of birth as well as death and dismemberment, suggestive of vagina and womb as well as cooking vessel. The apparitions to which their cauldron gives

uncanny birth are products of a "deed without a name"; two of the three take the form of children (the bloody child who encodes Macduff's Caesarean birth, the child crowned with a tree in his hand who encodes Malcolm's taking of Dunsinane Hill). They leave in their wake the "issue" of Banquo. The cauldron becomes a womb in which dead body parts are incorporated and recombined to create new, rival "issue."⁴⁰

Yet the creations emitted from their cauldron as a reproductive organ are unnatural, leading to destruction rather than production; they merely conceive a "gruel" (4.1.32), a "charm", (4.1.18), and some spectres. Similarly, although Hecate in *The Witch* is clearly not barren—she has a son, Firestone—she too utilises a deceased child as an ingredient in her cauldron, "There, take this unbaptised brat. / Boil it well, preserve the fat" (*The Witch*, 1.2.18–19), and expresses an interest in hurting infant creatures, "Seven of their young pigs I have bewitch'd already / Of their last litter, / Nine ducklings, thirteen goslings, and a hog / Fell lame last Sunday" (1.2.56–58) as well as being willing "To strike a barrenness in man or woman?" (1.2.151). Again, one can see the shocking disorder generated by the witches, as their cauldrons become symbolic of a threatening lack of adherence to the traditional female role. Hecate, like the witches in *Macbeth*, appears to transgress the boundaries between life and death within her cauldron. As the early modern period maintained "a culture where women's value was crucially determined by their ability to bear children and nurture others," the cauldron on the early modern stage visually indicates the witches' failures in this regard.⁴¹ The lack of femininity displayed by the malfunctioning and un-nurturing uterine cauldron demarcates the witches as abnormal women, categorising them as an alien "other." The cauldron also emphasises the potential threat of women as it is indicative of food, and food is often associated with both women and temptation. The *Biblia Pauperum* demonstrates this and cautions against such temptation, as it presents three Biblical scenes, from both the Old and New Testaments, in which food is used to entice and lead people astray (see figure 7).

The right section illustrates Genesis 3, showing the "fall of man" as Adam and Eve are corrupted by their temptation to eat of the forbidden fruit. As Eve, the first woman and wife, "gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat" (Gen. 3:6), and was therefore thought to be primarily responsible for their downfall and the bringing of sin into the world,

⁴⁰ Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1995), 232.

⁴¹ Willis, 39.



Figure 7. Page from a *Biblia Pauperum*, c.1460-1470, The British Museum, London, The British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1845-0809-11. Reproduced in accordance with the British Museum terms of use under the Creative Commons licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

the connection between women, food, and devilish temptation is evident.⁴² This deep-rooted, misogynistic fear is thus embodied on the early modern stage by the object of the cauldron. The left section of the *Biblia Pauperum* (see figure 7) depicts Genesis 25.29–34, the passage in which Jacob uses a soup to tempt Esau into yielding his birthright, and even includes an image of a cauldron. While it must be acknowledged that there were complex theological issues around Protestant understandings of Judaism and the Old Testament, it can also be

⁴² *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, ed. Robert Carroll (Oxford University Press, 2008).

noted that Jacob was especially prominent and revered within the Jewish tradition as one of the patriarchs and forefathers of Israel. Yet, the *Biblia Pauperum* displays him as a parallel to Eve and thus suggests he played an active role in the downfall of Esau; the figures are placed in a mirrored positioning within the artwork (see figure 7) and share similar actions within their Biblical stories. As this text therefore suggests that Jacob and Eve are identifiable with food-based temptation, so too are the marginalised areas of society that they can be associated with: Jews and disobedient women. The central section of the illustration even connects these two Old Testament stories by highlighting that food-based temptation is in itself the work of the devil (see figure 7). As one of the primary tools of food preparation, the cauldron can thereby be seen to carry such connotations on the early modern stage, signifying a demonic device that is used for nefarious purposes and for leading well-meaning Christians astray. Those who deploy the cauldron for food-based temptation or destruction are evidently suggested to be sinful characters who should be ostracised.

The cauldron is used to signify that the witches in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* are representative of an inversion of the stereotypical housewife, and thus promote the misogynistic message that a non-conforming woman would pose a threat to society. The primary indication of this is their rhyming and rhythmic chanting of the “recipes” which they concoct within their cauldrons. As Purkiss indicates, in *Macbeth*

The list of noxious substances read out by the witches, which constitutes the incantation, is a recipe, albeit a parodic one; this becomes more tenable when we recall that books of housewifery were often composed in rhyme in the early modern period, as an *aide-mémoire*, and when we remember that some counter-magical charms were preserved in recipe books.⁴³

The ingredients that the witches use in their recipes echo common, contemporary ingredients, but are adulterated to become noxious, sinister and outside the realms of what would normally be considered to be edible “food.” As Joan Fitzpatrick comments, the witches in *Macbeth* “begin with the parts of fairly familiar animals which are made strange because they were not usually used in cooking,” such as “Fillet of a fenny snake / [...] Eye of newt and toe of frog, / Wool of bat and tongue of dog, / Adder’s fork and blind-worm’s sting, Lizard’s leg and howlet’s wing” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.12–17).⁴⁴ Similarly, the witches in *The Witch* throw in “blood of a bat,” “libbard’s bane,” and “The juice of a toad, the oil of adder” (*The Witch*, 5.2.67–71). An early modern cookery book contains a recipe for “An Entrayle,” yet the

⁴³ Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 212.

⁴⁴ Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare* (Ashgate, 2007), 48.

“entrails” that the witches use in *Macbeth* are “poisoned” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.5).⁴⁵ Another early modern cookery book instructs that the cook must “do away” with or “kutte away” the gall of the fish that they use, but the *Macbeth* witches specifically include “Gall of goat” (4.1.27).⁴⁶ Hecate in *The Witch* also directly juxtaposes “marmaritin” with “some bear-breech” (5.2.52) when asking for ingredients; the former is “a herb used in classical antiquity supposedly to conjure up supernatural beings” (“marmaritin, n.”), while the latter is a colloquial term for *Acanthus*, a plant which was known for its medicinal and healing properties.⁴⁷ The witches in these plays superficially behave like traditional, wholesome cooks as they “Stir, stir about” (*The Witch*, 5.2.59) and urge their “Fire burn,” “cauldron bubble,” and “cauldron boil and bake” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.21, 21, 13). Middleton’s Hecate asks the Duchess to “Stay but perfection’s time, / And that’s not five hours hence” (*The Witch*, 5.2.12–13), a period of time which is not unusual for the making of a stew as is seen in early modern cookery books (Grey, 75), and she carefully measures out her ingredients: “Put in a grain” (5.2.70).⁴⁸ However, the witches’ culinary deficiency is clear to the audience; their actions and ingredients do not pass as true cookery and they cannot hide that their supposed “gruel” is really “a charm of pow’rful trouble” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.32, 18). Indeed, the witches in these plays are decidedly bad cooks and are thus indicative of bad housewives, appearing to even take delight in their false culinary performance. In this way, the cauldron comes to represent the liminality of the housewife, and the potential threat that a rogue one could pose towards society, as it is the site of tainted and inverted cookery.

It is significant that the witches’ words and actions around the cauldrons in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* so closely imitate those of a good, stereotypical housewife, with only slight variations that serve to indicate their wickedness. Wendy Wall argues that the witches’ ingredients are designed to exaggerate the unpleasant and disturbing qualities that were commonplace in early modern cooking and medicine as “*Macbeth* simply demonises an already alarming domestic practice by freighting its materials [in the witches’ brew] with an added characteristic.”⁴⁹ Wall also expands upon these unsavoury and violent practices that

⁴⁵ See *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery-Books: Harleian MS. 279 (ab. 1430), & Harl. MS. 4016 (ab. 1450), with Extracts from Ashmole MS. 1429, Laud MS. 553, & Douce MS. 55*, ed. Thomas Austin (London: Trübner, 1888), 38.

⁴⁶ *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery-Books*, 95, 101.

⁴⁷ See “marmaritin, n.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2022), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114250>, accessed 25/04/2022; and John Gerard, *The Herball Or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London, 1633), STC 11751, 1146–48.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Grey, *A True Gentlewomans Delight Wherein is Contained all Manner of Cookery* (London: 1653), Wing K317, 75.

⁴⁹ Wall, *Staging Domesticity*, 199.

underpinned the maintenance of the early modern household, especially in the preparation of food, as she explains that "Part and parcel of physic was the transformation of the kitchen into a slaughterhouse strewn liberally with blood and carcasses" and "Renaissance cookbooks depict domestic work as both aggressive and visceral."⁵⁰ As the housewife was primarily responsible for such work—and must have therefore regularly undertaken gruesome and brutal acts such as killing, plucking, skinning, dressing, and butchering animals within the culinary process—she is evidently a figure that regularly practises, and therefore holds the potential for, violence. In light of this, the witches' cauldron-scene serves to highlight the power of the housewife—and therefore her potential threat—as it foregrounds such darker aspects of womanhood which the patriarchy would otherwise prefer to overlook. If she chose to do so, the early modern housewife would clearly be capable of redirecting her aggression and brutality from the animals in the preparation of food to people, namely her household or even society at large. One can see indications of this threat of escalated violence through the human ingredients in the cauldron, such as "Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips" (*Macbeth*, 4.1.29). Moreover, these body parts are specifically from foreign peoples, those outside the society of early modern England. The English perceived the Turks at this time as "a threat, a deviation, and an emblem of immorality," exhibiting characteristics such as "cruelty, lust, aggression, heresy, and mercilessness."⁵¹ As it appears that the witches have successfully dismembered these supposedly wild and violent figures, the witches are suggested to hold even more strength, aggression and threat than the Turk and the Tartar. The "otherness" of the witches as deviant, vicious, and even murderous, housewives is at least accentuated by their association to the perceived attributes of these racial "others" which they add into their mixture. The object of the cauldron on the early modern stage serves to facilitate this rhetoric through its recognisable symbolism of housewifery and its malevolent use by these non-conforming, violent women who operate outside the structure of established society.

Specifically, the cauldron symbolises the perceived threat of the inverted housewife as it is the vessel by which poison can be prepared and administered and "poison stands for danger from within the house or community."⁵² Indeed, Lyndal Roper suggests that "Witches were women who did not feed others except to harm them," and Edward Bever recognises that poison was thought to be one of the most common methods of attack by the early modern

⁵⁰ Wall, *Staging Domesticity*, 3, 193.

⁵¹ Filiz Barin, "Othello: Turks as 'the Other' in the Early Modern Period," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 43, no. 2 (2010): 39.

⁵² Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 150.

witch.⁵³ This essay considers that the “charm” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.18) that the witches create within the cauldron might actually be a toxic substance by way of which they continue to poison Macbeth, particularly contaminating his mind and inducing visions and paranoia. Such an interpretation is echoed by Willis, who comments that “The witches’ brew also recalls Lady Macbeth’s poisonous mother’s milk; it too is a poisoned meal.”⁵⁴ Even before the cauldron scene has taken place, Hecate explains to the witches that

Upon the corner of the moon
There hangs a vaporous drop profound,
I’ll catch it ere it come to ground;
And that, distilled by magic sleights,
Shall raise such artificial sprites
As by the strength of their illusion,
Shall draw him on to his confusion (3.5.23–29).

As Clark and Mason note, this “vaporous drop” is “assumed to mean the *virus lunare*” in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, where “this foam [from the moon] is used by the witch Erictho for a spell” (3.5.24n). Interestingly, this reference to Lucan vi.669—“*et virus large lunare ministrat*”—is sometimes translated as “the poison that the moon supplies” and even appears in Thomas May’s 1627 translation as “the Moones poisonous gelly store.”⁵⁵ Such an inference can reinforce the idea that the intention of Hecate and the witches is to administer poison to Macbeth, as is later prepared and brought to fruition by their use of the cauldron, and that it is a poisonous substance emitted from the cauldron which causes Macbeth to see the apparitions that appear in 4.1. Although it must be acknowledged that there is uncertainty and debate as to the authorship of the speeches and songs relating to Hecate in *Macbeth*—and indeed of 3.5 in general—with many thinking that they were later editorial additions made by Middleton, there is undoubtedly still merit in recognising this moment.⁵⁶ As noted by Clark and Mason, 3.5 “does have a dramatic function in preparing for the longer witchcraft scene 4.1, and it makes the point that Macbeth has less control over events than he believes”;⁵⁷ it

⁵³ Lyndal Roper, “Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany,” in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 221; Edward Bever, “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford University Press, 2014), 54.

⁵⁴ Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 231.

⁵⁵ Lucan, *The Civil War (Pharsalia)*, trans. J. D. Duff (Harvard University Press, 1928), 353; Lucan, *Lucan’s Pharsalia: or The Civill Warres of Rome*, trans. Thomas May (London: 1627), STC 16887, sig. L4v.

⁵⁶ On the authorship of the scene see Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason, “Appendix I: The Text of *Macbeth*,” in Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Clark and Mason, 325–36.

⁵⁷ Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason, “Appendix I,” 331.

can thereby be valued in stimulating discussion around the subsequent use of the cauldron, and may provide insight into early modern interpretations and reception of 4.1.

The theory that the cauldron is used by the witches to prepare a poison and use it against Macbeth is supported by Francesco Maria Guazzo’s *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608) where he expresses the contemporary belief that

The poisons used by witches are compounded and mixed from many sorts of poisons, such as leaves and stalks and roots of plants; from animals, fishes, venomous reptiles, stones and metals; sometimes these are reduced to powder and sometimes to an ointment. It must also be known that witches administer such poisons either by causing them to be swallowed, or by external application. [...] They also have a third method of administering poison, namely, by inhalation: and this is the worst of all kinds of poison⁵⁸

As has previously been discussed, the uncomfortable and unusual usage of animal ingredients in the witches’ cauldron certainly accords with Guazzo’s description of the ingredients for a typical witch’s poison, even insofar as explicitly including “poisoned entrails” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.5) and “Sweltered venom” (8) from a toad. The contents of the cauldron are also described as a “hell-broth” which does “boil and bubble” (4.1.19), implying a liquid state that would thus be akin to an “ointment.”⁵⁹ The 2013 Globe production of *Macbeth* even saw the witches enact the force-feeding of a bowl of their potion to Macbeth, suggesting the ingestion of a mind-altering poison and again aligning with Guazzo’s notes that witches “administer such poisons [...] by causing them to be swallowed.”⁶⁰ Alternatively, Macbeth being in the presence of the bubbling cauldron itself before witnessing the apparitions and procession of kings may be enough to suggest poisoning “by inhalation” (Guazzo, 90), especially as “this is the worst of all kinds of poison.”⁶¹ The plant and animal-based ingredients of Middleton’s cauldron also echo Guazzo’s suggestions and Hecate’s comment on “the stench” (*The Witch*, 5.2.73) of the concoction again implies poisoning “by inhalation.”⁶² It is also significant to note that poison can be interpreted as a distinctly feminine method of attack; Bever comments that, in the early modern period, “men tended to aggress with fists or knives, while the

⁵⁸ Guazzo, Francesco Maria, *Compendium Maleficarum*, trans. E. A. Ashwin, ed. Montague Summers (John Rodker, 1929), 90.

⁵⁹ Guazzo, 90.

⁶⁰ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, dir. Eve Best, Shakespeare’s Globe, 2013 (Opus Arte DVD, 2014), 1:25:57–1:26:04; Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, 90.

⁶¹ Guazzo, 90.

⁶² Guazzo, 90.

women tended to aggress with poisons, rituals, or raw emotional onslaughts.”⁶³ Adding to this line of thought, Purkiss comments that “Poison also represents women’s power to intervene decisively in public affairs by using their power over food preparation. The effect of the witches’ cookery is to give them power over Macbeth, to reverse gender norms, to pluck a kingdom down.”⁶⁴ Evidently, poison was seen to be a gendered—but also somewhat political—method of attack, particularly when considered in conjunction with the housewife and her proximity to the hearth. The symbolic threat of poison—and therefore by extension the cauldron—is consequently indicative of the patriarchy’s fear of non-conforming women who might seek to overthrow them and undo the standing socio-political order.

Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* adapts the association of the cauldron with femininity and the housewife in order to emasculate Barabas and thus emphasise his alien nature as a marginalised Jew. Barabas twice uses cauldrons for the purpose of murder, one of which is successful; he uses a poisoned “pot of pottage” (*The Jew of Malta*, 3.4.88)—in other words a pot or small cauldron of gruel—to kill all the nuns in the nunnery, and he constructs a hidden cauldron into which he had planned to lure Calymath: “*the cable cut, a cauldron discovered*” (5.5.62 s.d.). Yet, as previously established, the cauldron is a feminine—even uterine—object which is closely associated with the housewife. Therefore, the use of the cauldron by Barabas feeds into contemporary anti-Semitic rhetoric which sought to “feminise” the male Jew and portray him as both lesser and unnatural for being like a woman, and thereby designate him even more so as the “other.” For example, “when it came to the Jews, the boundaries between male and female were often seen as quite slippery” as “writers about Jewish festivals were quick to point out that Jews practiced cross-dressing as part of their activities on the feast of Purim” and there were stories “that Jewish men were sometimes capable of breast-feeding.”⁶⁵ Most strikingly, there was an early modern myth that Jewish men menstruated which was supposed to “explain the Jews’ desperate need for Christian blood to replace that which was lost through male menstrual discharge.”⁶⁶ This myth appears to directly be represented by Barabas’s use of cauldrons as he utilises this feminine, uterine object to attempt to murder Christians and thereby, metaphorically, gain their blood. Barabas’ connection to, and attempted mastery over, the cauldron-cum-uterus directly implies the aforementioned early modern beliefs that male Jews might exhibit the physicality of females; this anti-Semitic

⁶³ Edward Bever, “Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community,” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 970.

⁶⁴ Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 212.

⁶⁵ James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (Columbia University Press, 1996), 38.

⁶⁶ Shapiro, 37.

iconography is designed to suggest that Barabas is abnormal as a man, both physically and morally, and is thereby identifiable as a wicked and twisted creature, the archetypal villain. As Stephen Greenblatt remarks, "For Marlowe, as for Shakespeare, the figure of the Jew is useful as a powerful rhetorical device, an embodiment for a Christian audience of all they loathe and fear, all that appears stubbornly, irreducibly different," and it is thus that we see Barabas so marked out as the threatening and atypical "other."⁶⁷ Moreover, Barabas's tending to the poisoned cooking-pot imitates the actions of a devoted housewife, as he repeatedly interjects: "Stay, first let me stir it" (3.4.93) and "Stay, let me spice it first" (3.4.85). Unlike the witches in *Macbeth* and *The Witch*, Barabas appears to be a good cook and thereby has the feminine qualities that would make a good housewife; he takes great care in the preparation of the food and makes it so well-tasting that Ithamore is "loath such a pot of pottage should be spoiled" (3.4.88). The cauldron on the early modern stage thus enables the inversion of stereotypical societal roles and gender norms through Barabas' success and the witches' failure to use it; the cauldron de-feminises the witches in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* by highlighting their lack of domesticity but de-masculinises Barabas, in accordance with anti-Semitic rhetoric, by emphasising his. In this way, the cauldron is used to signify the marginal and destabilising elements of society.

In particular, the use of a poisoned cauldron by Barabas both further emasculates him, since poison was thought to be an especially feminine weapon as has previously been mentioned, and also visualises common contemporary anti-Semitic rhetoric and thus the threat of the "other." Indeed, as Shapiro notes, "stories describing how Jews secretly threatened Christian society from within continued to flourish. The favourite method of the Jews was usually poison, and by the sixteenth century the idea that Jews tried to poison Christians was proverbial."⁶⁸ Thus, the Jew became stereotyped as a "poisoner," and this is visually reinforced to the audience by the physical object of the cauldron. Barabas's interactions with cauldrons would have reminded the audience of recent, highly-publicised scandals. For example, the events of *The Jew of Malta* strikingly resemble the case of Richard Roose, the cook of the Bishop of Rochester, who allegedly "poisoned a cauldron of broth with a mysterious white powder, which was served to the bishop and his household" in 1531.⁶⁹ Barabas' poisoning of the nunnery with a "precious powder" (3.4.68) is a distinct

⁶⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 203.

⁶⁸ Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 96.

⁶⁹ John Matusiak, *Henry VIII: The Life and Rule of England's Nero* (The History Press, 2015), 189.

replication of this affair. The similarities continue as Roose was ultimately boiled alive in a cauldron as punishment, much like the way in which Barabas meets his demise in 5.5. Indeed, "Such was the publicity of the case that in its aftermath Henry VIII went in person to the House of Lords and in a speech lasting one and a half hours declaimed upon the barbarity of poisoning."⁷⁰ Early modern audiences would accordingly have had a heightened awareness of the severity of the crime of poisoning, deeming it to only be orchestrated by the most villainous. As such, this extreme villainy is intrinsically reflected in the character of Barabas as a mass-poisoner, which in itself is visualised by the emblem of the cauldron as the means by which he can achieve this terrible crime. In the end, the cauldron therefore comes to represent a just and familiar retribution against him. It is also interesting to take note of the 1594 trial and execution of Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth I's royal physician, and the effect that this would have had on a contemporary audience. Although the first performance of *The Jew of Malta* predates the Lopez case by two years, when this scandal occurred it would have been at the forefront of the minds of the Elizabethan theatre-going public; Shapiro describes the trial and execution of Roderigo Lopez as "the most notorious case of Jewish criminality in Elizabethan England."⁷¹ Lopez had long been identified by contemporaries as Jewish, but the emergent accusation that he was plotting to poison the Queen caused national shock and uproar.⁷² This was to the extent that woodcuts depicting Lopez continued to appear in books detailing treasons and plots for decades after his execution, evidencing how the attempted poisoning of the Queen of England by a Jew became allegorical in the contemporary mind and perpetuated the iconography of the Jew as a treacherous and destabilising poisoner.⁷³ Eerily, the actions of Barabas in the *The Jew of Malta* closely align with these subsequent historical events. It can therefore be considered that *The Jew of Malta*—particularly by its use of the cauldron to mark the threat of the "other" through the cauldron's facilitation of poisoning—was, like the Lopez woodcuts, one of the art forms that exacerbated the inflamed anti-Semitism of the national conscience. Thus, as a consequence of both historical events and works such as *The Jew of Malta*, Jews were not only strongly associated with poison but were also seen as a threat to the stability of the nation as they were alleged to use poison against the ruling elite and devout Christians, attempting to overthrow established society in the process. The object of the cauldron is

⁷⁰ Matusiak, 189.

⁷¹ Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 73.

⁷² Shapiro, 73.

⁷³ Shapiro, 73.

therefore one of the early modern symbols of the threat that the “other” poses to society through its association to poison, especially in its use for this purpose by Barabas—a Jew.

Evidently, the cauldron is used in *The Jew of Malta*, *Macbeth* and *The Witch* to symbolise societal threat and segregation. This iconography is particularly conveyed in the plays by the cauldron’s relationship to early modern eating and commensality, the act of eating together; as the cooking pot, the cauldron was used to generate and serve several portions, thus instigating communal feeding. Yet, as Goldstein indicates,

Commensality has a dark side—it is the cultural mechanism that divides the eaters from those who starve, those we love from those we ignore or destroy. The exclusions that commensality creates, the costs of its obligations, and the negative ramifications of its inclusions, are very much at issue in the relations of eating. Eating was used in early modern England to exclude certain groups by privileging others. [...] including early Evangelicals, Native Americans, Africans, Jews, women, and Catholics⁷⁴

In other words, those groups of society who controlled the cauldron, controlled society at large. This is most evident in *The Jew of Malta* as Barabas seeks revenge against the Christians who have, metaphorically, starved him of his livelihood. By using the poisoned cooking pot to assassinate the inhabitants of the nunnery, Barabas takes advantage of communal eating to achieve his goals, poisoning and killing the whole nunnery in one act. Therefore, this temporarily allows Barabas to dominate the Christians as he is both figuratively and literally in control of the cauldron. This metaphor is extended to the end of the play, where Barabas ultimately meets his downfall; Barabas loses—and the Christians regain—control of the cauldron, again both metaphorically and literally, as they arrange for Barabas to fall into the fatal cauldron of his own devising in 5.5. In this way, the cauldron represents that “Renaissance discussions of commensality often point toward religious fellowship as well as the dining table” as the exclusion and inclusion that is controlled by the cauldron is specifically fashioned into a contest between Jews and Christians in *The Jew of Malta*.⁷⁵ Indeed, the use of commensality to promote religious conflict is evident in contemporary anti-Semitic rhetoric as Barabas’s poisoning of the cauldron is akin to the common scaremongering myth that Jews were frequently trying to poison Christians via wells.⁷⁶ Such religious tension and division is expressed in food-related terms throughout *The Jew of Malta* as Barabas refers to “these swine-eating Christians” (2.3.7) and Ithamore positions the lifeless body of Friar Bernardine “as if he were begging of bacon” (4.1.154).

⁷⁴ David B. Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare’s England* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

⁷⁵ Goldstein, 4.

⁷⁶ Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 97.

Evidently, commensality was used to embody and exacerbate some of the core conflicts between Christianity and Judaism in the early modern period as differences in religion were directly related to differences in diet. Although Barabas and Ithamore's comments attempt to insinuate that the Christians are inferior for their eating of pork, in reality Barabas remains the excluded party as this is a food that he cannot eat, which would thereby constitute a meal that he could never attend, and consequently a fellowship that he cannot build through commensality. Similarly, Barabas refers to "the ass that Aesop speaketh of, / That labours with a load of bread and wine / And leaves it off to snap on thistle tops" (5.2.40–42), of which, as explained by Siemon, the proverbial point is that "the donkey does not profit from his labours but eats common thistles" (5.2.40–42n). Barabas again here expresses his thoughts in terms relating to commensality, showing in this proverb a concern for who should be granted—or even deserves—access to which type of food, but what is most notable is that the ass carries "a load of bread and wine." This suggests an allusion to The Eucharist, another eating-related rite which divides Christians from Jews, Barabas from his opposition, and which thus reinforces the religious exclusion and inclusion implicit in certain acts of commensality, contributing to the deep-rooted hostility between these groups in the play. Because "eating forced Renaissance thinkers to consider questions about how communities were formed and shattered; the creation and dissolution of true fellowship; the inclusion and exclusion of groups and individuals; the tensions among hospitality, obligation, and agency," Barabas' attention to these different dietary practices between Jews and Christians indicates not only that he is to be seen as an "other" and is aware of this perception of himself, but also perpetuates the narrative of the impossibility for these groups to understand and empathise with one another due to their inability to enact true commensality together.⁷⁷ Thus, the cauldron—through its association to food and commensality—is used to emphasise societal divisions and the perceived dangerous groups within society, particularly those who seek to disrupt the established norms of Christian commensality and manipulate it for violent purposes.

The cauldron also represents the close association of Judaism with witchcraft in the early modern period, and thereby emphasises the supposed danger of both by relation to one another; "Jews, heretics and witches are all groups on to which [early modern] society successively projected its fears and guilts," and are symbolically unified by the object of the

⁷⁷ Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare's England*, 6.

cauldron.⁷⁸ This is particularly evident in the iconography of the cauldron being integral to the witches’ meeting or “sabbath”; for example, a cauldron being attended to by witches is centralised in Frans Francken the Younger’s 1606 painting *The Witches Sabbath*, while one can also see witches congregating around their smoking cauldron in Hans Baldung Grien’s *The Witches* (see figure 8). As Scarre explains, “testifying to the anti-Semitic tendencies of the age, the meetings of witches were commonly designated by Hebrew terms, initially being called ‘synagogues’, and later ‘sabbats’ (or ‘sabbaths’).”⁷⁹ The Jewish sabbath “begins at sunset on Friday evening,” but this practice was transmuted into the folklore belief that “Contrary to the day when Christians meet to pray—Sunday morning—the devil and his legions prefer the night between Friday and Saturday.”⁸⁰ In this way, Judaism is linked to witchcraft in that both were thought to be opposed to Christianity in the early modern period and thereby correlated to the Devil. Indeed, in the early modern period Jews were considered as “the accursed descendants of those who had killed Christ and who continued in their devilish ways”⁸¹ in a similar way to the identification of the witch as one who renounces Christ and adores the Devil.⁸² The object of the cauldron in the sabbath signifies this theorised connection between Judaism and witchcraft as “The ceremony [of the witches’ sabbath] allegedly included [...] feasting on roasted or boiled unbaptized children’s flesh and exhumed corpses” which is “a disturbing revival of ritual murder charges that had for centuries hounded the Jews.”⁸³ The plays highlight this role of the cauldron in the sabbath ritual as Hecate demands “fetch three ounces of the red-haired girl / I killed last midnight” (*The Witch*, 5.2.55–56) to go into her cauldron and the *Macbeth* witches put “Finger of birth-strangled babe” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.24) in theirs. Similarly, the cauldron-device that Barabas constructs in 5.5 would have appeared indicative of the ritual killings that were associated with Jews. Perhaps the ingredient of “Liver of blaspheming Jew” in *Macbeth* (4.1.26) is also deliberately included to remind the audience of the anti-Semitic folklore pertaining to the

⁷⁸ Barbara Rosen, “Introduction,” in *Witchcraft in England: 1558–1618*, ed. Barbara Rosen (University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 8.

⁷⁹ Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 18.

⁸⁰ Trevan G. Hatch and Loren D. Marks, “Sanctuary in Time: Shabbat as the Soul of Modern Jewry and the Essence of ‘Doing’ Judaism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Jewish Ritual and Practice*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2023), 365; Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist’s Perspective,” *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 1 (1980): 5.

⁸¹ Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 13.

⁸² Jeffrey B. Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (Thames and Hudson, 1985), 66.

⁸³ Ben-Yehuda, “The European Witch-Craze,” 5; Gary K. Waite, “Sixteenth-Century Religious Reform and the Witch-Hunts,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford University Press, 2014), 502.

witches' sabbath. Consequently, it is evident that the object of the cauldron is used to reiterate and reinforce derogatory and anti-Semitic ideas. Further still, as the object of the cauldron appears to connect Judaism with witchcraft, it emphasises the wickedness and demonism of both and thus serves to vilify the "other" in society, namely Jews and the disobedient housewife as represented by the witches.



Figure 8. *The Witches* by Hans Baldung Grien, 1510, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Met Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336235>. Reproduced in accordance with Open Access at the Met operating under Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

Ultimately, it is evident that the cauldron is used on the early modern stage to signify the threat of the "other." The users of the cauldron in *The Jew of Malta*, *Macbeth* and *The Witch* represent marginalised groups within society—Jews and unconventional women respectively—and are portrayed as agents of evil by their association to the object of the cauldron. These plays utilise the cauldron as a subversive and murderous tool which is closely linked to femininity, Hell and the Devil. The cauldron is seen to be a liminal object with a symbolism that presents the inversion of its conventional use; the theatrical cauldron brings death rather than life, chaos rather than stability, poison rather than nourishment. This

inversion serves to emphasise the proximity of the potential threat of the “other” as the object of the cauldron lay at the heart of the family and the community and could so easily be used for either beneficial or nefarious purposes.

Bibliography

- Albucasis, Chirurgia. c.1400. Bodleian Library, Oxford. MS. Laud Misc. 724, fol. 097r, *Digital Bodleian*, <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/a6e02525-9d5b-4637-a01a-c5862001e895/surfaces/b34d430b-7c4c-4202-89b9-da93022eea57/>. Accessed 04/10/2023.
- Angelico, Fra. *The Last Judgement*. c.1425–1430. Museo di San Marco, Florence.
- Augustine of Hippo. *De Civitate Dei*. c.1350. Translated by Raoul de Presles, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Français MS 22912, *Gallica*, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8447874d/f10.image>. Accessed 15/04/2022.
- Barin, Filiz. “Othello: Turks as ‘the Other’ in the Early Modern Period.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 43, no. 2 (2010): 37–58.
- Ben-Yehuda, Nachman. “The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist’s Perspective.” *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 1 (1980): 1–31.
- Bever, Edward. “Popular Witch Beliefs and Magical Practices.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, edited by Brian P. Levack. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- . “Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community.” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 955–88.
- The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, edited by Robert Carroll. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Biblia Pauperum*. c.1460–1470. The British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1845-0809-11. Accessed 10/09/2023.
- Bosch, Hieronymus. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. c.1490–1500. Museo del Prado, Madrid, *WikiMedia Commons*, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Bosch_the_Prince_of_Hell_wi_th_a_cauldron_on_his_head.JPG. Accessed 26/06/2024.

- Clark, Sandra and Pamela Mason. "Appendix I: The Text of *Macbeth*." In William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (Bloomsbury, 2020).
- Corcoran, John X. W. P. "Celtic Mythology." In *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, translated by Richard Aldington and Delano Ames, edited by Felix Guirand. Hamlyn, 1975.
- De la Joie de Paradis*. c.1290–1300. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Français MS 1838, Gallica, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84516017/f157.item>. Accessed 15/04/2022.
- Fitzpatrick, Joan. *Food in Shakespeare*. Ashgate, 2007.
- Francken, Frans the Younger. *The Witches' Sabbath*, 1606, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, V&A, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69001/witches-sabbath-oil-painting-francken-frans-ii/>. Accessed 20/09/2023.
- Gerard, John. *The Herball Or Generall Historie of Plantes. Gathered by Iohn Gerarde of London Master in Chirurgerie very Much Enlarged and Amended by Thomas Iohnson Citizen and Apothecarye of London*. London, 1633. STC 11751.
- Goldstein, David B. *Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare's England*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Grey, Elizabeth, Countess of Kent. *A True Gentlewomans Delight Wherein is Contained all Manner of Cookery: Together with Preserving, Conserving, Drying and Candyng. Very necessary for all Ladies and Gentlewomen*. London, 1653. Wing K317.
- Grien, Hans Baldung. *The Witches*. 1510. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, *The Met Museum*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336235>. Accessed 20/04/2022.
- Guazzo, Francesco Maria. *Compendium Maleficarum*, translated by E. A. Ashwin, edited by. Montague Summers. John Rodker, 1929.
- Hatch, Trevan G. and Loren D. Marks. "Sanctuary in Time: Shabbat as the Soul of Modern Jewry and the Essence of 'Doing' Judaism." In *The Routledge Handbook of Jewish Ritual and Practice*, edited by Oliver Leaman. Routledge, 2023.
- Henderson, Katherine Usher and Barbara F. McManus. *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England 1540–1640*. University of Illinois Press, 1985.

- Heyden, Pieter van der. *Anger (Ira)*, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder. 1558. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, *The Met Museum*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/383073>. Accessed 12/09/2023.
- The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*. c.1440. Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.917/945, ff. 168v–169r. <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/hours-of-catherine-of-cleves/259>. Accessed 04/10/2023.
- Joy, Jody. “‘Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble’: Iron Age and Early Roman Cauldrons of Britain and Ireland,” *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 80 (2014): 327–62.
- Karlsen, Carol F. *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*. Norton, 1987.
- Keller, James R. “Middleton’s *The Witch*: Witchcraft and the Domestic Female Hero.” *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 4, no. 4 (1991): 37–59.
- Littleton, C. Scott. “The Holy Grail, the Cauldron of Annwn, and the Nartymonga: A Further Note on the Sarmatian Connection.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 92, no. 365 (1979): 326–33.
- Lucan. *The Civil War (Pharsalia)*. Translated by J. D. Duff. Harvard University Press, 1928.
- The Mabinogion*, translated by Sioned Davies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Marlowe, Christopher. *The Jew of Malta*, edited by James R. Siemon. Bloomsbury, 2020.
- “marmaritin, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, 2022. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114250>. Accessed 25/04/2022.
- Marshall, Peter. “The Reformation of Hell? Protestant and Catholic Infernalisms in England, c.1560–1640.” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, no. 2 (2010): 279–98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005964>.
- Matusiak, John. *Henry VIII: The Life and Rule of England’s Nero*. The History Press, 2015.
- Lucan. *Lucan’s Pharsalia: or The Civill Warres of Rome, between Pompey the great, and Ivliivs Caesar. The whole ten Bookes*. Translated by Thomas May. London: 1627. STC 16887.
- Middleton, Thomas. *The Witch*, edited by Elizabeth Schafer. A & C Black, 1994.
- Mulligan, Amy C. “‘The Satire of the Poet is a Pregnancy’: Pregnant Poets, Body Metaphors, and Cultural Production in Medieval Ireland.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108, no. 4 (2009): 481–505.
- Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. Routledge, 1997.

- Roberts, Penny. "Marginals and Deviants." In *The European World 1500–1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History*, edited by Beat Kümin, 69–78. Routledge, 2014.
- Roper, Lyndal. "Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany." In *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, edited by Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts, 207–36. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Rosen, Barbara. "Introduction." In *Witchcraft in England: 1558–1618*, edited by Barbara Rosen. University of Massachusetts Press, 1991.
- Russell, Jeffrey B. *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans*. Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1985.
- Saluces, Thomas de. *Le Chevalier Errant*. 1403–1404. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Français MS 12559, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10509668g/f385.item>. Accessed 12/09/2023.
- Scarre, Geoffrey. *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*. Macmillan Education, 1992.
- Schmidt, Gary D. *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century*. Associated University Presses, 1995.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. Bloomsbury, 2020.
- . *Macbeth*, directed by Eve Best. Shakespeare's Globe, 2013. Opus Arte DVD, 2014.
- Shapiro, James. *Shakespeare and the Jews*. Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Spoto, Stephanie Irene. "Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power." *Pacific Coast Philology* 45 (2010): 53–70.
- Steinforth, Dirk H., Bryony Coombs and Charles C. Rozier. "Britain and its Neighbours: Contacts, Exchanges, Influences. An Introduction." In *Britain and its Neighbours: Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Dirk H. Steinforth and Charles C. Rozier. Routledge, 2021.
- Teague, Frances N. *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*. Associated University Presses, 1991.
- Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery-Books: Harleian MS. 279 (ab. 1430), & Harl. MS. 4016 (ab. 1450), with Extracts from Ashmole MS. 1429, Laud MS. 553, & Douce MS. 55*, edited by Thomas Austin. London: Trübner, 1888.
- Wall, Wendy. *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

- . *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Waite, Gary K. “Sixteenth-Century Religious Reform and the Witch-Hunts.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, edited by Brian P. Levack. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Willis, Deborah. *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England*. Cornell University Press, 1995.