



**The Making of a Witch: Witchcraft, Economic Crisis and the
Materialistic Culture in William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and
John Ford's Play, *The Witch of Edmonton***

Suchetona Pal
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
University of Calcutta
West Bengal, India
Email: amiya.yugen22@gmail.com

Abstract

The Witch of Edmonton, a 17th-century Jacobean play unlike the plays on witchcraft of the preceding era, presents a familiar figure of early modern English rural communities at its centre. The play offers neither a threatening image nor a theatrical spectacle of a witch. Instead, it focuses on the ramifications of a titular character embedded in the socio-economic, cultural, socio-political, and legal contexts. Contrary to the mystifying supernatural abilities, this play allows an examination of the societal role and function in the construction of a figure of a witch. This article examines how the rise of materialism, amid growing tension over a radically transforming economy, contributed to the identity formation of a witch. It additionally addresses the extent to which Elizabeth Sawyer, the eponymous character, has succeeded and failed in resisting this enforced role under societal pressure, especially in an era when socio-economic grievances attained the stringency of legal statutes.



Received: 26.09.2025

Accepted: 30.11.2025

Published: 31.12.2025

CJHSSC, Volume: 1

Issue: 2, December 2025

Page: 96 - 103

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18258249>

Copyright: Author © 2025



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Available at: www.sjjangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.sjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: early Modern women, witchcraft, class, social order, socio-economic construct.

Although Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1609) canonized the stereotypes of a witch figure in the Jacobean period, the representation still continues to echo distinct resonances among its modern readers and theatre audiences. While the portrayal of the three witches made an enduring impact, it nonetheless evokes occasional confusion, an ominous note of ambiguity about their function and possible role in shaping Macbeth's tragic destiny. The allusions to Norse and classical mythology, which associate them with the three Goddesses of destiny, further render them elusive. Even though in the stage directions of the Folio, the term "witches" has been mentioned, hardly any stage character uses it explicitly; instead, the witches identify themselves as "the weird sisters" (Shakespeare, 1609, as cited in Clark & Mason, p. 139). Moreover, some controversy exists even over their naming of witches, since Raphael Holinshed, by the term "weird," refers to the "Goddess of Destiny" (Shakespeare, 1609, as cited in Clark & Mason, p. 139), some nymphs, or even fairies. However, this article focuses on Elizabeth Sawyer, the titular character of *The Witch of Edmonton*, whose identity as a witch, unlike the three witches of *Macbeth*, is acknowledged and regarded not only by the characters in the play but also by contemporary spectators. Elizabeth Sawyer, a spinster, married to Edward Sawyer of Edmonton village, was no fictional character. Henry Goodcole, an Anglican minister, records her court trial, confession, and details of execution in a pamphlet titled *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch, Late of Edmonton* (1621). Not only the pamphlet, but also the popularity of an exaggerated version of her tale in ballad form concurrently established Sawyer's identity as a witch among her community. While the play significantly spurs scepticism close to the modern view of witchcraft, and offers a detailed account of the demonic association of witchcraft, the play most crucially attempts to explore a woman's turn to it in a community actively complicit in its making. William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford's play, *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), demonstrates how a close-knit early modern English community in a period of socio-cultural and socio-economic transition responds to economic crisis and the evolving materialistic culture.

The play opens with an evocation of commercial and mercantile atmosphere, as evident in the very opening line, when Frank Thorney states, "Come, wench, why here's a business soon dispatched" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.146), where "business", implies anxiety or trouble and "dispatched" meaning settled (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Munro, 2017). Overall, it immediately indicates an atmosphere of a business negotiation that has been duly taken care of. This indeed proves to be true, later in the scene, when Frank seeks monetary aid from Arthur Clarington, reminding him of a "portion" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.148), denoting dowry, he promised for Winnifride's marriage. Clarington's prompt reply to Frank's question about the financial offer "...what think'st thou of two hundred pound And a continual friend?" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.149) has an absolute air of mercantile negotiations as well. Ironically, despite his preaching and chastising of Frank for corrupting an innocent maid and making his house disreputable with his lustful desire, we come to know how Clarington made his maid Winnifred pregnant. As he calls Frank "Cuckoo" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.150) when the latter departs, we can conjecture how he had successfully manipulated Frank to believe himself responsible for Winnifride's condition and forced him to marry her.

On the other hand, Frank's service to the household of Clarington appears to be more than a mere custom of serving the household of aristocrats by the children of gentry, since it

indicates his insolvent status and the necessity of wages also. Frank ominously describes his economic crisis in demonic terms when he mentions “The misery of beggary and want” as “Two devils” that bring forth “shameful end” (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 146). In the following scene, while Old Carter and Old Thorney discuss the prospective marriage between their progeny, Susan and Frank, the conversation focuses primarily on the transactional aspect of marital negotiation, with Old Thorney appreciating Carter’s generous offer as marriage money. However it was not only the discussion of the two patriarchs, but also the exuberant courtship of the young pairs, that of Susan and Warbeck, and Katherine and Somerton, which vigorously exudes contemporary emphasis on materialism, with Susan chiding Warbeck, for commodifying marriage, (Stretton, 2018, p. 142)- “Am I a property for you to use?” (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.155). It is in this context that Elizabeth Sawyer is introduced. While the main plot focuses on bigamy as a legal and moral crime, the playwrights place it to be also embedded in Frank’s economic crisis, similar to that of Sawyer’s witchcraft.

In early modern England, the significance of an overall economic condition in constituting a witch's identity was first underlined by Reginald Scot. Published in 1584, Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* raised a question about the interrelation of the identity of a witch and her poverty-stricken condition. Instead of describing them with inherent maliciousness and supernatural power, he points out their self-delusion, melancholia, and old age, who rely heavily upon the charity of the community for their regular needs – “These go from house to house, and from doore to doore fora pot full of milke, yest, drinke, pottage, or some such releefe; without the which they could hardlie live...” (Scot, 1584, chapter 3). When Henry Goodcole attempts to explain Sawyer’s resort to witchcraft, his pamphlet draws on a reason primarily involved with her economic condition. In an overtly simplified explanation, Goodcole mentions that Sawyer held her neighbours responsible for her unprofitable trade of selling brooms, “because her neighbours where she dwelt, would not buy Broomes of her” (1621, as cited in Gibson, 2000, p. 305). This lack of cooperation for financial aid, in turn, made her spiteful and thus striking her neighbours with a malevolent form of witchcraft, according to Goodcole, appeared to be a rational consequence. What is ironical about Goodcole’s explanation is that he presents the process of embracing the identity of a witch as an occasion of conscious choice-making, while it is the lack of adequate choice that forcefully marginalizes and categorically coerces her to accept an identity ascribed to her by society. David Stymeist (2001) thus observes that, despite acknowledging Sawyer's socio-economic crisis, Goodcole does not portray her as a victim of persecution, even though he assesses her maliciousness towards her neighbours as a consequence of her destitution. Unlike the pamphlet, the play neither makes any direct reference to her livelihood nor to the existence of any family member. Consequently, we are unsure of her vocation and whether she has any source of income for survival. However, her precarious and anxiety-stricken psychological state, prompted by her beggarly economic condition, has been implicated within the play. On her first arrival on stage, she explains the socio-economic reasons behind her persistent agony. To Old Banks’s admonition of her presence on his landed property, she expresses her dire need of collecting “a few rotten sticks to warm” herself (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 159), indicating how her existence depends entirely upon charity.

Historians like Alan Macfarlane (1970) and Keith Thomas (1971) have significantly observed a change in the contemporary economy and an overall transformation in an individual's attitude to money and property. Both Macfarlane and Thomas have pointed to the structural changes in society that significantly contributed to the early modern English witch craze. Identifying a psychological shift in people transiting from the previously existing agricultural economy to a pre-industrial wage-based labour economy, they emphasized that people grew to be more individualistic and less morally obliged in helping their poor neighbours, unlike their predecessors. On her very first utterance, when Sawyer exclaims how she is persecuted by everyone around her, "Why should the envious world throw all their scandalous malice upon me?" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 159), she explains it primarily as a consequence of her economic destitution. As she soon complains how the members of her community exploit her, forcefully ascribe to her a disgraceful identity, instantly, an interconnection is made between her impoverished state and the hostility of her neighbours, as in Goodcole's pamphlet. This raises the question of how the ethics of good neighbour in the small villages and towns of early modern England were determined by socio-economic identity within a predominantly materialistic culture. Sawyer claims how she is repeatedly harassed and exploited due to her impoverished status. This is reflected indeed in Old Banks's attitude to Sawyer. He curses her throughout, with the address of a "hag" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.160), "witch", "she-hell cat" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.186) even before Sawyer had turned to witchcraft by committing a demonic pact with the devil. Consequently, Sawyer's calling him "curmudgeon" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, p. 160), literally meaning "ungenerous miser" (Kolb, 2023, p.174), reflects this resentment. Commenting on Bank's insensitive attitude Sawyer laments, "reverence once had wont to wait on age. Now an old woman, ill favour'd grown with yeers, if she be poor, must be call'd Bawd or Witch" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.188) indicating how with the change of time, a reversal of the value system is introduced, where seniority in age does not evoke respect, instead her poverty has become the defining characteristic, and therefore object of persecution (Stymeist, 2001).

Citing instances of both continuity and transformation in the customs and conventions of the early modern socio-cultural, legal, and economic domains that significantly shape interpersonal relations in English rural communities, Tim Stretton (2018) indicates how Elizabeth Sawyer's victimization as a witch resulted from the combined effect of the two. The onset of the capitalistic economy not only initiated a rise of materialism but also a sense of inequality, followed by a lack of empathy and sensitivity towards the marginalized. This unfair, disproportionately structured economy, in the context of increasing population growth, also affected people psychologically, contributing to public scapegoating of Sawyer (Stretton, 2018). While Old Carter represents the desire to continue with the old custom of owning landed property as financial security, a new interest in trade and the commercial ventures was also developing. Represented through the Thorneys, it indicates how the definition of property, asset, and economic security altered from its erstwhile emphasis on landholdings. Sawyer, when furious at Clarrington's suggestion that she should maintain distance from the devilish influence, flaringly questions her authority, by employing the metaphor of the hierarchical equation between a land owning master and his slave in agriculture based economy, –"Is he a landlord of my soul to thrust it, when he list, out of door?" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge

1986, p.187) An overall transformation in the economy thus implicates a sociological practice, where the impoverished individual increasingly becomes a scapegoat, bearing brunt of the moral guilt of the moderately affluent and selfish people (Sharpe, 1999). The tide of the capitalistic economy thus brought change in the conventional practices, which conveniently place witchcraft at the margin with the aim that the act of excluding such members appears less morally culpable. Sawyer's description of such treatment from her neighbours, "shunned and hated like a sickness" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.162) further elucidates this self-serving mechanism of the society.

The discussion on the influence of a materialistic culture and how it evolved in the early modern society requires a definition of the concept like "class" and how landed property and other assets are associated with an individual's socio-economic status. Although 19th 19th-century Marxist connotation was absent from the early modern notion of "class", yet the continuous process of categorizing and even discriminating on the basis of economic status was perceivable everywhere. While elucidating the term "class" in the early modern context, Ronda Arab and Laurie Ellinghausen (2023) observe that it does not define the contribution or participation of an individual in economic production, but rather evaluates his/her socio-cultural position in a hierarchical society. This is also evident from the early modern expression of "credit", which, apart from connoting trust, also suggests the socio-cultural worth of an individual (Amussen, 1985). Thus, economic class or status in early modern England denotes not only financial assets and landed property but also includes an individual's socio-economic standing. Thus, Frank Thorney, reminding his master, Arthur Clarrington, of his promise of financial compensation, mentions- "Sir Arthur Clarrington deserves the credit Report hath lent him," (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 148). "Credit" here stands for his "reputation for trustworthiness" (Munro, 2017). As Clarrington soon declares his inability to offer a "present payment", that is, providing money immediately to Frank (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.149), his promise is regarded as authentic and sincere because of his "currency of reputation", or his social standing (Stretton, 143).

The term "class" is not merely limited to social standing alone, but as Ania Loomba (2002) indicates that as a stratifying category, "class" in the early modern context functions similar to race, subsuming the other categories such as gender, faith, nationality, and complexion. Arab and Ellinghausen (2023) have also employed the term "intersectionality" to suggest how race, gender, and class collectively contribute to the formation of an identity, where each one of them intersects with another, resisting any attempt to reduce an identity into a single category (p.3). Thus, not merely Sawyer's indigent status, but also her gendered identity as a solitary woman, greatly contributes to the production of a witch-figure. Lora Kolb (2023) discusses how the complex making of an identity, based on the varied notions of class, economic condition, and social standing, is also presented through specific addresses such as "wench", "witch", and "widow" (p.165) in the play. Kolb stresses that this continuous act of addressing an individual with such specificity initiates an ongoing process of identity formation, even though unstable, and subject to negotiation. Elizabeth Sawyer initially questions and disregards this externally enforced identity of a witch, yet later she conforms to this as a morally ambivalent address, "'Tis all one To be a witch as to be counted one" (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.162). When the justice asks her to confirm about her identity as a witch, she

unflinchingly responds, “I am none!,”...“If every poor old woman be trod on thus by slaves, reviled, kicked, beaten, as I am daily, she to be revenged had need turn witch”, (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 187) thus indicating the societal pressure, which forcefully urges her to conform to the identity of a witch. The gender and age-specific addresses like “witch” and “wench” also reveal interpersonal relations, mapping the emotional quotient, suggesting closeness or social distance, in other words, their acceptability or banishment within a community. Frank and Clarrington’s address of “wench” to Winnifride not only indicates her age, but also emotional proximity. The addresses thus subtly operate on discrimination, deeply ingrained in the economic status and socio-cultural position, where someone like Winnifride is accepted, regarded, and the other, as Sawyer is ostracized. Responding to Sawyer’s question whether Banks actually called her a witch, the latter assuredly remarks “I do, witch, I do; and worse I would, knew I a name/ more hateful” (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 159), thus implicating how the identity of a witch is constructed to contain the unpleasant, despicable even unnamable aspects of a community. Sawyer also expresses how the identity of a witch is constituted in order to generate a space of unwanted waste, “a common sink” (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 159), where the most obnoxious abuse can be placed. Although the Justice attempts to pacify the crowd, the violent uprising of the mob shouting “hang her, beat her, kill her!” (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 186) indicates how a witch is a figure of persecution, whom the mass aggressively wants to eliminate. The reason for purging society of her is convenient not only on moral grounds, but also because of her absence from the workforce, productivity, and lack of socio-economic standing.

The predominance of materialistic culture is evoked not only through the stress on economic condition, but is consolidated with legal statutes. Old Banks, when displeased by Sawyer’s frequent visit to his property, charges “What makest thou upon my ground?” (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 159), accusing her of illegal intrusion into his property. Before the enclosure laws were legislated, the village indigents were allowed to collect essential resources of domestic and daily utility, such as firewood or materials for building thatch from the local common (Stymeist, 2001). The newly introduced enclosure law not only repudiated such a claim but also forced people of the marginalized section to survive on the charity of the affluent class. According to David Stymeist (2001), the stringent legality drove the impoverished population to begging, merging them with the class of criminals and vagabonds. In this context, the identity of a witch scarcely conforms to the magic or supernatural power, but gradually merges with that of the petty criminals, who attempt to take advantage of the affluent class by crooked means. In this context, we must remember that the vagrant act of 1547 legalized the enslavement of vagabonds or Masterless Men (Habib, 2008). The contemporary Government policy during the era of no poor law act ensured that the idle, unproductive group of vagabonds received stringent punishment, unlike the grant-receiving parish poor. Elizabeth Sawyer represents the former kind, the vagabond. Thus, when she confronts restrictions regarding the usage of the land, Sawyer’s angry tirade unwittingly ushered in the devil. Sawyer, consequently, not merely suffers from a deprivation of legal protection, but in consequence received no assistance from her community that practically ensured her economic impoverishment, and further marginalization.

Sawyer is nonetheless self-aware of the social mechanism involved in making her a witch. Thus, when desperate to protect herself from atrocious abuse, she prays for an agency, indiscriminating the question of morality that would not only enable her to survive but also to avenge her perpetrators. With her blasphemous speech and her dog that popular witchcraft lore considers a demonic imp, or “familiars”, socio-culturally she fulfills the stereotypes of a witch. As a result, when misfortunes of any kind occur, such as the madness of Anne Ratcliffe, the cuckolding of a new wife, the death and illness of the cattle, Sawyer becomes an easy target of scapegoating. Sawyer nonetheless attempts to challenge and redefine the identity of a witch when she ascribes repulsive attributes to the morally corrupted, pretentious men and women of the money-making affluent class. Mocking Clarrington’s attempt to insult her by the address of a “witch” she retorts that the identity of a witch is “universal” and a “brave name” (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.187) and satirizing him further warns him not to use the name of a witch in irreverence. Voicing her censure against the corruptible, unscrupulous, and inconsiderate class of adversaries, she points at their materialistic greed. As opposed to the widespread conventional definition of a poverty-stricken, old witch of the rural communities, she incorporates alluring mistresses of the royal court, profligate urban wives, pretentious men of lofty titles, lawyers, and verbally abusive women into her list of different kinds of witches. Thus, distinctly drawing contrast with herself, and vividly portraying how moral sin is associated with each one of them, she describes them as more “witch-like” than her imposed identity of a witch (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p. 187). She illustrates how the mistresses at court with their youthful charm can change the “whole lordships”, “ploughs and teams” into sheer materialistic objects, such as “trunks of rich attire”, and coaches (Rowley, Dekker & Ford, 1621, as cited in Corbin & Sedge 1986, p.188). The spendthrift wives, she notes, lead to their husbands’ bankruptcy; men with prestigious titles, like Clarrington, unflinchingly manipulate and sexually exploit innocent maids, and the lawyers turn a profit through falsifying the ignorant lots with hopes. Sawyer, although resists explicitly accepting her identity as a witch until her execution, attempts to present the identity of a witch as devoid of moral transgression.

The complicity of 17th-century law and judicial procedure in England, however, initiates Sawyer’s ultimate destruction. Similar to treason, witchcraft was considered a special crime that allowed laxity in the case of inadequate evidence. Consequently, the court verdict was often swayed by the authority’s suspicion rather than proper investigations and testimonials (Durstun, 2019). While all the characters of the main plot reunite and empathize with Frank at his execution, Sawyer is not allowed to make an emotionally evocative speech. Her abrupt confession on devil’s trickery serves merely as a cautionary example for the masses, when Old Carter even attempts to hold the witch responsible for murdering his daughter, Susan. However, with the abandonment of the dog Tom, as portrayed as a familiar, her death evokes no sympathy from either the characters on stage or the spectators. It is Clarrington’s socio-economic rank as an affluent landowner that allows him to avoid grave punishment at the end. Although he is chastised and charged for his treacherous involvement in the crime, Old Carter’s admonition of him, as the real malefactor deserving punishment more than Frank and Sawyer, appears to evoke a sense of moral justice in the world of moral disorder at the conclusion.

References

- Amussen, S.D. (1985). Gender, Family and the Social Order 1560-1725. In A. Fletcher & J Stevenson (Eds.), *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (pp. 212). Cambridge University Press.
- Arab, R., & Ellinghausen, L. (2023). *Intersectionalities of class in early modern English drama* (pp. 1-3). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Durston, Gregory J. (2019). *Crimen Exceptum: The English Witch Prosecution in Context* (pp. 18-19). Waterside Press.
- Gibson, M. (2000). *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (pp. 302-305). Routledge.
- Habib, I. (2016). *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (pp. 1-9). Taylor & Francis Group- Routledge.
- Houston, R. (1980). Vagrants and Society in Early Modern England. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*. 6 (1/2), 16-20. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23816380>.
- Kolb, L. (2023). Wench, Witch, Wife, Widow: The Power of Address Terms in *The Witch of Edmonto*. In R. Arab & L. Ellinghausen (Eds.), *Intersectionalities of class in early modern English drama* (pp. 165-176). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Loomba, A. (2002). *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Munro, L. (Ed.), Dekker, T., Ford, J., & Rowley, W. (2016). *The Witch of Edmonton*. (Arden Early Modern Drama). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Scot, R. (2019). The Discoverie of Witchcraft. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/60766>.
- Stretton, T. (2018). Contextualizing The Witch of Edmonton. *Early Theatre*, 21(2), 137–149. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90026629>.
- Stymeist, D. (2001). “Must I be . . . made a common sink?": Witchcraft and the Theatre in “The Witch of Edmonton.” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 25(2), 33–53. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43445343>
- William, R., Dekker, T., Ford, J. 1986. The Witch of Edmonton. (1986). In P. Corbin & D. Sedge (Eds.), *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays: The Tragedy of Sophonisba, The Witch, The Witch of Edmonton* (pp. 144 -209). Manchester University Press.