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Digital Wizardry: The Afterlives of the Offstage

This essay considers how the offstage, which in early modern dramaturgy is often associated with shapeshifting, obscene, strange, and disturbing acts that threaten to pull the focus away from dominant plotlines and ideological structures, has been re-imagined in made-for-digital productions of early modern drama since 2020. It focuses on *Macbeth*, directed for Big Telly by Zoë Seaton in 2020, and *The Witch of Edmonton*, directed for Creation Theatre by Laura Wright in 2022. Both deploy the obscene dramaturgies of the offstage to draw attention to the real-life experiences of the women the plays associate with demonic forces, highlighting their domestic oppression and exposure to violence (in *Macbeth*) and their historical persecution for suspected witchcraft (in *The Witch of Edmonton*). Digital theatre thus creates an afterlife for the offstage that thrives on the tension between what is included in the fictional frame and the traumatic lived experiences that lie just beyond it.

Keywords: Digital theatre, Creation Theatre, Big Telly, *Macbeth*, *Witch of Edmonton*, virtual theatre

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid transition of live performance to digital platforms, two theatre companies in the UK – Creation Theatre (Oxford) and Big Telly (Northern Ireland) – prominently rose to the challenge of continuing to perform early modern drama on digital stages. The companies first attracted attention as digital innovators with their landmark co-production of *The Tempest* in April and May 2020 on the platform Zoom, directed by Big Telly's Zoë Seaton and facilitated backstage by stage manager-turned-'Zoom wizard' Sinéad Owens.[1] Since then, both companies have continued using videoconferencing platforms to produce made-for-digital work that appeals to an international audience of early modern drama specialists. These audiences have become the twenty-first-century equivalent of an early modern coterie, with word-of-mouth (and

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[1] "Zoom wizard" is how Owens was credited for *The Tempest* (Creation Theatre and Big Telly, 2020) and *Macbeth* (Big Telly, 2020).

word-of-Tweet or email) bringing together a viewer community with niche interests in early modern drama and experimental digital theatre.

This article is concerned with understanding the complex dynamics governing the relationship between the onstage and the offstage in early modern drama and with how Big Telly and Creation Theatre's digital wizardry re-imagined these dynamics for the digital stage. To set the (off)stage, I start with a discussion of how in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the offstage becomes a powerful site of magic which translates the familiar into the strange and is associated with shape-shifting, obscenity, and an alternative worldview grounded in a reality that is often painful to admit. This analysis then underpins my reading of the afterlives of the offstage in two made-for-digital productions of early modern witchcraft plays: Seaton's *Macbeth* (2020) for Big Telly and Laura Wright's production of John Ford, Thomas Dekker and William Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* for Creation Theatre (2022). In these productions, I suggest, the onstage/offstage dynamics of early modern dramaturgy bring into sharp and uncomfortable focus the lived experience of the women the plays associate with demonic forces and witchcraft, giving them the power to disrupt the fictional scenarios that occupy the stage. Digital wizardry, in this afterlife of the offstage, is deployed to shine a spotlight on elements of the plots these early modern plays that sensationalise witchcraft seek to occlude.

When Hermia, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, decides to head off into the woods with Lysander, what she intends to do is turn her eyes away from Athens "To seek new friends and stranger companies" (1.1.219). It is into these same woods with their promise of "stranger companies" that Peter Quince suggests that his acting troupe should head and rehearse "in the palace wood, a mile without the town, by moonlight" so as to keep their play a secret (1.2.83–84). Quince's star performer, Nick Bottom, immediately agrees that this is an excellent idea, because "there [they] may rehearse most obscenely and courageously," as the Quarto text of 1600, in the reading most commonly adopted by modern editions, puts it (1.2.89–90). The 1623 Folio text has a tiny but interesting variant: there, Bottom finds that moving out of sight will allow them to rehearse not *most*, but "*more* obscenely and courageously" (lines 457–458). *More* obscenely and courageously, that is, than if they stayed in the city of Athens.

Like Hermia, who contrasts the stranger companies of the woods with Athens, where the Duke imposes the strict, if familiar, discipline of Athenian law on her, Bottom thus sets up an opposition between rule-

bound Athens, where Shakespeare has laid his scene and the wood, which is its ob-scene flip-side. This is the only time, in his works, that Shakespeare couples the meanings of "Offensively or grossly indecent, lewd" (OED, 1) and "Offending against moral principles, repugnant; repulsive, foul, loathsome" (OED, 2) with what the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as the word's "folk provenance" from Latin *scaena*, making it, in art historian Lynda Nead's terms, into "literally what is off, or to one side of the stage, beyond representation" (25).[2] The folk etymology Shakespeare draws on here is suggestive of an opposition between the discipline, 'unity and constraint' exercised onstage, where bodily excesses are regulated to produce a heightened, idealised representation of the world that falls into the category of 'high art,' and what falls outside its boundaries: nature and, more often than not, the female body, which is seen as organic, "*un*structured," leaky and excessive – what Mikhail Bakhtin would call "grotesque" (Nead 25; Bakthin 26). Crucially, as Nead explains, in the realm of the obscene "there is no imaginative escape from the real, and the viewer becomes motivated and disturbed" (26), so that the obscenity can function as an incentive to action and political change.

Once Bottom has pointed us in the direction of the obscene wood 'without' Athens, Shakespeare exhilaratingly takes us there and brings into view what is normally hidden from sight. In the woods, the offstage disruptive creative processes of rehearsal, magic and dreams can take centre-stage and introduce us to an environment where fairies rule and strangeness is everywhere, but which is also, in some ways, more 'real' and 'true' than the ordered Athenian scene. When in Act Two the amateur actors gather in the wood for their rehearsal, Shakespeare is poking fun at them while also, through his portrayal of Peter Quince, whose handing out of the parts and obsession with cues reveals that he is especially conversant with early modern performance practice, exposing the actual processes that went into crafting a play for the early modern stage (Stern 31–34).

Tellingly, upon arrival in the wood, Quince proclaims that "here's a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring house, and we will do it in action, as we will do it before the Duke" (3.1.2–5). "Plot," here, while referring to

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2   See also Jonathan Walker's discussion of this scene and the etymology of "obscene" (25–26) and his broader argument regarding the uses of the offstage in early modern dramaturgy. I discuss the dramaturgical uses of the obscene in a different context and in relation to the early modern stage's "discovery space" in Aebischer (2020 18–20).

the patch of grass that is also the ground plan for Quince's imaginary playhouse and its stage (with the hawthorn brake as the offstage area), also gestures towards the meaning of "plot" as the outline of the play. The line sets up a connection between the spatial division between the onstage and the offstage and the conceptual design of an entertainment. As Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern have shown, a "plot" or "platt" was the physical object pinned to a wall backstage (72), which, in the technical language of the theatre trade, was there to be "translated" by a team of craftsmen and actors into the finished performance (Turner 129–130). Such a "plot" told the performers waiting offstage when to go onstage and what props they needed for their scenes. Plots, then, are the offstage flipside of the onstage performance: they map out the bits *between* the scenes and regulate off-stage action in order to make onstage action possible. Quince's 'green plot' is just waiting to be 'translated,' and that translation is the work of both theatrical professionals and of magic.

In the strange offstage world of the wood, however, 'translation,' as we soon find out, is fraught with danger, as Puck disrupts the mechanic-als' 'obscene' rehearsal by magically "translating" Bottom's head into that of a donkey. The verb 'translate,' when Quince exclaims "Bless thee, Bot-tom, bless thee! Thou art translated" (3.1.105), or when Puck tells Oberon that he "left sweet Pyramus translated there" (3.2.32), carries the technical meaning of transformation of a backstage plot into a finished entertain-ment. For Quince, the translation partakes of the monstrous, strange, and supernatural: "Oh, monstrous! Oh strange! We are haunted! Pray, masters! Fly, masters! Help!" (3.1.93–94). There is a sense here that there is some-thing profoundly ungodly about this translation that requires prayer to remedy. Theatrical magic has a quite sinister (if hilarious) edge here, as it can make supernatural, invisible forces take on a tangible, visible form and make Bottom's asinine character traits appallingly (delightfully) real.

'Translation' is also how Helena describes her desired transformation when she says she'd give the entire world to be "translated" into her love rival Hermia: "Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated, / The rest I'd give to be to you translated" (1.1.191–192). In the end, it is not she who is transformed into Hermia, but Demetrius' love for Hermia which is magic-ally "translated" into love for Helena. The play's happy ending hinges on the 'translation' continuing once the lovers have returned to the city, with the obscene having a direct impact on the scene of the play's happy resol-ution.

When the lovers tell Theseus and Hippolyta about the absurd way in which in the offstage space of the woods their formerly misaligned love

relationships have been translated into a tidy 'Jack shall have Jill' pattern (3.2.461), the ruling couple's response is telling in its invocation of the concept of 'strangeness.' To Hippolyta's "'Tis strange my Theseus, that these lovers speak of," Theseus answers:

> More strange than true. I never may believe
> These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more
> Than cool reason ever comprehends. (5.1.1–6)

Of course, the audience know that the strange events the lovers report are true: they, after all, have just watched them take place. Callan Davies' research on 'strangeness' helps us understand Theseus and Hippolyta's use of the word "strange" here, along with Quince's earlier exclamation regarding the strangeness of Bottom's translation and Hermia's comment about the "stranger companies" she was setting out to seek in the obscene woods: Davies has shown that the term 'strange' in the period is "used to describe visual and verbal moments that are both attractive and repulsive, or that are both understandable and obscure, and so it serves as a euphemism for contentious and potentially transgressive subjects" (2). Strangeness, that is, is a word that is strangely apt to describe the borderline between the visible and the invisible, the translation zone between the obscene and the seen/scene, what can be fully comprehended and what can only be apprehended but is nevertheless very real.

The strange domain of the obscene, which in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is principally exploited for its comic potential, can become a much darker force in early modern tragedies, where, to borrow Andrew Sofer's definition of the "dark matter" that is relegated offstage, it becomes the "tidal force of gravity that pulls at us unseen" (5). It is this pulling power of dark matter relegated to the offstage, to the transgressions that are kept just beyond sight, so that they may be apprehended rather than coolly comprehended, that I want to explore in Seaton and Wright's digital productions of early modern witchcraft tragedies. To what extent does made-for-digital theatre enable the kinds of strange, obscene translations associated with the offstage world to come to the foreground and shed fresh light on the plays? How does digital wizardry make the familiar strange and the strange disturbingly, disruptively real? How do these afterlives of the offstage enable the lived experiences of historical women to reach through the centuries and their fictional framing to touch present-day viewers in what amounts to a call to remembrance and action?

Seaton's *Macbeth*, which was produced on Zoom in October 2020 to be part of the Belfast Theatre Festival and timed to virtually 'tour' to Oxford via the Creation Theatre box office for the final two weeks of the Halloween season, capitalised on the play's emphasis on the weird, wayward and strange, its investment in offstage horror (think of Duncan's offstage murder and Macbeth's beheading) and its easy juxtaposition of witchcraft and ordinary human motivations. A tragedy of state supported by supernatural forces was, in Seaton's production, combined with the hyperrealist details of a lived-in domestic interior to bring the familiar into immediate contact with the strange.

This production's investment in the offstage and backstage as spaces where witchcraft and theatrical magic thrive was obvious already in its framing device, which took the shape of a COVID-19 pandemic-style Public Health briefing by the Prime Minister flanked by two advisers, who warned viewers about the insidious spread of witchcraft and 'tested' individual audience members for signs of contagion. The briefing over, a brief pre-recorded sequence tracked the politicians' movement from the lecterns on their political stage to the backstage areas of Brighton's Theatre Royal. Once in the dressing room, the politicians turned into the witches of the play, with an on-screen costume change and make-up adjustment that segued into the next scene, where they appeared to Macbeth and Banquo against the backdrop of an eerie virtual tree-lined heath.

Figure 1. A witch (Angus Óg McAnally) in the wings of the Theatre Royal (Brighton), with Macbeth (Dennis Herdman) sitting in the stalls. *Macbeth*, dir. Zoë Seaton (Big Telly, 2020).

Later, when Macbeth returned to seek further guidance from the witches, he found them in the wings of the theatre, from where they were busy creating the genealogical apparitions of a line of kings. Quite overtly, the production thus advertised the backstage and offstage zones of a recognisable theatre building as spaces generative of magic and digital illusions rooted in a fundamentally theatrical environment.

These overt uses of theatrical offstage worlds were complemented by obscene effects generated whenever the production moved away from using green-screened virtual backdrops and anchored its offstage world in a recognisably 'real' yet strange environment, seemingly away from the trappings of digital theatre. This was a production that was remarkably self-assured in its sophisticated use of pre-recorded materials and virtual backgrounds and that could very easily have been entirely staged in such virtual environments. It is the more striking, therefore, that virtual backdrops conjured up through digital wizardry were consistently juxtaposed with 'real,' lived-in domestic spaces, creating a productive friction between the two types of space.

The use of 'real' environments as an offstage space, in turn, was noticeably character- and gender-specific: it was reserved for Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth, played respectively by Lucia McAnespie and Nicky Harley.[3] Both actresses were performing inside their own homes, surrounded by the everyday clutter of a lived-in private space to which the cameras had (seemingly) unfettered access. This was so despite Lady Macduff's blind- and door-closing bedtime routine and the closed door of Lady Macbeth's bedroom, which clearly demarcated those spaces as off-limits, private, untheatrical. Much of the power of the scene of Lady Macduff's murder, as a consequence, was derived precisely from the sense of threat within a private domestic space, as the hand-held camera adopting the point-of-view of the murderous intruder followed her through her house, deploying conventions associated with horror film that resonated deeply with the Halloween season's investment in jump scares, horror and supernatural forces.

The sequences located in Lady Macbeth's attic bedroom likewise stressed the ordinariness and domesticity of this character. The audience first encountered her lying on her bed, watching the government briefing on her laptop in a way that suggested that she, too, might simply be an audience member, in semi-lockdown (Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger 138). Soon, however, it became clear that her laptop was able to transmit into

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3   My discussion of the obscene in Seaton's *Macbeth* here complements my argument regarding the grotesque obscene in *Viral Shakespeare* (74–88).

that safe and familiar-looking space the sinister forces of the witches, as the news bulletin included a report that, in an implied connection to the witches' prior vindictive discussion of the sailor's wife who had not shared her chestnuts, told of the blood being drained out of the master of a shipwrecked argosy near Aleppo. As Tom Cartelli comments, "This inter-polated scripting of the fruition of their curse against the sailor and his wife anticipates the power that the variably playful and predatory witches will command against the Macbeths and their victims throughout" the production (78). If Lady Macbeth's bedroom was already 'offstage' in relation to the 'onstage' environments of the virtual backdrops against which Macbeth was most frequently seen, then the news report on the laptop brought into that offstage world a sinister storyline that was yet further removed from the official world of the virtual stage.

There was also a sinister element to the very fact that audiences were able not only to observe Lady Macbeth in her bedroom, but also able to do so from three different camera angles (ostensibly following the three-camera set-up and continuity editing familiar from television), so that she was subjected to intense scrutiny of which she was evidently unaware. Not least because of the apparent absence of anything suggesting the in-visible hand of Ryan Dawson-Laight's set design, an environment that looked real and familiar – just another bedroom in lockdown – became strange as it was touched by sinister forces. The sense of unease crept up on the viewer when Lady Macbeth was joined in her bedroom by her hus-band. Suddenly, what previous space-mapping shots had led the audience to expect to be a corner with a sloping ceiling was now revealed to be an incongruous flat-ceilinged corner in which Macbeth could stand unim-peded, flanked by a standard lamp. Reviewing the production, Benjamin Broadribb described this scene as follows: "as Harley performed in her own bedroom opposite Herdman in front of a similarly oversized virtual backdrop of the same room, the setting fluctuated between inherent real-ism when focused on Lady Macbeth and disorienting artificiality that towered over Macbeth" (281). In terms of conventional filmmaking and editing, the camerawork here was wildly disorienting, frustrating the spa-tial coherence mainstream film grammar works so hard to create. Not only did Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's eyelines not meet, but viewers were suddenly propelled into an environment in which the hidden nooks of Lady Macbeth's bedroom revealed impossible vistas. The spatial in-congruity was the more unsettling for being so firmly ensconced in a real-istic world made uncannily strange through the digital witchcraft that could translate the familiar into incoherence and disorientation.

Figure 2. Lady Macbeth (Nicky Harley) in her attic bedroom, talking to Macbeth in the corner where the ceiling slopes down. *Macbeth*, dir. Zoë Seaton (Big Telly, 2020).

Figure 3. Macbeth (Dennis Herdman) talking to Lady Macbeth from the corner of her bedroom, which no longer has a sloped ceiling. *Macbeth*, dir. Zoë Seaton (Big Telly, 2020).

In fact, as Gemma Allred observes, a sense of spatial distortion affected all spaces associated with and controlled by men in this production. Allred points out how

> Once Lady Macbeth leaves her room the stairs and doors are out of scale. Similarly, Macbeth's fortress is clearly painted cardboard and Dunsinane a glitching virtual background. There seems to be an inversion of traditional gender roles – female spaces are solid and real, male spaces flimsy and intangible. (Private correspondence, 23 March 2023)

Yet it was also in those private, solid, real female spaces that the women's bodies (rather than their environments) were always at risk of distortion and fragmentation. Subsequent to her murder, Lady Macduff was reduced first to her hand clutching the wound on her stomach and then to her face, whose dead open eyes seemed to stare into another world. Similarly, as Lady Macbeth's sanity began to slip, extreme close-up of her tearful eyes, the inside of her mouth and of her nostrils, turned her face into a grotesque version of a blazon that was both hyper-realistic and distorting and the more disturbing for being so firmly anchored in the "solid and real" space of her attic room.

Lady Macbeth's modest, private offstage/obscene bedroom stood in marked contrast to the luxurious virtual public stage/scene on which she could be found subsequent to Macbeth's coronation. Whereas the first half of the production was screened in black-and-white, giving the scenes in the attic bedroom the grainy look and reality-effects associated with CCTV footage, the moment the crown touched Macbeth's head, the production switched to garish technicolour effects as the royal couple were reunited against the virtual backdrops of their throne room, state bedroom and banquet hall. On these virtual stages, it was Lady Macbeth who was able to ward off the forces of witchcraft that had previously invaded her bedroom: oblivious to the presence of Banquo's ghost, she was able to function rationally throughout the banquet scene. It is only when she returned to the 'real' offstage environment of Nicky Harley's attic bedroom that those sinister forces broke in on her with a vengeance, as, through a simple digital chromakey trick involving wrapping a green cloth over her shoulders, she enveloped herself in the virtual environment of the gilded banquet hall, inhabiting the virtual onstage and the analogue offstage spaces all at once, with her mind fracturing as the divide between the real and the fictional, the familiar and the strange broke down for good.

When Lady Macbeth was finally released from the ever more claustrophobic seclusion of her offstage bedroom to wade off into the Irish Sea,

Figure 4. Lady Macbeth (Nicky Hurley) wrapped in the offstage environment of the banquet hall. *Macbeth*, dir. Zoë Seaton (Big Telly, 2020).

in a stunningly poetic pre-recorded sequence that was intercut with Macbeth's live "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" soliloquy delivered from Dunsinane's battlements (1.13.50), it was the offstage natural environment into which Lady Macbeth immersed herself that offered a sense of unexpected release even as it took its audience into a scene which resolutely remains unseen in Shakespeare's play. Finally, Lady Macbeth was able to move in an environment that was neither realistic nor virtual, unfettered from oppressive domesticity.

Seaton's deployment of the real environments of her performers' homes as the production's offstage spaces thus achieved a quite radical realignment of the plot's prioritisation of Macbeth's fantastical, witchcraft-driven character arc, shifting attention onto the pressure-cooker environment of women trapped in locked-down domestic interiors. There, the very naturalistic clutter of everyday life exacerbated the sense of threat and the mind's ability to twist and bend reality to breaking point. Reframed as a domestic tragedy, this *Macbeth* used the offstage as a means of spotlighting the very ordinariness of a woman confined to her home and only able to access the outside world vicariously and virtually via the news or her intermittently visiting husband, who only ever appeared to distort the corners of her room and mind, making the familiar strange and upsetting. This offstage version of the play relegated the tragedy of state to the realm of spectacular theatrical magic while reserving its most poignant moments for the 'real' everywoman experience

of its heroines, whose compelling fates in a space "beyond representation" (Nead 25) exerted the "tidal force of gravity" (Sofer 5) that pulls at us unseen.

A similar gravitational pull in which the offstage 'reality' of women's lived experience had the power to re-orient a plot away from its dominant plotlines, and which similarly let the supernatural intrude on and rub against the ordinary, also characterised Wright's production of *The Witch of Edmonton*, a domestic tragedy which has long been recognised for its ability to make "the quotidian and the supernatural share a common space" (Barker 163). Wright's production self-consciously deployed the digital wizardry made possible by the next generation of digital stage to pull the focus repeatedly onto the real-life experiences of women executed for witchcraft. The offstage reality of these women's persecution and deaths served to pull Wright's implied digital audience into a recognition of the obscene underpinnings of the unified and orderly scene, to preclude any "imaginative escape from the real" and to motivate and disturb her implied viewers into not accepting Ford, Dekker and Rowley's sensationalist use of the recently executed Elizabeth Sawyer's confession as simple entertainment (Nead 26).

Unlike *Macbeth*, this production's set design was entirely reliant on green-screened virtual backgrounds into which the cast were inserted using vMix software to share virtual spaces and into which ghostly presences could be digitally layered into an image, using the same video-mixing technique Seaton had deployed for Banquo's haunting of Macbeth's banquet. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, this technique was repeatedly used to disrupt the realist illusion created by virtual backdrops, making the familiar strange. When, having been murdered by Frank, Susan's oversized ghost returned to haunt him in his hospital room, the translucence of her double ghost placed her both inside the room and outside it, in the offstage world of Frank's fevered guilty imagination (see figure 5).

Digital Wizardry, in this production, was in fact systematically deployed to bring the offstage onstage and dead characters into contact with the living, offering alternative viewpoints on the plotline that powerfully brought the force of gravity of the obscene to bear on the plot. Thus, for the sequence in which Old Ratcliffe (PK Taylor), in an ekphrasis to rival Gertrude's account of Ophelia's drowning, narrated the offstage suicide of his bewitched wife, digital layering was deployed to show both the ekphrasis and the suicide it described simultaneously. Significantly, while the viewpoint onto the ekphrasis was external – Ratcliffe was in a mid-shot to close-up, speaking to the camera – Agnes' suicide by "beat[ing]
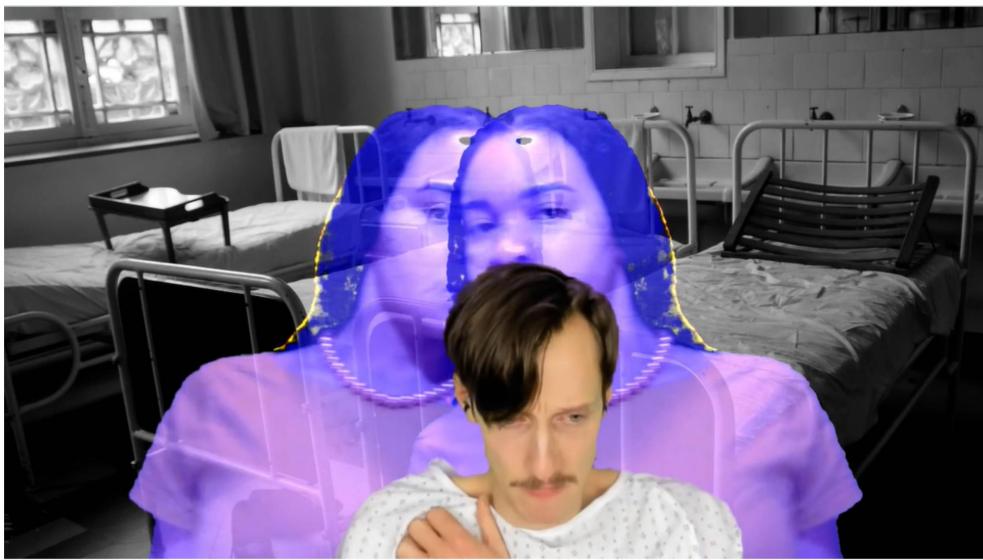
Figure 5. Frank (Guy Clark) haunted by Susan (Chloe Lemonius). *The Witch of Edmonton*, dir. Laura Wright (Creation Theatre, 2022).

out her own brains" (4.1.225–226), which remains firmly offstage in the scripted play, was here represented and portrayed through Agnes' own eyes. Adopting her point of view, the camera erratically "ran" through a forest, *Blair Witch Project*-style, and gave the viewer access to the ob-scene moment of the character's transition from life to death in the trau-matic moment when she repeatedly hit her head against a tree, with the image from "her" camera feed going momentarily black. Shockingly, the sequence ended with Agnes' post-mortem viewpoint of the forest floor she had fallen onto, taking the viewer yet further offstage into her afterlife and translating her husband's narration into her own experience of dying (see figure 6).

Such estranging digital wizardry was also deployed for the play's main staging challenge: the representation of the dog-devil which has bedevilled the performance history of the play (Munro 55–69; Barker), and who, as "the link between the two plots of the play and between its human, animal, and supernatural realms" is the play's principal shape-shifting figure (Prince 181), poised on the boundary between the familiar and the strange. Here, the dog was performed by Ryan Duncan as a slightly sooty-faced human with fangs he occasionally revealed in a flash of a cheeky smile or snarl. Significantly, Duncan's first appearance as the dog situated him precisely in the obscene offstage. The sequence started when, having been beaten by her neighbours for gathering sticks on their land, Elizabeth Sawyer wished for "the thing called Familiar" (2.1.36).

Figure 6. Old Ratcliffe (PK Taylor) finishing his ekphrasis about Anne's death, with the forest floor seen from dead Anne's viewpoint. *The Witch of Edmonton*, dir. Laura Wright (Creation Theatre, 2022).

The tonal shift from the familiar to the strange was literalised through a sound cue and the image changing from sepia to a red tint, as the devil-dog appeared to Elizabeth from the offscreen position of the camera. The panting of the offstage dog, which came to lick Elizabeth's outstretched hand, shifted, in a jump-scare, to Duncan's human voice for "Ho! Have I found thee cursing? Now thou art mine own" (2.1.128), at which point the dog's panting morphed into Elizabeth's own gasps as she began to incorporate the still invisible devil. That incorporation was made complete when he asked for her gift of body and soul. This prompted his face's digital superimposition onto Elizabeth's face to suggest his grotesque penetration of her body and soul, the obscene intrusion of the offstage supernatural force onto the stage, and the translation of an offscreen dog into an onscreen human devil (see figure 7).

For fans of Creation Theatre's work during the pandemic, the grotesque bleeding together of dog-devil and witch into a composite image pulled into the image the recent intertheatrical memory of the company's *Duchess of Malfi*, which was co-directed by *The Witch of Edmonton*'s director Laura Wright with Natasha Rickman in 2021. Wright describes this moment as an 'Easter egg' which she expected Creation Theatre's coterie early modernist audience to spot: it replayed the sequence in *Malfi* in which the Duchess's two brothers warned her not to marry, which culminated in Ferdinand virtually penetrating into his sister's headspace (see figure 8). For faithful Creation Theatre audiences, therefore, the morphing

Figure 7. Elizabeth Sawyer (Anna Tolputt) penetrated by the overlaid image of the dog-devil (Ryan Duncan). *The Witch of Edmonton*, dir. Laura Wright (Creation Theatre, 2022).

Figure 8. The Duchess of Malfi (Annabelle May Terry) penetrated by the overlaid image of Ferdinand (Dharmesh Patel). *The Duchess of Malfi*, dir. Natasha Rickman and Laura Wright (Creation Theatre, 2021).

of the dog-devil into Elizabeth invoked a related narrative of a female protagonist's persecution and visual penetration by a male figure. The intertheatrical citation opened up the apprehension of an unexpected parallel between these two plays portraying the oppression of women whose lives do not conform to social expectations. The effect was to expand the scope of *The Witch of Edmonton*'s critique of what turned out to be not an individual, but a systematic persecution of historical women, poor and rich alike.

That point was made yet more forcefully through the production's punctuation, at key moments, with inserted vignettes that ruptured the progression of the plot by introducing the digressive accounts of the alleged crimes and executions of women condemned as witches across early modern Europe. After an early text montage that framed the central name of Elizabeth Sawyer with those of seven additional historical 'witches' – Anne Gamperle, Ursley Kemp, Mary Barber, Joan Flower, Agnes Browne, Elizabeth Sowtherns and Joanne Harrison – each of these women appeared in a brief vignette consisting of her reading out an extract from the surviving historical record of her conviction and execution. Each vignette was quite deliberately placed at a turning-point in the plot which spoke, in some way, to the individual story of the 'witch' in question. The vignettes thus obscenely inserted themselves between the scenes in the manner of an offstage plot that organised how those scenes might be translated and understood by the audience. At the point when Elizabeth was publicly accused of witchcraft, all the women appeared together as a chorus to echo her cry "I defy thee," making the defiance reverberate across all their lives and shared experience of persecution (see figure 9). Elizabeth Sawyer's fictionalised life and persecution for witchcraft was thus powerfully framed by and embedded into the centre of a network of historical women who shared her fate and who acted as an obscene chorus of dead women who disrupted the production's scene with their direct address to the audience and insistence on their historical existence and lived experience of persecution and death.

The final vignette was Elizabeth Sawyer's. Meeting the gaze of the camera in a way that, in the production, was reserved for the forces of evil, Anna Tolputt read the passage from the source text for the play, the historical Elizabeth Sawyer's confessor Henry Goodcole's *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a witch* (a sensationalist pamphlet which was entered into the Stationer's Register just a few days after Sawyer's execution on 19 April 1621) in her own voice, that of a performer who had just spent ninety minutes re-performing Elizabeth's life for he twenty-

Figure 9. The historical 'witches' assembled on a single screen to lend their support for Elizabeth Sawyer's defiance.

first-century audience. After her final line, "Written by HENRY GOOD-COLE Minister of the word of God, and her continual Visitor in the Gaol of Newgate. *Published by Authority,*" which she spoke with an admixture of wry resignation and sadness, she simply averted her eyes from the camera. The vignette placed her simultaneously in the scene of the play, the obscene of the historical Elizabeth who remained just out of reach while seeking to connect with us through her gaze into the camera, and the offstage reality of the present-day actor through whose performance all these layers were brought into contact.

These vignettes did not just root the play in an offstage reality, but did so in ways that kept that reality tantalisingly always just out of reach. Filmed to simulate mid-19th-century daguerreotype portraits in oval frames, whose sitters appear to speak from the past to the modern viewer in an uncannily ghostly way, the vignettes represented an unsettling approximation of images which Walter Benjamin pores over in his essay "A Short History of Photography." Looking at these plates, Benjamin observes how in them, "[t]he human face was surrounded by a silence inside which the gaze was in repose. In short, all the possibilities of portraiture depended on an absence of contact between photography and actuality" (8). There is a detachedness about the human face in early daguerrotypes that gives them a ghoulish quality of near-life and/or near-death, of abstraction from the environment and concentration on the face, held still

for the long exposure period necessitated by daguerreotype technology. As Benjamin explains:

> The procedure itself taught the models to live inside rather than outside the moment. During the long duration of these shots they grew as it were into the picture and in this way presented an extreme opposite to the figures on a snapshot. … Everything in the early pictures was designed to last…. (17)

This last comment about being "designed to last" might explain the popularity, in nineteenth-century English and North American culture, of the sub-genre of the daguerreotype dedicated to post-mortem images. The vignettes of women executed for witchcraft in this production evoke such grotesque post-mortem images, whose subjects were sometimes arranged in a seated position, with eyes open, to simulate life, and who accusingly look at the viewer from the obscene point of view of the dead (Linkman 29; see also Harris 31). Whereas much nineteenth-century post-mortem photography aimed to convey the comforting impression that the deceased had died a "Good Death" (Harris 28), the rarer images of open-eyed corpses meeting the gaze of the viewer are hard to reconcile with such a narrative and seem to speak rather of a 'bad death,' which no amount of soft lighting can mellow. The production's softly-lit, sepia-toned vignettes of women in washed-out circular frames cited these 'bad death' images as a bridge to the reality of the lives of these historical women who always remain just beyond our reach, in the ultimate offstage space of death which can only be apprehended and never fully comprehended, even as their stories are evidently designed to last.

That same dynamic of *almost but not quite* reaching the reality of their experience, of apprehension without comprehension, was also created by the fact that the women, while bearing witness to their persecution and death, did not read their own depositions but were instead confined to reading the legal documents and popular press accounts written about them by (male) clerks, confessors and pamphleteers. The voices of the women themselves remained always out of reach, impossible to bring back to life with any certitude. Together, these intrusions of the obscene offstage in Wright's production of *The Witch of Edmonton* drew the audience towards recalibrating the play's fictional and historical plotlines in a way that pulled the rug from under the fictional plot of Frank's bigamy and murder and the silliness of the dog-devil's shape-shifting, which was exposed as a mere distraction as the vignettes focused attention ever more firmly on the obscene real-life persecution of Elizabeth Sawyer as repres-

entative of a much broader history of oppression, from which there was no imaginary escape.

Both Seaton's *Macbeth* and Wright's *The Witch of Edmonton*, therefore, revealed an investment in using the digital medium to create an afterlife for the early modern offstage that thrived on the tension between what they included in the frame of their productions and the reality that lay beyond it and onto which they afforded glimpses in between the virtual environments where the productions laid their scene. Making the familiar strange, these made-for-digital productions of early modern witchcraft plays capitalised on the obscene power of offstage plots to derail or at least critique the unity and constraint of the official onstage worlds, inserting into them elements of the unsettling realities of domestic oppression and lived experiences of death and persecution that are side-lined by the plays' sensationalist witchcraft plots. By reserving the more obvious digital wizardry of virtual backgrounds and characters being virtually inserted into each other's spaces for the 'scene' of the plays and placing the reality of domestic clutter and of the testimonies of the executed women in the offstage, these productions powerfully translated the tidal force of gravity of the early modern offstage for the digital medium, motivating and disturbing their viewers to prevent them from forgetting the lived experiences that underpin the tragic plots of early modern drama.

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