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‘To Kill Harmless Cattle’: Animal Victims and *The Witch of Edmonton*

The Witch of Edmonton (1621) is often considered as a sceptical portrayal of witchcraft that offers a sympathetic view of the accused, but its accurate depiction of animal victims in events leading to accusations remains overlooked. This essay argues that witchcraft in early modern England was largely an animal crime. Following its source text, Henry Goodcole’s The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch (1621), and earlier prose accounts, The Witch of Edmonton illustrates the centrality of human-animal relations to the gendered dynamics and discourse of early modern witchcraft.

‘My horse this morning runs most piteously of the glanders, whose nose yesternight was as clean as any man’s here now coming from the barber’s’, laments Old Banks in act 4, scene 1 of *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), a scene that begins with several villagers lobbing accusations at Elizabeth Sawyer and then escalates into an angry mob calling for the witch to be burned.¹ Such hysteria sets the stage for the skeptical Justice of the Peace to dismiss the villagers’ beliefs and to enter into a reasoned debate with Sawyer, who proves herself a formidable interlocutor. Together Sawyer and the Justice distract our attention from Old Banks’s initial complaint; if we recall the afflicted horse at all, we might consider that Banks deserves whatever misfortune befalls him or his property, as his physical and verbal abuse of Sawyer earlier in the play prompts her to consider becoming a witch in the first place (2.1.17–38).

This essay attends to the overlooked animal victims of witchcraft, like Banks’s horse, in *The Witch of Edmonton*, and in earlier prose accounts of witchcraft — intertexts that inform the depictions of witchcraft in this and other plays of the Jacobean ‘witch vogue’.² When we think of the victims in incidents of early modern witchcraft, who or what comes to mind? First and foremost are likely the

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women, like Sawyer herself, who were accused, tried, and executed for the crime of practicing witchcraft. Maybe we also consider the child witnesses who were made to testify against family members. If we take witchcraft accounts seriously, then perhaps we think of the members of the community who were victims of maleficia. But do we count, among those members of the community, the scores of cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, and other creatures whose suffering and death is recounted, sometimes in graphic detail, in early modern accounts?

Such animal victims played an enormously important role in how events escalated into incidents of witchcraft. The nonhuman victims of maleficia, whose experiences of bewitchment are detailed in numerous accounts, were physical evidence against the accused. But in some cases, the witch's own animals were victims of abuse. Injury of a supposed witch's beasts gave her motive for seeking revenge. Witchcraft accounts repeatedly suggest that violence against animals is a primary reason for accusations of witchcraft and for the retaliatory acts of the witch. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, then, the illness of Banks's horse is far from trivial; rather, its ailment is entirely characteristic of early modern incidents of witchcraft and one of several factors that lend verisimilitude to the play. The horse's illness is also a plausible reason for accusing Sawyer of witchcraft, as Banks and others do in this scene.³

The animal victims of witchcraft also serve as textual evidence for the crimes described. For early modern readers absorbing these accounts after the fact, the enumeration of animal bodies attests to the guilt of the accused.⁴ The preponderance of evidence in the form of animal victims further complicates the already complex evidentiary dilemma of early modern witchcraft. In addition to the physical marks on the witch's body, the presence of animal familiars, and the testimony of family members and neighbours, the afflicted or dead animals in a village are presented to readers as concrete evidence — more concrete perhaps than the questionable testimonies of children, biased neighbours, or absent animal familiars. Even sceptical readers who doubted the witch's occult abilities might have concluded that, however it was done, her killing of a neighbour's animal property merited punishment. By the same token, if that neighbour who fatally wounded the accused witch's sow was beset by some malady, although the neighbour instigated the act of retaliation, the injured animal's body served as incriminating evidence against the witch. Such patterns of human-animal relations inflect the complex dynamics of gender and witchcraft. Early modern witch texts reveal how violence against an animal's body is an indirect form of violence against the woman herself, with potentially devastating consequences.

The account of Elizabeth Sawyer is a case in point. Henry Goodcole's pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch Late of Edmonton* (1621) is typical of early modern witchcraft accounts in revealing the role of animal victims as catalysts for the crimes in question. Elaborating on Goodcole's account for the witch plot in their play, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley present animal injury as an impetus for the escalation of events, and they include the striking detail from Goodcole that Sawyer's own pig was beaten by Agnes Ratcliffe, spurring Sawyer to retaliate. Many studies of *The Witch of Edmonton* emphasize its skeptical view of witchcraft and illumination of social factors in early modern witchcraft accusations.⁵ Sawyer's animal familiar Tom the Dog has also received valuable critical attention; however, the animal victims that played a crucial role in the circumstances of her accusation — and their real-life counterparts — have gone generally unnoticed.⁶ This essay situates the events in Edmonton among other incidents of witchcraft in which animal bodies are a driving force in the cycles of abuse and accusations. When we bring animal victims into focus, we can consider the dynamic relations between early moderns and their animal property and understand witchcraft both as a threat to such bonds and as evidence of their strength. To adequately appreciate early moderns' perceptions and experiences of witchcraft — and to properly understand the concomitant body of literature — we must recognize the central role of actual animal bodies involved in contemporary events.

'Howbeet the Horse Died': Animal Victims in Prose Accounts

Just how prominently did animals feature in incidents of witchcraft? In his study of the Essex Assize records, Alan Macfarlane indicates that in indictments of 1560 to 1680, animal victims of witchcraft were documented in eighty cases, but taken together, these victims comprised 100 cows, 63 horses, 124 pigs, 123 sheep, and 11 chickens/capons.⁷ More recently, according to Kirsten C. Uszkalo's digital humanities project *Witches in Early Modern England*, at least ninety-seven incidents of animal damage or death occurred among witch-related events between 1560 and 1689.⁸ This figure in itself may seem unimpressive, but becomes more significant when we recognize that an individual incident, as in the Essex assizes, may include dozens upon dozens of animals killed, as was the case, for instance, in the events at St Osyth documented in W.W.'s *A True and Just Recorde* (1582).

Although discussions of animal bewitchment appear in some notable historical studies of witchcraft,⁹ such attention generally has not carried over to literary criticism of early modern witch texts nor to early modern animal studies.

Literary critics who study the drama of the Jacobean ‘witch vogue’ may mention the creaturely body parts added to the witches’ cauldrons in *Macbeth* and Thomas Middleton’s *The Witch*, but rarely consider that the plays’ source texts document, sometimes in graphic detail, the suffering and destruction of actual animal bodies.¹⁰ And in the increasingly robust field of early modern animal studies, scholars have attended to many ways that early moderns used, interacted with, and thought with animals; however, witch texts have been largely overlooked as an important discursive site.

In fact, the prose accounts suggest the real and symbolic value of the injured livestock to their humans. When someone thrusts a pitchfork into a pig or beats a horse, such violent acts are not merely damage to property.¹¹ The injured animal impacts the human’s livelihood and ability to sustain herself and her family; as an innocent creature in pain, the animal’s suffering also has a profound emotional impact. As Erica Fudge’s careful study of early modern wills suggests, the long-term, companionate, and collaborative relationships between early moderns and their ‘quick cattle’ were defining features of many people’s everyday lives.¹²

At the same time that the accounts reveal harm to animals as fraught acts of violence against their owners, these narratives, with their sometimes-graphic descriptions, also fulfill and fuel an audience’s interest in spectacles of animal performance, torture, and death more broadly — in fact, the same semiotic matrix formed among the discursive intersections of ‘stage, stake, and scaffold’, as Andreas Höfele argues.¹³ Numerous accounts provide detailed descriptions of bewitched animals behaving wildly, leaping about in a frenzied state, as well as how humans torture the distressed creatures in efforts to ‘unwitch’ them, for example, by burning an animal in whole or in part.¹⁴

Despite their palpable presence in the prose accounts, the significance of animals in the dynamic encounters of early modern witchcraft remains understudied. One reason for this must be that, among prevailing approaches for understanding witchcraft, perhaps the most influential is still the ‘charity denied’ model, espoused by Keith Thomas and Macfarlane, which emphasizes social class disparities, the decline of charity, and the increasing criminalization of the poor as key factors.¹⁵ Their important historical studies of the 1970s affirm the skeptical view of witchcraft Reginald Scot extends in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), in which the typical order of events involves an older, impoverished, perhaps physically disabled woman who begs for alms from her neighbours; those neighbours grow weary of her requests and eventually deny her; the woman utters words against them in anger, or so they think if they hear her mutter as she walks away; the neighbours’ children fall sick, their crops die, or their cattle are lamed; they

then accuse the woman of practicing witchcraft.¹⁶ This course of events assumes the accusation to stem from the guilt of the accusers; their own lack of charity leads them to believe that the begging woman has cause to seek revenge and that whatever ills they experience are the result of her power to exact revenge through supernatural means.

Even in cases in which such circumstances pertain, what if the series of events that ends in an accusation escalates not because the witch, denied a request for food, has forespoken the neighbours' children or cattle, but because the neighbours, in a state of anger, have injured the woman's livestock? What if the neighbours have been verbally or physically abusive to the woman or her children? In many cases, it seems the witch is only responding in kind by injuring animals or children. Thomas himself acknowledges that 'there was a wide variety of ways in which the witch might have been caused to take justifiable offence', citing instances of people injuring or threatening the animals of the accused.¹⁷ And yet, it seems that in the final analysis, his conclusion that 'the most common situation of all was that in which the victim ... had been guilty of a breach of charity or neighborliness, by turning away an old woman who had come to the door to beg or borrow some food or drink, or the loan of some household utensil'¹⁸ has held such sway in studies of early modern witch texts that other circumstances, and the animals so central to them, have been obscured. By reading violence against animals as a major impetus for witchcraft events, animal victims are restored to the centre of the conflicts out of which accusations emerge.

One of the earliest printed witchcraft accounts, *The Examination and Confession of Certaine Wytches* (1566), details the confessions of accused witches Elizabeth Frauncis, Joan Waterhouse, and her mother Agnes Waterhouse. Each describes their interactions with animal familiars, including a cat named Sathan and a creature like 'a blacke dogge with a face like an ape, a short taile a cheine and a sylver whystle'.¹⁹ These familiars go about typical business: they grant wishes (sheep, a husband for Elizabeth Frauncis — as well as laming her husband and doing away with her child when she 'found not the quietnes that she desyred'), they disrupt neighbours' brewing and churning. Sathan also kills several hogs and geese, and drowns a cow.²⁰ Sathan changes shape, from a cat into a toad for easier maintenance, and demands Agnes Waterhouse's body and soul in exchange for his service.²¹ As witness Agnes Brown tells it, the horned dog 'skyped and leaped to and fro', demanded butter and then interfered with production when denied, and also tempted her to suicide with a dagger belonging to Agnes Waterhouse.²² In a moment that has echoes in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as well as *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Waterhouse explains that her familiar has no

power to hurt one of her neighbours 'because [he] was so strong in fayth', though Sathan could create mischief and harm his property.²³ With its proto-Faustian resonances, this pamphlet is an important literary intertext; in featuring livestock and animal property among those injured and killed, it foregrounds the pattern of animal abuse and retaliation that characterizes a number of accounts published thereafter.

A Detection of Damnable Driftes, published in 1579, recounts trial details of four women accused of witchcraft, including Elizabeth Frauncis (almost surely the same woman from the 1566 pamphlet, as Marion Gibson notes).²⁴ Injury to animals features prominently in this brief pamphlet. Three or four dozen chickens die after a neighbour, Prat, grabs a handful of grain from another accused, Mother Staunton, and throws it to them; a gelding dies suddenly after Staunton has been denied a leather thong. After being denied another unspecified request, another villager's cattle 'yelded gore stinkyng blood, and one of [them] fell into suche miserable plight, that for a certaine space, [her owner] could by no meanes recover her'.²⁵ In another instance, Staunton seems to have been denied another request, and afterward, the offending party's 'Hogges fell sicke and died, to the number of twentie, and in the end he burned one, whereby as he thinketh, he saved the reste: He also had a Cowe straungely caste into a narrowe gripe ... [who was] in a fewe daies three tymes like to be loste in the mire'.²⁶ Clearly, the denial of charity (or just denial of Staunton's requests) is a factor here, but the dire consequences of the denial merit attention. Such details of animal injury and death, as well as the owner's efforts to 'unwitch' his remaining hogs by burning one of them, populate the bulk of this account.

In the pamphlet's final section, evidence given against Mother Nokes, a gentleman testifies that his horse is stricken:

Having a servant of his at Plough, this Mother Nokes going by, asked the fellow a question but getting no aunswere of him she went on her way. Forthwith one of his horses fell doune. At his coming home to dynner, he tolde his Maister howe the same horse was swolne about the head. His Maister at first supposing that it came by a strype, was greatly offended at the ploughman, but afterwards understanding of Mother Nokes goyng by ... went to the said Mother Nokes and chid and threatened to have her to her aunswere, howbeet the Horse died.²⁷

The pamphlet ends on this note. In such details we get a sense of the scale of animal suffering and death involved in witchcraft events, and by extension, of their human owners' suffering as well. As many as seventy-two animals have died,

by this account. This is not to ignore other mischiefs and maleficia described; however, where other studies disregard animals to focus on the babies and the brewing at stake, I deliberately emphasize the nonhuman bodies whose injuries and deaths, as we see, are a driving force behind these incidents and ensuing accusations and convictions.

Like *The Examination of Certain Wytches, Damnable Driftes* was a foundational prose account in what is a growing literary genre, one that evolved conventions of its own — conventions that would, in turn, inform the drama inspired by such texts — and animals are part and parcel to those conventions. Other early prose accounts in which animals are significant presences include Richard Galis's *A Brief Treatise* (1579), *A Rehearsall both Strang and True* (1579), *The Severall Factes of Witch-Crafte* (1585), *The Apprehension and Confession of Three Notorious Witches* (1589), and G.B.'s *A Most Wicked Worke of a Wretched Witch* (1592).²⁸ But it was W.W.'s *A True and Just Recorde* that had the most profound literary impact — Reginald Scot read it, as did Middleton — and in which the animal victims are most graphically described.²⁹

Among the lengthiest of the witchcraft accounts published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *A True and Just Recorde* is a testament to J.P. Brian Darcy's obsessive investigation into the complicated events of St Osyth in 1582. The pamphlet closes with a foldout table cataloguing the witches and their confessions, crimes, and victims. Even the table alone — if one finds the pamphlet's labyrinthine informations and confessions confusing or tedious — highlights the animal victims at stake. Sometimes the bodies are tallied: 'vi. beasts', 'vii. milch beasts', 'v. beasts, and one bullocke'. Elsewhere numbers are eschewed: 'horses and beasts', 'several of his Swine', 'beasts, horses, swine, and pigs of severall men'.³⁰ But the many testimonies that constitute this account create a much more specific and harrowing picture of the animal suffering that fueled acts of retaliation and accusations.

Among these, Robert Sannever's information implicates Elizabeth Ewstace, whose daughter had been a servant in his house, and whom he had apparently mistreated. Upon hearing her daughter's complaints, Mother Ewstace retaliated. Sannever claimed:

That the Sommer after he milked vii. milche beasts, and that al that sommer many and very often tymes, his sayde beasts did give downe blood in steede of milke and that hee had little, or no profit by them: And hee saith that about iiii. monethes after many of his hogges did skippe and leape about the yarde in a straunge sorte: And some of them died.³¹

Other accusations against Ewstace appear further in the account: Felice Okey accuses her of hurting geese, causing her milk cows to give blood instead of milk as well.³² Another accused, Cisley Celles, offended by Thomas Death's wife, bewitched a child to death for whom his wife was a nursemaid, and further, Death 'had presently after severall Swine the which did skippe and leape about the yarde, in a most straunge sorte, and then died. And he saith that over night he had a Calfe which was very fat, and the next morning he found the same dead'.³³

In another information, Darcy gathered testimony from several people of the same parish, Little Okley, in which Annis Herd was accused of bewitching many animals. At least twenty of John Wade's sheep and lambs, as well as beasts and other cattle were injured and died.³⁴ Thomas Cartwrite claimed his:

Head Cowe fell over a great bancke into a ditch on the other side, and there lay with the necke double under her, and the head under the shoulder, but alive ... it lay fourteene dayes in a groning and piteous sorte, but of all that time would eate nothing, whereupon hee saith hee took an axe & knocked it on the head. And also the other Cowe that was with the said Cow being a calving in a most strane sort died.³⁵

Andrew West and his wife offered to sell Herd a pig, but Herd did not want to pay: 'if a poore body should have one of them and bestow cost, & ... if they should die it would halfe undoe them'.³⁶ Herd offered to take one of the pigs (and perhaps pay later or pay in kind) if her landlord would let her keep it, and West's wife agreed. But Herd never showed up to take the pig, so the Wests sold it to another neighbour. Soon after, West explained:

One of the best pigs that he had set upon a crying as [the pigs] all stood together before the dore in the yard, and the rest of the pigs went away from yt at the length the pig that cried folowed stackering as though it were lame in the hinder partes, and yt he called his weeders to see in what strange case the pig was in, and asked them what was best to doe therewith, to which some of them said, burne it, other said, cut of the eares & burn them, and so they did, & then the pig amended by & by.³⁷

As a final example, several residents of Walton blamed Joan Robinson for the bewitchment or death of a calf upon its birth, two of the Carters' 'best & likeliest beasts' whose necks were broken 'in a strange sort', a fine mare as well as a dog that ate its flesh after it died, a beast that drowned 'in a ditche where there was but a litle water', a sow that 'would not let her pigs sucke, but did bite & flye at

them', ten newborn pigs, plus two more pigs belonging to a different neighbour, 'a fat and a well liking pigge' which belonged to yet another neighbour, and finally a cow 'that was drowned in a ditche not a foote deepe with water'.³⁸

In terms of sheer scope, *A True and Just Recorde* is exceptionally revealing with respect to the centrality of animals to the incidents described, and the prolific account of animal bewitchment, injury, and death brings into focus the ways that human and nonhuman lives were shaped by acts of neighbourly aggression and retaliation. The cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, and chickens of an early modern household quite literally determined the ability of its humans to live and to make a living. Their loss could be disastrous, especially for those who had less: those whose lives depended upon the fewest animals — the single cow sustaining a family with its white meats — were the least visible, and the most susceptible should an animal perish.³⁹ For many early moderns, Fudge writes,

Quick cattle were sentient and self-moving beings, and how to live with and work with them — working out who they were, if you like — was crucial to the functioning of the household. Getting to know one's livestock was a vital part of a family's survival, and getting to know them would have been particularly easy on a smallholding where few animals were kept ... the person who worked most closely with the animal would also have a grasp of an animal's interior being — of what might be termed their character.⁴⁰

The loss of a cow or pig, then, is loss of sustenance and animal capital; it is also loss of a member of a household for whom humans cared, and with whom they collaborated. As we have seen, the descriptions of human-animal relations in the prose accounts of witchcraft are unsentimental, to be sure. These are not pets. Nevertheless, if a cow had been with a family for fifteen years, then it was a family member they knew intimately. Awareness of animal victims thus sharpens our understanding of the crime of early modern witchcraft — that the category of witchcraft encompassed the crimes of violent aggression and retaliatory acts upon animal bodies that led to accusations. Taking the animals seriously reveals just how anachronistic is a view of witchcraft that focuses on human players alone. For early moderns reading Goodcole's account or attending a performance of *The Witch of Edmonton*, Elizabeth Sawyer's turn to witchcraft as a means of redress for wrongs against her *and her sow* would have been entirely consistent with expectations around incidents of witchcraft informed both by numerous prose accounts and by the defining presence of animals in their own everyday lives.⁴¹

'Her Own Sow Shall Give Evidence Against Her': Animal Bewitchment and Abuse in *The Witch of Edmonton*

Goodcole's pamphlet, which he claims to have published as a corrective to spurious ballads circulating on the occasion of Sawyer's execution, offers Sawyer's testimony and confession ostensibly in her own words. Published in 1621, decades later than the early prose accounts cited above, and well after the 1590s when the generic conventions of such accounts took a literary turn, as Gibson suggests,⁴² *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch Late of Edmonton* is unusual in its efforts to present its contents as unequivocal truth. The pamphlet's 'concern for recording question and answer and printing them as a *recreation* of events is striking' and reflects an 'anxiety to recreate the moment in more detail than is usual in the reporting of other crimes — an anxiety presumably stemming from the debate about the evidence needed to prove that this exceptional crime had taken place'.⁴³ Unsurprisingly, Goodcole's painstaking reconstruction of Sawyer's information and confession includes references to Sawyer's animal victims; it also explains Sawyer's reason for seeking revenge against Agnes Ratcliffe: this neighbour 'did strike a Sowe of [Sawyer's] in her sight, for licking up a little Soape where she had laide it'.⁴⁴ Ratcliffe's husband testified that on her deathbed, Ratcliffe had 'these wordes confidently spake: namely, that if shee did die at that time shee would verily take it on her death, that Elizabeth Sawyer her neighbor, whose Sowe with a washing-Beetle she had stricken, and so *for that cause her malice being great*, was the occasion of her death'.⁴⁵ Indeed, this testimony presented to the jury is what impelled the further examination, and ultimately the execution of Sawyer, who was acquitted of other charges but for the death of Ratcliffe was convicted. Ratcliffe's role in this set of events accords with the dynamics shown in *A True and Just Recorde* and other accounts: she had injured Sawyer's sow, provoking Sawyer to retaliate. The detail is an important hinge in the Agnes Ratcliffe/Anne Ratcliffe facet of the plot, in both the pamphlet and the play. In both texts, the injury to Sawyer's sow is presented as a cause for her vengeance as well as proof of her guilt: 'I'll sue Mother Sawyer, and her own sow shall give in evidence against her', Anne Ratcliffe says, in a fleeting moment in which her sanity seems to be temporarily restored (4.1.203–5).⁴⁶ That the playwrights include this detail — which would have been simple enough to exclude while still retaining Anne Ratcliffe's character — demonstrates their attention to the details of Goodcole's pamphlet, their concern with giving Sawyer a motive for revenge, and their broader awareness of the dynamics of neighbourly aggression, retaliation, and accusation in which animal bodies form a crucial locus.

Criticism of *The Witch of Edmonton* tends to emphasize the play's skeptical stance toward witchcraft. The play's treatment of Sawyer as a woman who has the role of witch thrust upon her, her sympathetic speeches, and even her affectionate relationship with her dog all assuage the discomfort that 'less relatable' plays like *The Witch* or *The Late Lancashire Witches* might induce. Yet amid critical investment in viewing the play as a 'truer' representation of early modern witchcraft, the playwrights' attention to nonhuman victims of witchcraft has, with rare exception, gone generally unconsidered as a vital element of its truth.⁴⁷ This oversight is perhaps a consequence not only of how the play seems to reflect a modern skepticism, nor simply because Tom the Dog's star outshines other textual features that merit attention. The play's generic categorization as domestic tragedy places the Frank Thorney bigamy-murder plot as the 'serious' through line, while the Sawyer scenes and the Cuddy Banks plot are less serious; they are treated, in fact, as an amusing backdrop to the human drama in this tragicomedy, much as the Hecate scenes are read as juxtaposing comic background in Middleton's tragicomedy *The Witch*.⁴⁸ As Roberta Barker has discussed, reading *Witch of Edmonton* as a domestic tragedy is problematic in part because the genre itself is characterized by 'realism': one prominent definition of the genre regards it as 'a tragedy of the common people, ordinarily set in the domestic scene, dealing with personal and family relationships rather than with large affairs of state, presented in a realistic fashion, and ending in a tragic or otherwise serious manner'.⁴⁹ To read the play by this light would seem to necessitate a focus on human players. Witchcraft, merry pranks of morris dancers, and a protean canine familiar may be too fantastic, too unrealistic by our standards to be taken seriously as elements of the 'domestic scene' — but by early modern standards, this was not so.⁵⁰ Failure to take these elements of early modern life seriously positions modern readers to entirely overlook the play's references to animal victims of witchcraft. What would happen if we expanded the definition of domestic tragedy to include the animal facet of reality, to consider the physical and textual presence of animals within drama 'set in the domestic scene, dealing with personal and family relationships ... presented in a realistic fashion'? Animals were, after all, a defining presence in the actual early modern household, and personal and family relationships included relationships with a household's animals. While many of the play's references to animals appear in the sometimes comic scenes of the Sawyer plot, attending to the presence of animals as a realistic component of the play has potential to expand our view of the reality that domestic tragedy can be said to represent.

The Witch of Edmonton gestures repeatedly toward animal bewitchment and violence toward animals as motivating factors in the events that transpire. The

villagers voice their fears for their livestock as accusations against Sawyer emerge. Violence toward humans and animals is interrelated. In Sawyer's first speech in the play, she protests her neighbour's ill treatment and accusations of witchcraft:

... Some call me 'witch',
 And being ignorant of myself they go
 About to teach me how to be one, urging
 That my bad tongue — by their bad usage made so—
 Forespeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
 Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse. (2.1.8–13)

Sawyer is not a witch, yet. But the violence she experiences at the hands of Old Banks, on whose property she was gathering branches,⁵¹ and the encounter with Cuddy Banks and the morris dancers who call her a witch and exit 'in strange postures', provoke her to curse and call for 'some power good or bad' to assist her with seeking revenge, since 'Tis all one / To be a witch as to be counted one' (113 sd, 122, 133–4). When Dog materializes and offers to help — only after Sawyer agrees to a Faustian compact, her body and soul in a deed of gift — her first wish is that Dog kill Old Banks.⁵² But like the Old Man in *Doctor Faustus*, Old Banks is protected by his faith:

SAWYER Why wilt not kill him?

DOG Fool, because I cannot.

Though we have power, know it is circumscribed
 And tied in limits. Though he be cursed to thee,
 Yet of himself he is loving to the world
 And charitable to the poor. Now men
 That, as he, love goodness, though in smallest measure,
 Live without compass of our reach. His cattle
 And corn I'll kill and mildew, but his life—
 Until I take him, as I late found thee,
 Cursing and swearing — I have no power to touch.

SAWYER Work on his corn and cattle, then. (174–84)

Working on cattle is an effective alternative to afflicting the human, whose body is out of bounds. Animal bodies are substitutes for human ones here as in so many of the prose accounts. Where the witch or her familiar cannot directly assail a human body, laming or killing animals is an avenue for a more indirect injury that may be no less traumatic, and indeed, may have more far-reaching consequences. Dog works not only on Banks's cattle, but on his horse, and finally, on

Banks himself (though not through violence), as we learn in act 4, scene 1.⁵³ And in this scene the pivotal — and typical — role of animals as catalysts in witchcraft events is most explicitly depicted.

Old Banks is not the only villager to have his animals affected by Sawyer's malefic magic, and the dialogue among the countrymen reveals the conflation of animal property and women as property, and more generally, the blurring of boundaries between human and nonhuman. 'I took my wife and a serving-man in our town of Edmonton thrashing in my barn together such corn as country wenches carry to market. And examining my polecat why she did so, she swore in her conscience she was bewitched', says the first countryman (4.1.6–10). The second countryman, concerned with women as well, declares, 'Rid the town of [Sawyer], else all our wives will do nothing else but dance about other country maypoles' (12–14). Fear of cuckoldry seems to supersede fear of damage to beasts here, but the third countryman's speech weaves these two seemingly discrete areas of concern together, making explicit the threat that Sawyer is believed to pose to the entire village: 'Our cattle fall, our wives fall, our daughters fall and maid-servants fall; and we ourselves shall not be able to stand if this beast be suffered to graze amongst us' (15–18). 'Falling' here applies literally, as with the cattle that have been lamed, but the term is also sexual: the women 'fall' into licentiousness, as in the first countryman's complaint. The 'beast' in the last line figures Sawyer herself as a cow grazing among the villagers. The third countryman's use of epistrophe makes plain a pattern of thought that goes beyond metaphor to identify both cattle and women as creaturely property and to situate them in apposition.⁵⁴ Not only do livestock and then women fall, threatening the standing of men, but Sawyer, having 'fallen' into witchcraft is herself a beast, attacking other beasts and as well as women who clearly can become (or already are) beasts as well. This bestial description of Sawyer also obliquely associates her body with the body of her own beast, her sow; by this reading, Banks's abuse of Sawyer herself has as its parallel Anne Ratcliffe's beating of Sawyer's pig. In the framework of the play, because Sawyer is suspected of witchcraft, called a witch, and abused by the community long before she ever contemplates obtaining an animal familiar and practicing in earnest, the injuries to her own body and to her sow's body are related as prime causes that precipitate her desire for revenge and retaliation.

Just as the play positions Sawyer and her sow in metonymic relation as victims of violence, so the behaviour of the bewitched Anne Ratcliffe recalls descriptions of bewitched animals in prose accounts, skipping about, leaping wildly, performing madness, as it were. As Purkiss writes, 'The witch's punishment of her enemies involves forcing them to cross the lines between animal and human'.⁵⁵

The Witch of Edmonton emphasizes how a human-animal boundary is blurred in the discourse of witchcraft (first our cattle, then our women, to paraphrase the third countryman). This shaky boundary is also destabilized both in the abusive treatment of the supposed witch and her animals, as described in prose accounts including Goodcole's pamphlet. Indeed, one way to read Hamluc's cries to 'Burn the witch' (4.1.19) — witches were not, in fact, burned in England — might be in connection to the view of burning as a remedy for bewitchment. Just as burning one animal was a means of saving the lot, as in the example from *Damnablen Driftes* above, here, burning Sawyer could save the 'herd' of the community from further effects of bewitchment. And finally, those effects themselves on both humans, as with Ratcliffe, and animals, as in the several examples from *A True and Just Recorde*, attest to witchcraft as a powerful force that undermines human-animal distinctions.

Later in the same scene, Old Banks becomes the emasculated butt of the joke. Testifying against Sawyer (and invoking a passage from George Gifford's demonological treatise, as Munro notes in the annotation to these lines), he further claims,

Having a dun cow tied up in my backside, let me go thither or but cast mine eye at her, and if I should be hanged I cannot choose, though it be ten times in an hour, but run to the cow and, taking up her tail, kiss — saving your worship's reverence — my cow behind, that the whole town of Edmonton has been ready to bepiss themselves with laughing me to scorn. (4.1.65–72)

Of course, the moment is comic, depicting a relatively harmless form of bewitchment quite different from Ratcliffe's. It also assumes an audience whose lived experience is defined by proximity to animals. Banks's uncontrollable affection for his cow might be understood simply as a preposterous, exaggerated version of the ordinary physical intimacy between early moderns and their beasts, as Fudge describes, born out of everyday interactions.⁵⁶

Because the cow-kissing passage is both comic and intertextual, with a referent in early modern demonology, it's easy for modern readers to laugh at Banks, notice the playwright's nod toward Gifford's sceptical treatise, and forget about the cow. The same is true of first countryman's additional accusation in the play's the final scene:

I'll be sworn, Master Carter, she bewitched Gammer Washbowl's sow to cast her pigs a day before she would have farrowed, yet they were sent up to London and sold

for as good Westminster dog-pigs at Bartholomew Fair as ever great-bellied ale-wife longed for. (5.2.55–60)

While the passage recalls incidents from the earlier prose pamphlets, such as *A True and Just Recorde*, modern readers may be more likely to find it an amusing reference to Ben Jonson's comedy than to actual pigs made to miscarry. How might we recalibrate our lens not only to observe intertextual winks among playwrights but to notice how this play repeatedly draws attention, even in the supposed 'comic subplot', to the animal victims of witchcraft?

The cultural context in which incidents of early modern witchcraft took place was defined by the ubiquitous presence of animals. Animal property was regularly targeted in acts of aggression between neighbours and in reprisals leading to accusations of witchcraft. A sustained practice of regarding animal victims in early modern witch texts expands our understanding of incidents of witchcraft as a set of events encompassing animal abuse and retaliation leading to accusation. It also reveals the extent to which violence against animals was construed as a method of injuring their human owners, on the part of both the witch and her neighbours. From a literary perspective, we might see animals in metonymic relation to their owners. For early moderns, of course, the relationship far transcended the figurative. Attending to human-animal relations and animal victims allows us to begin to recognize a crucial lacuna in studies of early modern witchcraft, and to consider that the experience and spectacle of witchcraft was, for many, less about a system of demonological beliefs than it was animal bodies in pain, as reflected in prose accounts and in *The Witch of Edmonton*.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley, *The Witch of Edmonton*, ed. Lucy Munro (New York, 2017), 4.1.1–3; citations in text hereafter.
- 2 I generally use the term ‘animal’ in this essay for ease of reading and reference, despite its problems. As Laurie Shannon has shown, early moderns themselves preferred ‘creature’ and ‘beast’ over the not-yet popular ‘animal’; see ‘The Eight Animals in Shakespeare; or, Before the Human’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 124.2 (2009), 472–9, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.472>.
- 3 Keith Thomas observes that ‘the charge [of witchcraft] was normally only levied when the accuser felt, not merely that the witch bore a grudge against him, but that the grudge was a *justifiable* one. The witch, in other words, was not thought to be acting out of mere vindictiveness; she was avenging a definite injury’; *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1991), 659. On evidence in witchcraft proceedings, see Orna Alyagon Darr, *Marks of an Absolute Witch: Evidentiary Dilemmas in Early Modern England* (Burlington, 2011), especially chapters 1 and 3, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315593982>.
- 4 As Darr explains, ‘from the accounts contained in the pamphlet literature, it appears that, on a popular level, the presumption of the injury following a conflict enjoyed a high degree of certainty. Alleged victims related the misfortune they experienced to a previous conflict with the suspected witch. The events were interpreted in a way that pointed to the suspect’s guilt, even if the conflict was not very recent or *in cases where the accuser had initiated the conflict* or behaved uncharitably’ (my emphasis). Darr, *Marks of an Absolute Witch*, 97.
- 5 See, most recently, several illuminating discussions of the play in *Early Theatre* 21.2, ‘Issues in Review: Placing *The Witch of Edmonton*’, especially Susan Amussen, ‘*The Witch of Edmonton*: Witchcraft, Inversion, and Social Criticism’, *Early Theatre* 21.2 (2018), 167–80, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.21.2.3608>. Diane Purkiss takes a critical view of modern readers’ acceptance of *The Witch of Edmonton* as a ‘truer’ representation of witchcraft than other witch plays; ‘Testimony and Truth: *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Witches of Lancashire*’, in *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (New York, 1996), 231–49. For an insightful reading of how both social pressures and demonological discourse operate in the play, see David Nicol, ‘Interrogating the Devil: Social and Demonic Pressure in *The Witch of Edmonton*’, *Comparative Drama* 38.4 (2004–5), 425–45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2004.0047>.

- 6 On the role of Dog, see Nicol, 'Interrogating the Devil', *passim*; Meg Pearson, 'A Dog, a Witch, a Play: *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Early Theatre* 11.2 (2008), 89–111, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.11.2.785>; Lucy Munro, 'Introduction', in *The Witch of Edmonton*, 55–64. Molly Hand, 'Animals, the Devil, and the Sacred in Early Modern English Culture', in *Animals, Animality, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Boehrer, Molly Hand, and Brian Massumi (Cambridge, 2018), 105–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108595278.007>, briefly gestures toward animal victims of witchcraft, but focuses primarily on the complex role of familiars in witchcraft narratives as well as dramatic representations, including *The Witch of Edmonton*. Amussen mentions that Sawyer is suspected of witchcraft based on the deaths of children and cattle, but these are not the subject of her inquiry, which emphasizes factors including class, gender, and age; 'The Witch of Edmonton: Witchcraft, Inversion, and Social Criticism', 168–9.
- 7 See Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London, 1970), 153–4.
- 8 See *Witches in Early Modern England*, a digital humanities project curated by Kirsten C. Uszkalo, <http://witching.org/>. The 'Brimstone' feature allows users to filter and sort by event type.
- 9 Discussions of animal victims appear in Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, 147–57; James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (London, 1996), especially chapters 4 and 6; and Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York, 1996), chapter 11, especially 84–90. Thomas acknowledges animal bewitchment as a factor in the events surrounding witchcraft accusations, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 663–80. Although these indispensable historical studies of witchcraft recognize the presence of animals in incidents of witchcraft, their overall conclusions — and the ways in which they have served as foundations for further research — remain generally anthropocentric in focus. In an essay on the figure of the animal familiar in early modern witchcraft, Sharpe writes, 'one element in any future research into familiars must be an analysis of early modern attitudes to animals, and of the relationship between the human and animal worlds'; 'The Witch's Familiar in Elizabethan England', in *Authority and Consent in Tudor England: Essays Presented to C.S.L. Davies*, ed. G.W. Bernard and S.J. Gunn (Aldershot, 2002), 227. I take this call to apply to research not only of the familiar but of early modern witchcraft more broadly.
- 10 The scenes in question from *Macbeth* were added or revised by Thomas Middleton. While the "authorship question" of the Scottish play is beyond the scope of this essay, it has been amply addressed by Gary Taylor in "Empirical Middleton: *Macbeth*,

Adaptation, and Microauthorship,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 65.3 (Fall 2014): 239–72, and Taylor, “Middleton and Macbeth,” in *Macbeth: The Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Robert Miola (New York, 2014), 294–303; and by Inga-Stina Ewbank in her introduction to *The Tragedy of Macbeth: A Genetic Text*, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford, 2007), 1165–9.

- 11 In one of the many informations taken by Brian Darcy, William Byet’s wife is said to have assaulted Elizabeth Bennet’s swine ‘with great Gybets, and did at an other time thrust a pitchforke through the side of one of [them]’; W.W., *A True and Just Recorde* (London, 1582; STC: 24922), sig. B7, in Marion Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (London, 2000), 90. For discussion of the testimonies involving the Byets and Bennet, see Hand, ‘Animals, the Devil, and the Sacred’, 109–11.
- 12 See Fudge, *Quick Cattle and Dying Wishes: People and Their Animals in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 2018), passim and esp. chapters 2 and 3. This is not to suggest — and Fudge herself does not — that all early moderns had especially affectionate relations with their livestock or that livestock were cared for in the way we now care for our pets. But Fudge’s consideration of the kind of relationship that would develop, for example, between a woman and the cow she milked everyday, twice a day, for fifteen years, urges us to think carefully about the nature of the interspecies bonds among humans and the livestock on whom they depended.
- 13 See Höfele, *Stage, Stake, and Scaffold: Humans and Animals in Shakespeare’s Theatre* (Oxford, 2011), introduction and passim.
- 14 Sally Hickey’s study of the natural causes of ‘animal bewitchment’ — in the form of toxic flora — offers an important path from an analysis of social causes of witchcraft accusations to scientific study of likely environmental causes for the animal disease and death documented in witchcraft narratives. The frenzied behavior of bewitched animals, Hickey suggests, may be attributed to any number of ingested plants or fungi, the effects of which she carefully describes and cites examples of in contemporary witch texts; ‘Fatal Feeds? Plants, Livestock Losses and Witchcraft Accusations in Tudor and Stuart Britain’, *Folklore* 101.2 (1990), 131–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.1990.9715787>.
- 15 See Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; MacFarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*. Amussen considers and complicates the Thomas/Macfarlane model and its relevance to *The Witch of Edmonton*, ‘*The Witch of Edmonton*’, 168–9. See also Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 62–7, for a feminist critique of the Thomas/Macfarlane approach. Jonathan Barry, ‘Introduction: Keith Thomas and the Problem of Witchcraft’, in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barry, Marianne Hester, and

- Gareth Roberts (Cambridge, 1996), 1–46, considers the constraints as well as the continued significance of Thomas's study.
- 16 Reginald Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584; New York, 1972), 4–5.
 - 17 Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 660–1.
 - 18 Ibid.
 - 19 *The Examination and Confession of Certaine Wytches* (1566), 2A4v; in Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*, 22. Subsequent citations of pamphlets include page references to Gibson only; signature references are included in Gibson's edited texts.
 - 20 Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*, 17–19.
 - 21 Ibid, 19–21.
 - 22 Ibid, 22.
 - 23 Ibid, 24.
 - 24 Ibid, 41.
 - 25 Ibid, 47.
 - 26 Ibid, 48–9.
 - 27 Ibid, 49.
 - 28 Gibson notes this latter pamphlet's more self-consciously literary style, appeal to an 'upmarket' audience, and its intertextual references to Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, first performed in the same year, 1592; *Early Modern Witches*, 138–9.
 - 29 Gareth Roberts suggests that Middleton did read W.W.'s *A True and Just Recorde* in fact, on fairly compelling grounds; 'A Reexamination of the Magical Material in Middleton's *The Witch*', *Notes and Queries* 23.5–6 (1976), 218–19, https://doi.org/10.1093/nq/23_5-6_216.
 - 30 W.W., *A True and Just Recorde*, in Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*, 123–4.
 - 31 Ibid, 98–9.
 - 32 Ibid, 110–1.
 - 33 Ibid, 108.
 - 34 As Fudge notes, 'cattle' may refer to cows, but also to animal property or livestock more generally (as in 'chattel'); *Quick Cattle and Dying Wishes*, 25–6. 'Beasts' in these accounts seems to generally refer to livestock in the bovine family, but might include draught animals, including horses, as well (*Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] s.v. 'beast' n., 3 a. and b.).
 - 35 Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*, 113.
 - 36 Ibid, 115.
 - 37 Ibid.
 - 38 Ibid, 120–2.
 - 39 Fudge, *Quick Cattle and Dying Wishes*, x.

- 40 Ibid, 45.
- 41 Keith Thomas posits 'Nowhere in Europe was ... dependence upon animals greater than in England, which, certainly by the eighteenth century and probably much earlier, had a higher ratio of domestic beasts per cultivated acre and per man than any other country, save the Netherlands'; *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1984), 26.
- 42 See Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*, 8–9, 138–9.
- 43 Ibid, 301.
- 44 Goodcole, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch*, in Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*, 305.
- 45 Ibid, my emphasis.
- 46 Barbara Traister describes Ratcliffe as 'a woman who has railed against [Sawyer]', and Dog as 'maddening the railing woman so that she commits suicide', but arguably, beating Sawyer's pig with an instrument of blunt force is a bit more injurious than railing; 'Magic and the Decline of Demons: A View from the Stage', in *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage*, ed. Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich (Burlington, 2014), 29. Amussen discusses Sawyer's conviction for bewitching Ratcliffe to death but does not mention Sawyer's motive for seeking revenge; *The Witch of Edmonton*, 168, 174.
- 47 See Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 242.
- 48 For alternative readings that view the play as coherent and the Sawyer/Dog plot as central, see Nicol, 'Interrogating the Devil', passim, and Pearson, 'A Dog, a Witch, a Play', passim.
- 49 Henry Hitch Adams, *English Domestic, or Homiletic Tragedy, 1575 to 1642* (New York, 1943), 1–2, cited in Barker, 'An Honest Dog Yet: Performing *The Witch of Edmonton*', *Early Theatre* 12.2 (2009), 164, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.12.2.821>.
- 50 Munro's discussion of the play's generic conventions highlights the extent to which the Sawyer scenes draw explicitly on the language of the domestic scene, 'Introduction', 47–52.
- 51 Witchcraft narratives, such as *Witches Apprehended, Examined, and Executed* (London, 1613), record similar abuse; for example, Mary Sutton, the daughter of an accused witch and also accused herself, was beaten with a cudgel 'til she was scare able to stirre' (Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*, 274).
- 52 Such compacts appear in many early prose accounts, including several that precede Marlowe's play. The binding agreement with the familiar is clearly a convention of the evolving genre.

- 53 That Dog can bewitch Banks suggests, perhaps, that he is not as good as Dog had claimed, or that Banks has become less good or otherwise compromised himself in the ensuing scenes.
- 54 Of this passage, Chris Clary writes, 'This last declaration neatly draws together Sawyer's connection to animals and the patriarchal infrastructure that she apparently endangers ... and emphasizes the sexualized threat that she poses to male authority — polecat[s], cattle, wives, daughters and female servants will fall into sexual license even at the moment that they're effectively grouped together in one common category'; 'Familiar Creatures: Witchcraft, Female Bodies, and Early Modern Animals', *Early Modern Culture* 11.5 (2016), 72.
- 55 Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 242.
- 56 Fudge, *Quick Cattle and Dying Wishes*, passim; see also Fudge, 'The Animal Face of Early Modern England', *Theory, Culture, and Society* 30.7/8 (2013), 177–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413496122>.

