

**PERPETUATING THE MISOGYNIST THOUGHT THROUGH REPRESENTATION  
OF THE WITCH IN JOHN MARSTON'S *THE TRAGEDY OF SOPHONISBA***

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**Abstract**

This study aims to analyse the representation of witchcraft in the Jacobean context within the framework of a Jacobean play, namely John Marston's *The Wonder of Women* or *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606). Written during a patriarchal period when the misogynistic emperor James I reigns over England and when women are regarded to be biologically and intellectually inferior to men, *Sophonisba* represents the misogynist mind-set in that the witch in the play is a woman, and she possesses the negative features conventionally associated with the witches at the time. In this respect, this paper argues that Marston's work reinforces the stereotypical witch image and thereby perpetuates the misogynist thought.

**Key Words:** John Marston, Sophonisba, witchcraft, misogyny, Jacobean age.

**JOHN MARSTON'IN *THE TRAGEDY OF SOPHONISBA* OYUNUNDA CADİ TEMSİLİ  
ARACILIĞIYLA KADIN DÜŞMANI DÜŞÜNCENİN PEKİŞTİRİLMESİ**

**Özet**

Bu çalışma Jakoben dönemde cadılık temsilini John Marston'ın aynı çağda kaleme aldığı *The Wonder of Women* or *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606) isimli eseri çerçevesinde ele almaktadır. Kadın düşmanı olarak bilinen bir kral olan James I İngiltere'de hüküm sürdüğü ve kadınların erkeklerden hem akli hem de biyolojik yönden daha düşük bir konumda yer aldığı görüşünün hâkim olduğu ataerkil kültür çerçevesinde yazılan oyun, dönemin kadın düşmanı bakış açısını sahnelemektedir. Öyle ki, eserdeki cadı figürü bir kadındır ve o dönemde cadı kadınlara atfedilen tüm olumsuz özellikleri taşımaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma John Marston'ın eseri aracılığıyla cadılığa atfedilen basmakalıp yargıları yinelediğini ve böylece kadın düşmanı düşünceyi pekiştirdiğini iddia eder.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** John Marston, Sophonisba, cadılık, kadın düşmanlığı, Jakoben dönem.

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the representation of witchcraft in the Jacobean context within the framework of a Jacobean play, namely John Marston's *The Wonder of Women* or *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606). Written during a patriarchal period when the misogynistic emperor James I reigned over England and when women were regarded to be the weaker vessel, it is arguable that *Sophonisba* represents the misogynist mind-set on the stage because the witch is a woman in the play, and she carries the negative characteristics traditionally accorded to the witches at the time. In this sense, the study concludes that Marston's work rehearses the stereotypical understanding of witchcraft and thus perpetuates the misogynist thought which blames women for transgressing their place sanctioned by the patriarchy once they disobey the male head.

## The Woman Question and Patriarchy in Context

To understand the implications of witchcraft and why it was commonly associated with women, it is necessary to grasp the patriarchal understanding of womanhood present in the Jacobean context. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a burst of conduct literature that aimed at regulating women's behaviour and character. Ranging from how women should be educated, what they could learn, where or when they could speak to how they should behave in domestic or public place, women were forced into certain patterns of behaviour by church fathers or officials to keep them under patriarchal control. Through sermons, theological pamphlets and conduct manuals, women were preached to follow the principles of chastity, silence and obedience because, they, once having become silent subjects, were representative of the success of the patriarchy, which was significant for the *healthy* familial relationships in that a silent and chaste woman -whether she was a daughter, a sister, or a wife- was emblematic of the family honour. There was close relationship between chastity, obedience and silence, and thus, a woman who spoke a lot was thought to be both disobedient and sexually impure. What was expected of her was to fulfil unquestioningly what her father or husband demanded from her; she was never allowed to deviate from the path instructed. Naturally enough, religious devotion, piety and virtue were inseparable from each other. A virtuous woman was thought to be the one who was engaged in worship to God and the Scripture in seclusion. Those who did not comply with the religious and patriarchal principles were blamed for transgressing the divine and earthly rule. In sum, the ideal characteristics a woman should have listed in the conduct literature were as follows:

The key aspects of her life and character that are highlighted are her wisdom, piety, humility, meekness, love, constancy, charity, good household government and godly devotion. Above all, these qualities fit the woman for her role as "wife," "mother" and "mistress" of the household. This woman never engages in idle gossiping; instead, great success is laid upon the wholesomeness of her speech, which is usually compromised of biblical citation ... Corporately, these texts indicate that the delineation of the exemplary Christian woman, [between] 1500-1700, did not alter significantly. (Trill 33)

As well as the omnipresence of patriarchal culture, accession of James I to the throne in 1603 (he ruled for 22 years till 1625) increased the oppression women used to have during the Jacobean age. James I was a misogynist who did not hide his contempt for the opposite sex. The French ambassador Beaumont, for instance, relates his manner at court as follows:

He piques himself on great contempt for women. They are obliged to kneel before him when they are presented, he exhorts them openly to virtue, and scoffs with great levity at men who pay them honour. You may easily conceive that the English ladies do not spare him but hold him in abhorrence and tear him to pieces with their tongues, each according to her humour. (qtd. in Roberts xv-xvi)

Likewise, in his works *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) and *Basilikon Doron* (1599) and in some of his speeches, James I stressed that he is a reflection of God on earth (the notion of the divine rights of the kings) and that women are inferior to men. For example, in the “Speech of 1609” he emphasised that the monarchical state is “the supremest thing vpon earth” (307) and in “A Speech in the Starre-Chamber” he remarked that “Kings sit in the Throne of God, and they themselues are called Gods” (326). His statement cemented the patriarchal culture when he compared the hierarchical establishment within the household with the State: “Kings are also Fathers of families: for a King is trewly *Parens patriæ*, the politique of his people (307). In *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, he argued that “by the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturall Father to all his Lieges ... And as the Father of his fatherly duty is bound to care ... his children, euen so is the bound to care for all his subjects” (55). In the same vein, in *Basilikon Doron* he instructed his son to demand obedience from his wife: “It is your office to command, and hers to obey; as ye to command; as willing to follow, as ye to go before; your loue being wholly knit vnto her, and all her affections louingly bent to follow your will” (36). James I believed that he represented God on earth/in public and the father/husband/brother substituted him at home. That is, he sanctioned that their authority is as insurmountable as that of his. He therefore justified and naturalised the patriarchal dominance. In accordance with his patriarchal mind-set, James I also thought that women had a penchant for dealing with witchcraft. He was not only inclined to believe that witches actually existed but he was also of the opinion that they should be wiped out as they were against the divine rule (Carroll 305). That is, witchcraft was not only a disobedience to God, religion or to the patriarchal authority but also his supreme authority as the representative of God on earth. He, indeed, claimed that he was in pursuit of the witches “not because I am James Stuard and can comaunde so many thousands of men, but because God hath made me a King and judge to judge righteouse judgment” (qtd. in Spoto 55). In other words, James I, who was an absolutist in politics and a misogynist regarding the woman question, had every reason to be against witchcraft. He indeed condemned witches and their practices in *Daemonologie* (1597).<sup>2</sup> The text he wrote on the theme records his biased attitude as to women regarding the issue: “that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil, as was over well proved to be true, by the serpents’ deceiving of Eve at the beginning” (128). James I was of the opinion that, just as the serpent could have easily deceived Eve, women also fall prey to the machinations of devil easier than men because they are innately weak and less intelligent than men. Indeed, in a statute of witchcraft enacted by him in 1604 entitled “an act against conjuration witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits” witchcraft was a crime punishable by death penalty:<sup>3</sup>

if any person or persons ... take up any dead man, woman or child out of his, her or their grave or any other place where the dead body resteth, or the skin, bone or any other part of any dead person, to be employed or used in any manner of witchcraft, sorcery, charm or enchantment ... then that every such offender or offenders, their aiders abettors and counsellors ... shall suffer pains of death as a felon or felons, and shall loose the privilege and benefit of clergy and sanctuary. (qtd. in Rosen 57-58)

### Understanding Witchcraft in England: An Overview

<sup>2</sup> Witchcraft meant a palpable danger for James I: “A pamphlet of 1591, *Newes from Scotland, Declaring the Damnable life and death of Doctor Fian*, relates how witchcraft placed King James in mortal danger on his voyage from Denmark with his new Queen in 1590” (Corbin and Sedge 1).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that as early as 1563, during the early years of Elizabeth I’s reign, “Parliament passed the Act against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts, making it a crime punishable by death to conjure evil spirits for any purpose or to use any ‘witchcraft, enchantment, charm, or sorcery’ to kill another person” (Willis 170).

It is seen that there was a particular interest in -or rather contempt for- witchcraft in the Jacobean period. On the other hand, even though Marston's *Sophonisba* takes place in the seventeenth century, the figure of the witch as a transgressor was not a new phenomenon at the time. It was ever since the Middle Ages that the witches were seen as ugly, repulsive, eerie figures traditionally thought to belong to the female sex. Reginald Scot, the writer of *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), for instance, described them as follows:

Who they be that are called witches ... are women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor, and sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as know no religion; in whose drowsy minds the devil hath gotten a fine seat; so as, what mischief, mischance, calamity, or slaughter is brought to pass, they are easily persuaded the same is done by themselves; imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination thereof. They are lean and deformed, shewing melancholy in their faces, to the horror of all that see them. They are doting, scolds, mad, devilish; and not much different from them that are thought to be possessed with spirits. (209)

The witches were also stereotypically regarded as fearsome, anomalous, monstrous figures in the drama of the early modern period. As there was a considerable interest in witchcraft in the Jacobean era, the dramatists of the age also drew their material from the issue. Playwrights such as William Shakespeare in *Macbeth* (w. 1606, p. 1623), Thomas Middleton in *The Witch* (c. 1613-1616), William Rowley, John Ford and Thomas Decker in their collaboratively-written work *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), and John Marston in *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606) likewise employed witches and witchcraft by presenting the stereotypical image of the witch as a woman who is ugly, voluptuous, profane, immoral and devilish.

Naturally enough, in the above mentioned plays, women are blamed for being engaged in witchcraft, and therefore, they are presented as immoral and vicious figures. Considering the misogynist politics of James I and the prejudice embedded in the patriarchal society against women which considered them to be morally, biologically, and intellectually inferior to menfolk, it should not be taken as a coincidence that the playwrights also reflected the mind-set of the society, and thus depicted women as witches on the stage. As Scarre argues, "an opinion of women as passionate, cantankerous and unpredictable creatures was prevalent enough to create a widespread fear of their being easily recruited into the satanic army of witches" (52). For example, one of leading Elizabethan dramatists, Shakespeare in *Macbeth* rehearses the biased outlook present in the society regarding the witch as a transgressive figure. The three witches in Shakespeare's play do not fit in the definition of ideal womanhood imposed by the patriarchal society. Contrarily, they deviate from the behavioural patterns expected of them such as silence and obedience, and, what is more, they initiate dreadful events as they instil evil ideas into Macbeth. In other words, they try to invert the gendered hierarchy within the household being involved in the affairs of the state. Instruments to the temptations of the devil, they concretise the association between women and witchcraft. As Carroll states,

In Shakespeare's culture, the typical accused witch was an independent woman who did not conform to cultural stereotypes of the ideal women ... Such women were assertive, vocal, often suspected of having mysterious powers to heal or harm; to name them as witches, then is to define them as deviant, even criminal by the standards of the dominant culture. (19)

Given the situation, it was not surprising that women were readily scapegoated for the crime or when they transcended the place assigned them by the patriarchy:

From the earliest twelfth century and to the present day, a belief in witchcraft has led to, at best, demonization and scapegoating and at worst, state -or church- sanctioned executions. Witches have always readily served to define the negative side of culturally sanctioned boundaries of good versus evil, natural versus deviant, and have been punished accordingly. (Carroll 300)

Despite the presence of the problem of witchcraft throughout the centuries, it was in the Jacobean era that the society became obsessed with it. What would be deservedly called the witch-craze period, there held thousands of witch-trials and subsequent executions of mostly innocent people among whom women constituted the “80 per cent of the defendants” (Scarre 51). As Clark states, “witch hunting was in reality woman hunting” (427). Naturally enough, such a menacing atmosphere created anxiety within the members of the society because “for Jacobean society witchcraft presented a real and frightening danger which posed a threat to everyone from highest to the lowest in the land” (Corbin and Sedge 1). It was thought that “witches were typically women, usually old, poor, uneducated, who used familiar or ‘imps’ -spirits who appeared to them in the form of small animals- to cause sickness, death, or other misfortunes to their neighbours, and [who] practised *maleficium*, harmful magic” (Willis 171). The use of the word *maleficium* stemmed from the earlier texts written on witchcraft such as the one the Dominican inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger penned in 1486 entitled *The Malleus Maleficarum* aka the witch hunter’s Bible. If Kramer and Sprenger’s work on witchcraft had been allegedly written to help officials to detect those engaged in witchcraft, the truth was that they often associated witchcraft with women owing to their supposed innate weakness which was thought to render them vulnerable to evil spirits (Carroll 304). Those who owned pets, for example, were seen to be prone to black magic because these pets, alternatively called “the familiar spirits ... half animal, half demon beings that most witches in England were thought to own” (Sharpe *Witchcraft* 62) were regarded as the means through which the witches communicate with the Devil. Furthermore, it was thought that there was a close relationship between witchcraft and sexuality. For instance, Kramer and Sprenger thought that women, who were supposed to be less rational than men, were more vulnerable to Satan’s temptations because they are “feebler both in mind and body, [and thus] it is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft” (39). They were of the opinion, which was also an expression of common patriarchal perception, that it was because of their innate nature that women were prone to sexuality:

But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations. And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives. For Cato says: When a woman weeps she weaves snares. And again: When a woman weeps, she labours to deceive a man. (39)

Kramer and Sprenger averred that women are deceitful creatures because of their natal defect. Such a misogynistic insight into women’s nature was also what related them to witchcraft: “therefore a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waver in her faith, and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the roof of witchcraft” (39). In other words, what Kramer and Sprenger and the figures of authority thought was that “from women’s unsatisfied sexual desires sprang their unequalled malice: the most malicious women were the most lustful; and the most lustful of women were witches, whose sexual appetite was insatiable” (Broedel 177). It is seen that there was a curious connection between witchcraft and sexuality. Since witches were thought

to be promiscuous, a sign of perversion considering the religious and social mores of the age,<sup>4</sup> they were seen as a threat to the patriarchal authority and male sexuality accordingly.

A witch was identified through her visible rejection of a society's moral code and her actions against commonly held standards for women; promiscuity was perhaps the most dangerous and subversive activity for women to engage in during the witch-hunts, as the most common attribute in portrayals of witches is their exaggerated sexuality, and perhaps more dangerously, their power over male sexuality. (Spoto 58)

Those who were thought to be witches were the women who were believed to be promiscuous. Since promiscuity was perceived as a rejection of the socially acceptable behaviour, witches were seen as deviant figures who threatened the patriarchal authority. Within this framework, given that the Church, one of the most powerful patriarchal institutions, considered witchcraft "anti-Christian religion" (Scarre 49) to be in dire need of suppression in order to secure the religious and patriarchal authority, there were harsh measures taken against practising witchcraft, and those found guilty were severely punished accordingly (Scarre 49). The Church sanctioned its authority over the issue by means of the Scripture in that in Exodus 22.18 it is preached that "thou shall not suffer a witch to live." The influence of misogynistic assumptions was at stake, and the biblical account of the Fall of Man was one of the most powerful reasons that women could engage in witchcraft due to their innate features. As Brauner states, "the church equated women and their bodies with sin, carnality, and spiritual death; and in feudal society, women were extremely repressed. These traditions fused ... in the concept of the modern witch" (13-14). Therefore, judges did not hesitate to punish the supposed witches for their sinful acts. Belsey records that "witchcraft was first made a statutory offence in 1542 and ... the main period for executions was 1559-1675" (185). Given the situation, one might safely argue that witchcraft was mainly associated with the female sex so that the patriarchy could maintain its power. As Daly also remarks, witch-craze was the "Western and Christian manifestation of the androtic state of atrocity" (179). That is, considering the burst of conduct literature preaching women how to -or how not to- behave under certain circumstances and the misogynistic attitudes women had to undergo, it is not surprising that women were blamed for witchcraft and punished by death accordingly because witch hunts and witch trials were the means through which the patriarchy could reinforce its already-present authority. The witch was thought to be "predatory, dominating, usually lustful, destructive and voluble" (Belsey 165). Endowed with the power denied her by the patriarchal society, she was a transgressive woman who subverted the patriarchal understanding of ideal womanhood. Her unauthorised power and noncompliance with the patriarchal precepts made her an unwelcome figure as she threatened the system established upon patriarchal rules. In other words, the witch, as a self-sufficient or even an overpowering woman, did not fit in the ideal definition of womanhood as she became an embodiment of female power that disturbs the social order. Given that the ideal woman was supposed to be a silent person therefore not posing a threat to the pillar of patriarchy based upon the obedience of women to the men, the witch, who was unruly and had a voice of her own, meant disturbance to the social harmony established upon the hierarchical relationship between sexes.<sup>5</sup> And, to prevent such a threat, it was urgent to control those who did not obey. Therefore, the necessity to suppress defiant women immediately led to a rise in witch trials because blaming uncontrollable women for demonic engagement was one of

<sup>4</sup> Sexual intercourse was necessary only for reproduction; it was sinful to have sexual pleasure.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Scarre remarks that witchcraft was an instrument for women to assert agency: "Witchcraft may have held more appeal for women than for men not because, as contemporaries thought, women were more wicked and more easily led than men, but because their social and economic position imposed greater constraints on their possibilities of action" (53).

the most efficient and unsuspect means for the patriarchal system to control and even to annihilate them. As Jackson aptly summarises,

The witch was the stereotypical opposite of the good wife. She was the woman who was trying to act entirely independently of male control, asserting her own powers, sexual and otherwise, to gain financial reward or carry out revenge on her enemies. The witch [trial] was a warning to women as to what would happen if they behaved in a way which could be counted as subversive. (72)

It is seen that the stereotypical witch image represented on the stage was in accord with the one embraced by the society.

### **Representation of the Witch in *Sophonisba***

In the same vein, even though Marston's *Sophonisba* is about the historical events that took place during the second Punic or Hannibalic War as the Roman historian Appian recorded them in the Book VIII of *Roman History* (Corbin and Sedge 5), the play communicates the social beliefs of the Jacobean culture. The plotline that concerns us within the scope of the paper is as follows: The central character in the play is its namesake, the Carthaginian Princess Sophonisba who has been married to Massinissa, the King of the Massylii. Although she is a married woman, she is voluptuously chased by Syphax, the King of the Maseasyli. The play, therefore, is basically about the sexual rivalry between Massinissa and Syphax. While Carthage is attacked by the Romans, Syphax decides to support them to avenge Sophonisba's choice. The Senators of Carthage, however, hand over her to Syphax because Massinissa is away to fight in battle. Reporting falsely that Massinissa is dead, Syphax lustfully forces Sophonisba to have sex with him. Even though the latter escapes sexual intercourse with a clever plan, Syphax becomes so obsessed with her that he decides to ask for Erictho's help to be able to have sex with her. Instead of helping him, though, Erictho, the witch, masquerading as Sophonisba, has sex with Syphax. By means of the cunning witch figure, Marston succeeds in addressing the Jacobean taste<sup>6</sup> as he offers a misogynistic interpretation of the female witch. In other words, he affirms that women are deceitful by birth because Erictho,<sup>7</sup> disguising as the woman Syphax lusts after only to satisfy her sexual urges, realizes the assumptions of the Jacobean audience. As well as women's deceitful nature, Erictho's carnality, her horrible residence and her dreadful appearance also help Marston represent the stereotypical witch on the stage.

That Erictho carries one of the most distinctive features of the witches becomes obvious when she copulates with Syphax for no reason but pleasure. As Kramer and Sprenger state, "I have found a woman more bitter than death ... that is, than the devil ... More bitter than death, again, because that is natural and destroys only the body; but the sin which arouse from woman destroys the soul by depriving it of grace ... To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in woman insatiable" (40-41). Erictho, likewise, turns out to be the embodiment of lust. There is also a clear association between her sexuality and her engagement in black magic because it is with the aim of soothing her unruly desire that she deals with witchcraft (so that she could change her appearance). Kramer and Sprenger argue in *The Malleus Maleficarum* that "witches

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that although Erictho is not a central figure to the play and her presence at times might even seem irrelevant to the plotline, she is an "essential part of Marston's argument, for the witch is the play's most potent emblem of lust and appetite in action and agent of Syphax's moral, if not physical destruction" (Corbin and Sedge 12-13).

<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Neumeier argues that during the Renaissance, the "shape-shifting of the witch signals a fundamental anxiety about female changeability and deception as well as the need for its containment, as the witch incorporates the female transgressions of the Renaissance ideals of chastity, silence and obedience" (31-32).

hold the worst kind of association with devils, with especial reference to the behaviour of women, who always delight in vain things” (100). Likewise, in *Sophonisba*, considering the misogynist interpretation of female nature, it is not a coincidence that Erictho -a woman- is closely linked to carnality and witchcraft. As Corbin and Sedge relate, “in her deception of Syphax by a bed-trick she adopts the role of succubus, a devil in female form, who seduces and betrays men” (7). As Erictho is represented as a lascivious woman engaged in the devilish act to have sex with Syphax only for pleasure, she immediately sustains the close relationship between lechery and witchcraft:

Know we, Erictho, with a thirsty womb,  
Have coveted full threescore suns for blood of kings.

...

We, in the pride and height of covetous lust,  
Have wished with the woman’s greediness to fill  
Our longing arms with Syphax’s well-strung limbs. (5.1.8-15)

It is also seen that Erictho reverses the traditional gender roles as Syphax becomes a commodity for her through whom she can satisfy her “thirsty womb” and her “covetous lust.” She benefits from Syphax so that she could give birth to children. Within the framework of the Jacobean period that seeks meekness, silence, innocence, purity, and absence of sexual appetite in women, and that allows for pregnancy only within the boundaries of marriage, Erictho presents a monstrous image due to both her lust and her deviant method of getting pregnant. Her position clearly proves that she is a threat to the patriarchal order that controls female sexuality and familial relations because she behaves in opposition to the accustomed social order. In this sense, Erictho embodies “the dark other of the early modern woman, expressing and acting on desires the other women must repress to construct their identities as mothers” (Purkiss 100) or as the patriarchy instructs them to become.

The fact that the witch as an unruly woman poses a threat to the patriarchal order based upon the surveillance of female sexuality comes to the fore when Erictho steals semen from Syphax to have her own children. Marston’s witch violates the social conventions; he thereby represents the anxiety on the stage as to uncontrolled female sexuality which immediately overlaps with female witchcraft. Indeed, the moment Syphax understands that he has become an instrument for soothing Erictho’s desire, he expresses his contempt as follows:

Can we yet breath? Is any plagued like me?  
Are we? Let’s think. O now contempt, my hate  
To thee, thy thunder, sulphure and scorn’d name.  
He whose lifes loathed, and he who breathes to curse  
His very being, let him thus with me  
Fall ‘fore an altar sacred to black power. (5.1 22-27)

The passage demonstrates how Erictho emasculates Syphax by means of witchcraft. Once she employs her magical power, it turns out to be Syphax -a man- who obeys to the commands of a woman to have sexual intercourse. Erictho, who is “full of [her] dear wishes” (5.1.18-19), now “grows young” (5.1.20) while Syphax, whose masculine power is taken by her, feels disgusted and exhausted. In other words, the scene represents the destructive effects of impassionate women dealing with witchcraft over men who are in danger of being incapacitated once they are under the spell of their magical power. It, therefore, renders witchcraft a serious crime as it emasculates men.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, “the fear that women could reduce men to impotence” through witchcraft

<sup>8</sup> It is hinted that Erictho and Syphax have sex in total darkness. In this sense, excessive sexuality is once more linked to witchcraft and darkness of the soul.

verifies that “many anxieties surrounding gender hierarchy were related to sexual power and sexual surrender” (Spoto 58). The anxiety that the witch as a sexually independent woman has the competence to invert the gender hierarchy turns out to be true.

To reinforce his argument and to meet the expectations of the Jacobean audience, Marston creates such a repulsive and deviant image of a female witch that Erictho, in order to alleviate her sexual appetite again, even has sex with some dead bodies:

But when she finds a corse  
New graved whose entrails yet not turn  
To slimy filth, with greedy havoc then  
She makes fierce spoil and swells with wicked triumph  
To bury her lean knuckles in his eyes.  
Then doth she gnaw the pale and o' vergrown nails  
From his dry hand. But if she find some life  
Yet lurking close, she bites his gelid lips  
And sticking her black tongue in his dry throat. (4.1.112-120)

As Corbin and Sedge remark, Erictho “represents the extreme of distorted appetite” (12) and her necrophilic engagement overlaps with the contemporary image of the witch as a dark, deviant, repugnant figure. Interestingly enough, even though her act is the representation of perverted sexuality within the framework of the Jacobean social norms, it also provides Erictho with the chance to live without patriarchal/social oppression. In other words, Erictho's sexual appetite becomes emblematic as she thereby poses a threat to -and even shatters- the patriarchal order. On one hand, it is true that she is ostracised from the society, but, on the other hand, it is her power as a witch that renders her an independent woman, the fact which explains the reason why she - or the witch figure- is not approved by the patriarchal culture. It is certain that the witch holds a marginal position. As Sharpe states, witches, “widows or women otherwise living outside the conventional hierarchies of family or household ... were ... outside normal patterns of control” (*Instruments* 172). Likewise, Erictho's dismissal of the patriarchal norms provides her with the freedom to live however she wishes:

Here in this desert the great soul of charms,  
Dreadful Erictho lives, whose dismal brow  
Contemns all roofs or civil coverture.  
Forsaken graves and tombs, the ghosts forced out,  
She enjoys to inhabit. (4.1.97-101)

The way she describes her residence also proves her isolation from civilization while it also suits the stereotypical dwelling the witches are thought to live in:

There once a charnel-house, now a vast cave,  
Over whose brow a pale and untrod grove  
Throws out her heavy shade, the mouth thick arms  
Of darksome yew, sun-proof, for ever choke;  
Within rests barren darkness; fruitless drought  
Pines in eternal night; the steam of hell  
Yields not so lazy air; there, that's my cell. (4.1.161-167)

The particular nouns and adjectives Erictho employs to depict her house demonstrate her marginalised position: she lives in “a vast cave” where there is no sunlight but “barren darkness.” References to the after world such as “a charnel-house” -and specifically to hell- such as “the steam of hell” not only indicate her isolation from culture but also her engagement in black magic.

Indeed, it is important to note that, let alone being dominated by a man, Erictho even has power over natural phenomena: “her deep magic makes forced heaven quake / And thunder spite of Jove” (4.1. 106-107).

As well as her deceitful and lecherous nature, her demonic acts, and her dreadful residence, Erictho’s physical appearance also realizes the ugly and repulsive witch image stereotypically imagined by the Jacobean audience. She is described as follows: “A loathsome yellow leanness spreads her face / A heavy hell like paleness loads her cheeks, / Unknown to a clear heaven / ... / With long unkempt hair” (4.1.102-104; 109). It is seen that she does not have an amicable or lovely appearance. Baumbach states that, according to the Renaissance physiognomy, there is a close relationship between physical appearance and one’s character:

According to physiognomy, which is concerned with the ‘interpretation,’ ‘rule,’ or ‘essence’ (*gnomon*) of ‘nature’ (*physis*), there is an intrinsic relation between form and content, exterior and interior, *physis* and *psyche*. The body is perceived as a legible ‘text,’ which openly communicates a person’s character and provides an insight into the disposition of man, provided that all signifiers that become visible on the bodily surface are given careful consideration. (Baumbach 582)

In other words, physical features were significant to understand one’s character, and accordingly, the uglier a person looked like, the wickeder she was thought to be while a pleasant face stood for purity and innocence during the early modern age. In this sense, it is arguable that Erictho once more meets the early modern expectation regarding physiognomy in that she has a dark soul, and therefore she is extremely ugly.

### Conclusion

In sum, it is safe to state that Erictho, “a witch whose appetital is bound to the underworld, the flesh, and for Marston’s audience, the devil” (Corbin and Sedge 13), becomes an embodiment of the stereotypical witch image as adopted by the Jacobean society owing to her deceitful nature, her carnality, and her ugliness. Marston represents the misogynist mind-set on the stage in *Sophonisba* because Erictho carries the unwelcome features often associated with the witches then. She also poses a threat to the patriarchal society owing to her strength stemming from her engagement with witchcraft; and, her sexual intercourse with the now-emasculated Syphax, indeed, realizes male anxiety over female power, which clarifies the reason why the patriarchal institutions are in ardent pursuit of those dealing with black magic to subdue them. Within this framework, it would not be wrong to conclude that Marston’s *Sophonisba* reinforces the stereotypical witchcraft image embedded in the seventeenth century culture, and therefore serves the interests of the patriarchal society which is always anxious to keep women under control inside the boundaries of the place allotted to them by the patriarchy.

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