MOTHER OF ALL

An Analysis of the Mother’s Portrayal in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English Popular Literature

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Preface

This master's dissertation has been coming for quite some time, but I am glad to say that this end result is one which I definitely enjoyed working on. Fortunately, I have been able to work on a topic which involves one of my main interests: the Early modern English period. While this period is primarily associated with Queen Elizabeth I, Shakespeare, the Civil War and the Restoration, I have had the pleasure to focus on the less-known aspects of the period, concerning popular literature and culture. I would like to give thanks to Dr. Henk Dragstra for his patient supervision, enthusiasm and his much appreciated suggestions, and to Dr. John Flood for being second reader. Finally, I would very unoriginally but nonetheless sincerely like to thank my family and friends for their support throughout the writing of this dissertation, even during the occasional crises in which I seriously considered throwing my computer out of the window.
Introduction

*Mother*, n. 1. Used as a respectful (or mock-respectful) form of address to an elderly woman, esp. to one of little means or education.

2. A woman who runs a brothel, a madam. (*OED*)

The above-mentioned definitions may not be the first that leap to mind when hearing or reading the word ‘Mother’, because they are considered slightly archaic nowadays. However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, those were two of the most common associations with the word ‘Mother’. Besides these two explanations, it also indicated ‘an intermediary between the everyday world and the world of the supernatural’ (Tsurumi 30). Yet another, though related, meaning refers to ‘an elderly woman of the lower classes’, who at the same time was traditionally associated with witchcraft (Tsurumi 31). It therefore became ‘a slightly mocking and patronising way of referring to an alleged witch or prophetess or supernatural figure’ traditionally belonging to the lower social classes of society (Tsurumi 31). In this dissertation I will focus on this description of the Mother in particular.

This dissertation investigates how the context and the changing attitude of the city towards the country and its oral tradition influenced the portrayal of this typical Mother in popular English literature, as reflected in popular texts about Mother Bombie, the Wise Woman of Hogsdon, Mother Sawyer, and Mother Shipton from the sixteenth up to the end of the seventeenth centuries.

In order to answer this question, first some background information is required concerning Early Modern English society, contemporary popular literature and popular beliefs about witchcraft and magic. Then I will explain the method I used to analyze the different sources with regard to the Mothers’ portrayals, before I go on to their actual analyses.

**Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English Society**

Sixteenth-century England was a pre-industrial country of which the sparse population mostly consisted of country people. London was the exception with its small workshops, cottage industry, and great contrasts between rich and poor. London greatly expanded its industry, which caused many rural cottagers to turn their homes into domestic factories since they no longer had the possibility to farm land (Kinney 9). Eventually, ‘the haves, the upwardly mobile and the entrepreneurial, turned profits at the expense of those who had little or nothing, constituting a world
of privilege and exclusion’ (Kinney 9). People on the land were forced off it and travelled to London, where they were economically victimized by the immigration of skilled craftsmen (Kinney 9).

London was socially underdeveloped, ‘but it also produced one of the greatest literary cultures ever known and witnessed an unprecedented ferment of scientific and intellectual activity’, though a huge proportion of the population could neither read nor write (Thomas 4). The fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the rise of printing, which greatly increased the number of circulating texts. This growth of written texts went hand in hand with the growing number of literate people among the lay population, which was due to ‘the expansion of formal education’ and to the ‘mothers teaching their children basic reading skills within the home’ (Fox 13).

A very prominent aspect of Early modern English life was the presence of and belief in witchcraft and magic. In his article ‘Witchcraft and Magic in the Elizabethan Drama’, H.W. Herrington investigates the prominence of witchcraft and magic in Elizabethan society and literature. He describes the Elizabethan period as one in which people were very interested in witchcraft, since it was continually present in the form of accusations, persecutions and trials (Herrington 447). People of socially lower classes often resorted to popular magic in the form of cunning men or women, who usually were members of the same, low, social layer (Thomas 14). Cunning men were believed to perform healing activities, point out thieves and retrieve things lost. They also provided the people with love potions and aphrodisiacs (Thomas 261-62). An especially popular form of magic was fortune-telling: sometimes this had a theoretical basis and some Renaissance intellectuals therefore took it seriously. Before the Civil War, magic was seen as something for scholars and intellectuals (Thomas 264). This scholarly magic differed from the popular village wizardry, in the sense that the latter was not based on any theory (Thomas 272).

Mid-sixteenth century, authorities ‘were equally vehement in their hostility to popular magic’, for they saw it as something diabolical (Thomas 307). Still, in cases of misery the cunning man became more important to the lay people than the church, because people rather believed they were divinely inspired (Thomas 317). However, social and political hierarchies played a role in the defining of magical powers: a lady with her healing powers was never placed in the same category as the local white witch, despite the fact that they displayed the same magical abilities (Mack 51). Such distinctions based upon social ranking were not uncommon in Early modern England, since this society was hierarchical and patriarchal: the gentlemen were highest, followed by free citizens and burgesses, then the country yeomen, and last came the commoners (Kinney 4). Families were patriarchal as well, and good wives were therefore supposed to be submissive to their husbands, patient, modest, sweet and silent (Kinney 4). This fits in the contemporary Protestant focus on the ‘feminine’ qualities such as ‘humility, receptivity, and emotionalism’ (Mack 18).
Popular Culture and Print

Despite the fact that ‘Early modern England may not have been a wholly literate society’, it did ‘comprise [...] a fundamentally literate environment’: everyone came in contact with this written material (Fox 37). The illiterate did not refrain from buying broadside ballads, for example, since they wanted to learn how to read those (Fox 38). The written and the spoken word interacted all the time in English society: ‘[w]hat began as gossip could easily be taken up and enshrined in text, before passing back again into oral circulation’ (Fox 40). Already in the Middle Ages, the written word found its place in social, economic and cultural aspects of life and gradually it came to be used for ‘imaginative and artistic achievement’ (Fox 13). Early modern English popular literature can be defined as ‘that which is suited to ordinary tastes, and to ordinary means’, intended for ‘the unsophisticated reader [...] for pleasure’ (qtd. in Briggs, Butts, and Grenby 2). Of course, the socially superior could also enjoy these popular chapbooks, but they felt ‘trespassers in the literary domain of their social inferiors’ (Briggs, Butts, and Grenby 32). The term chapbook does not say anything about its contents; it was merely ‘a short, cheap book produced in large numbers from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries’ (Briggs, Butts, and Grenby 27).

This contemporary popular literature usually reflected the subjects that were important to and within society. Samuel Pepys’ collection of chapbooks, for example, is a reflection of the popular literature – and thus of the popular notions – of the second half of the seventeenth century. He included ‘a dozen books of fortune telling, and black and white magic’ (Spufford 146). A couple of them were on palmistry, while other books indicated ‘a popular belief in magic and the desire to read stories of the supernatural’ without scientific or religious belief (Spufford 146). Apparently, stories about magic, whether existent or not, were part of popular literature, because the belief in the supernatural was a very real part of society.

Herrington mentions that ‘throughout the reign of Elizabeth no figures were to the masses, high and low, more familiar than those of the wise woman and the witch’ (Herrington 477). He also provides us with some generalizations about these figures in English literature. Before 1597, these figures were borrowed from other non-English literatures or even from historical accounts. However, ‘[t]he gross sensationalism of the witch accounts over which the public gloated [...] are prior to 1597 strangely absent’ (Herrington 477). Drama was usually not at all realistic or topical: ‘it hardly copies even court life, and ignores almost completely [...] the life of the lower classes’ (Herrington 477). The witch or cunning woman was only considered suitable for comedy, but not for low comedy because of her doom (Herrington 477). From the 1590s on, the topic of witchcraft came to be treated more and more realistically (Herrington 478). In this same period, ‘[d]rama came to resemble as well as
portray the condition of English life in the Renaissance’, which therefore must have involved the role of witchcraft (Kinney 3).

Fortune-telling was very much a part of popular culture in the seventeenth century, and actually had been since the Middle Ages, in the form of prophecies. During the Civil War, there occurred a massive rise in printed prophecies, but they had always been part of popular culture ‘along with the generally held belief in magic, astrology, and witchcraft’ (Rusche 753). Prophecies were more popular in times of distress and danger, though, because people wanted to see what was yet to come (Dodds 276). Evidently, ‘prophecies tended to be invoked at a time of crisis’ to show that a change ‘had [already] been foreseen by the sages of the past’ (Thomas 493). This results from the need to justify most revolutionary actions by proving this relation to more ancient times (Thomas 502). During the Civil War, both Royalists and Parliamentarians used prophecies as propaganda for their own parties. They ‘collected, interpreted, and sometimes even rewrote prophecies that served in some degree as proof of the righteousness and [...] prophetic inevitability of their own beliefs’ (Rusche 752).

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English society was one in which orality, print and script were all working together: ‘[t]here was no necessary antithesis between oral and literate forms of communication and preservation; the one did not have to destroy or undermine the other’ (Fox 5). There was a distinction between the social classes with regard to the ability to read and write, though: by the seventeenth century ‘those from the gentle and professional classes were universally “literate” [...] but the ability to sign decreased down through society, being far greater among merchants and specialist craftsmen than among husbandmen and labourers’ (Fox 18). Geographically speaking, the people in the urban areas were more often literate than the people in the rural areas: especially London was very literate by the 1640s (Fox 18). The higher social classes soon considered illiteracy a characteristic of the ‘vulgar’: ‘lack of the skill came to be confined to the lower orders’ and it ‘came increasingly to be regarded as a deficiency and a defect in various contexts’ (Fox 46-47). The uneducated mainly used the oral tradition to communicate, because the things most important to them did not require reading and writing: ‘[b]eing unable to read or write in no way restricted people’s capacity to perform skilfully and dexterously in most aspects [of] their daily lives’ (Fox 22).

‘Most of the oral culture which can be recovered from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England is adult male culture’, because the extant printed sources fail in reflecting ‘the assumptions and priorities of the female and juvenile part of the population’ (Fox 173). Women rarely had the opportunity to express themselves in writing, even though within their households they came in frequent contact with written sources (Fox 174). Usually the household had ‘a rich and distinctive oral tradition of its own’, but it was certainly influenced by written sources such as ballads, medical
remedies and kitchen recipes (Fox 174). Still, the oral transmission of knowledge prevailed within the female’s household and was not deemed worthy of writing down (Fox 174).

The Mothers and Their Texts

The typical Mother was usually associated with the lower, illiterate part of society. By the seventeenth century, the city regarded the country inferior to itself, which was mostly due to their lack of education and, therefore, progress. This is a view often reflected in popular literature, since that was usually printed in and intended for the city. Since the ‘Mother’ belonged to this illiterate class of people, it is to be assumed that she and her oral, popular form of magic soon were deemed inferior as well. This dissertation focuses on four different Mothers in English popular literature from the end of the sixteenth up to the end of the seventeenth century. These are Mother Bombie, The Wise Woman of Hogsdon, Mother Sawyer, and Mother Shipton. The choice for these specific Mothers has been based on the fact that they are most prominently present in contemporary literature, which possibly makes them the best-known Mothers in the English literature. Especially Mother Shipton’s sources circulated until the twentieth century and she is therefore still well-known in the English-speaking world. Of course, there was also the very well-known Mother Bunch, whose sources were published until the nineteenth century at least. I have decided to leave her out, though, because her vogue is not established until the eighteenth century.

The earliest source for this dissertation is John Lyly’s court comedy Mother Bombie. This play was first performed from 1587-1590, and first published in 1594. According to the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) there are four extant editions of the play. The earliest was printed by Thomas Scarlet for Cuthbert Burby in 1594. The second was printed by Thomas Creede for the same Cuthbert in 1598, and the final two editions are actually the same: this was printed by William Stansby for Edward Blount in London, in 1632. Only this final edition was used for this dissertation, because this does not differ from the previous ones, except for the title-page, and it was the most legible edition. The title-page says that the play was ‘[o]ften Presented and Acted before Queene Elizabeth, by the Children of her Maiesties Chappell, and the Children of Paules’. Performances by The Children of the Chapel and St. Paul’s Boys were intended for a more homogenous and richer audience than the usual popular plays (Kinney 10).

Only one version of Thomas Heywood’s comedy The Wise Woman of Hogsdon is extant according to the ESTC. This play was presumably first performed in 1604, and first published by M.P. for Henry Shepherd in London, 1638. The title-page provides us with fewer details than Mother Bombie’s: ‘The VVise-woman Of Hogsdon. A comedie. As it hath been sundry times Acted with great Applause’.
Mother Sawyer is the first Mother who is represented in more than one source. The first is Henry Goodcole’s pamphlet *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer*. The title-page says that this source was ‘[p]ublished by Authority’ and printed for William Butler in London, 1621. Henry Goodcole was a ‘Minister of the Word of God, and her continuall Visiter in the Gaole of Newgate’ (A2). This source is a factual report of Elizabeth Sawyer’s capture and confessions, so it is mostly a historical account instead of a fictitious work like *Mother Bombie* and *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*. The very same year, this pamphlet was turned into the tragi-comedy *The Witch of Edmonton*, of which only a version, printed by J. Cottrel for Edward Blackmore in 1658, is extant (ESTC). It was written by several famous authors, or as the title-page says: ‘[a] known true Story. Composed into a tragi-comedy by divers well-esteemed Poets; William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, &c.’. Like *Mother Bombie*, this play was also performed in court: ‘[a]cted by the Princes Servants, often at Court, with singular Applause’. Together with *The Late Lancashire Witches*, *The Witch of Edmonton* forms a group of plays that try to give accounts of real, celebrated witch-trials.

The most famous English Mother of the four is Mother Shipton, which is reflected by the copious and various sources about her. The earliest account is *The Prophesie of Mother Shipton In the Raigane of King Henry the Eighth*, which was printed for Richard Lownds in London, 1641. For several years this version was taken and expanded in many different sources. For this dissertation I used five different versions of Shipton’s prophecies. The first version following the earliest source is *A True Coppy of Mother Shiptons Last Prophesies: As they were taken from one Joane Waller*, 1642, which was printed for T.V. This is closely followed by *Two strange Prophesies*, which was published for C. Smith in 1642. Quite a well-known edition of Shipton’s prophecies is William Lilly’s *A Collection of Ancient and Moderne Prophesies*, 1645, which was printed for John Partridge and Humphrey Blunden. This source will be referred to as *Ancient and Moderne Prophesies* in the rest of this dissertation. The final version of the prophecies I used is *Foureteene strange Prophesies*, which was printed for Richard Harper in 1648. No attempt has been made to list all the extant versions of Mother Shipton’s prophecies, but they can all be found in the ESTC.

Another important source for this dissertation was Richard Head’s *The Life and Death of Mother Shipton*, which was a jest-biography printed in London for B. Harris in 1677 (title-page). However, it mentions the events running up to ‘this present Year 1667’, so presumably this edition was printed then instead of in 1677 (title-page). I will therefore refer to 1667 as its publishing date in the rest of this dissertation. Different editions of this source appeared in the following years, of which I only used the 1687 version printed for W. Harris. Several sources followed that were probably based on Head’s. One of them is the comedy *The Life of Mother Shipton* by Thomas Thompson, printed in London by and for Peter Lillicrap in 1668. The final source of Mother Shipton
used is *The Strange and Wonderful History of Mother Shipton*, printed for W.H. in London 1686 (*ESTC*). This will be referred to as *The History of Mother Shipton* in the rest of this dissertation.

**Treatment**

In this dissertation, I will discuss four different aspects that all may have influenced the portrayals of the four Mothers in popular literature. Each Mother is analysed with regard to her professional status, her position as an uneducated woman of the oral tradition in the growing literary culture of the time, her outer appearance, and her literary treatment in each individual text. The first two aspects, thus the Mother’s professional status and her position in an increasingly literate society, are concerned with the question how society perceived the Mother and how this was reflected in contemporary popular literature. Furthermore, since the relation between city and country gradually changed, the city’s perception of this Mother must have also. The question is whether we can find any evidence of this changing relationship and how the Mother’s portrayal was affected by it. However, since I decided to focus on only four different Mothers to describe the Mother’s development in popular literature throughout an entire century, we have to bear in mind that this dissertation may not give a reliable overview of society’s perception of the Mother in the seventeenth century.

I have decided to look at the Mother’s professional status, her level of orality or literacy and her outer appearance, because they can be considered the main characteristics of a typical Mother. The Mother was initially perceived as an old, poor, uneducated, illiterate cunning woman. This description combines her professional status and her level of education, but it still leaves her outer appearance aside. It seems logical that together with the changing relations between city and country in society, the perceptions, and thus portrayals, of the Mother with regard to her main characteristics must have changed. The city people gradually developed a more negative attitude towards the country and the unlearned lay people, which in combination with the contemporary witch craze may have led to a more negative portrayal of the Mother in popular literature. If this is indeed so, her outer appearance must have altered negatively with the other aspects. The final chapter then serves to relate each specific text to its context and of course to the authors’ intentions, which must have been the main influence on the Mother’s portrayal in popular literature.

The first chapter deals with the Mother’s professional status, as cunning woman or black witch, as presented in popular literature, which could be a reflection of the context and her status in contemporary society as perceived in the city. We already know that the Mother was mostly perceived as a benign cunning woman at the end of the sixteenth century, but this was before the seventeenth-century witch craze. Since the city came to regard country folk as inferior to itself, it
seems logical that city folk no longer respected such popular forms of magic. Popular literature often reflected contemporary popular ideas and beliefs, so the witch craze should logically be referred to as well. This changing view of the learned towards the smaller unlearned communities may have been reflected in the opinion on the Mother’s status: if popular magic came to be perceived as something negative and diabolical, so may have been the Mother.

The second chapter focuses on the uneducated and illiterate Mother’s position in an increasingly literate society, which obviously has a great overlap with her professional status. At the end of the sixteenth century, both city and country had a rich oral tradition. With the rise of print, though, the city became increasingly literate while the country remained primarily oral. Since the overall image of country folk and their oral traditions became more negative, the perception of popular magic must have changed negatively as well, as I explained above. When the city started to feel superior over the country and its oral tradition, it is possible that authors started to diminish the Mother’s status based on her oral tradition especially. By looking at how orality and literacy are depicted in the various popular texts, we once again can form an image of how the Mother was perceived in the city.

The third chapter intends to show how society’s perception of the Mother influenced her outer appearance as described in popular literature. While the Mother’s illiteracy and low social status probably affected her professional status, her appearance must have negatively changed together with the growing negative attitudes towards her. The definitions of the term ‘Mother’, as mentioned previously, include the aspect of age but not so much of appearance. Before the seventeenth century, diabolical descriptions of Mothers are absent, but with the outbreak of the witch craze more emphasis was put on diabolical witchcraft in popular culture. It therefore seems reasonable that the negative attitudes towards the Mother were soon related to diabolical witchcraft with regard to her status as well as to her appearance.

The fourth and final chapter mainly focuses on each text individually, with regard to the literary treatment of the Mothers by the authors. In order to find out how the changing attitude from city to country affected the portrayal of the Mother in English literature, it is very useful to look at the genres in which she appears. I already mentioned that at the end of the sixteenth century, witchcraft was very much present in English society, but it was mainly suited for a type of comedy. My sources, though, display quite a variety of genres throughout the seventeenth century, which were apparently all suited for the Mother. However, each author must have had specific intentions with his text and, therefore, influenced the portrayal of the Mother in popular literature. In turn, the genres in which she appeared must have been adapted to fit into the authors’ specific intentions.
with the Mother. In this chapter I therefore analyse each text separately to see how the Mother’s portrayal was affected not only by the context, but also by the intentions of the text.
In the sixteenth century, when city and country were not yet so distinct and both relied upon the oral tradition, the Mothers were considered benign cunning women. The growing distinction between the city and country as well as the increasing presence of black witchcraft in society may have led to a different perception of the Mother’s professional status. In this chapter I intend to show the loss of distinction between black and white witchcraft, by looking at how the four different Mothers are portrayed in their texts with regard to their professional status in society.

Mother Bombie is portrayed as the typical sixteenth-century cunning woman, which implies that her title, Mother, referred to white witches at the end of that century. This becomes evident from the very first time she makes her appearance in the play. The fool Silena visits ‘the old woman’, which is followed by her address: ‘[t]hey say you are a Witch’ (2.3). Not only does this phrase suggest that Mother Bombie is known and possibly famous among the villagers, but it also draws the parallel between the title ‘Mother’, a cunning woman and a witch. This might be a result of contemporary attempts of the Church to emphasize that cunning women were diabolical in their practices. Consequently, contemporaries probably regarded the Mother, a cunning woman and a black witch as roughly the same. Mother Bombie, however, immediately distinguishes herself from a black witch by answering: ‘[t]hey lie, I am a cunning Woman’ (2.3). Apparently, the benign cunning women were not to be confused with diabolical witches. Herrington explains this distinction: black witches are ‘vulgar traffickers in the supernatural’ while Bombie ‘gives not [sic] evidence of trafficking with infernal powers’ (473). Furthermore, it is emphasized that Bombie is rather a traditional cunning woman than a black witch when the poor country girl Serena refers to Mother Bombie as ‘an olde cunning Woman, who can tell fortunes, expound dreames, tell of things that bee lost, and diuine accidents to come, she is called the good woman, who yet neuer did hurt’ (3.1). Later in the play, the servants all decide to visit Mother Bombie, each for a different specialty of hers:

Lucio: I was troubled vwith a vile dreame, and therefore it is little time spent to let mother Bombie expound it, shee is cunning in all things.
Dromio: Then will I know my fortune.
Rixula: And Ile aske for a siluer spoone which vvas lost last day, which I must pay for.
Riscio: And I le know vvhat vvil become of our deuises. (3.4)

When Mother Bombie answers the door, Risco addresses her with ‘[t]hey say you are cunning, and are called the good woman of Rochester’ (3.4). Mother Bombie thus provides us with an image of a
good, old woman whose purpose it is to help others in different areas. This is the woman that deserves the respectable title Mother.

Mother Bombie can paradoxically be classified as a so-called demonized crone, which is a term commonly used to denote a repulsive and threatening witch, but sometimes, as is the case in *Mother Bombie*, it also refers to a benign figure of special powers according to Jeanne Roberts in her article ‘The Crone in English Renaissance Drama’ (131). The original crones were women past their menopause, but through the years they had become negative images of older women (Becvar 20-21). In Elizabethan drama, the crones are usually trivialized characters, represented as nurses, bawds, widows and witches: all female ‘figures of some power as threats to the male’ (Roberts 121). Mother Bombie, though, is portrayed as a good cunning woman without any references to diabolical witchcraft, who is taken seriously by different layers of society. Of the four Mothers discussed, thus of the four crones, Mother Bombie is the only cunning woman that truly equals the definition of the rare, benign crone. She seems to be the model of the contemporary white witch, as opposed to the black witches. Still, the wise woman of Hogsdon is a very benign crone as well, since she still ends up being truly wise: ‘she does work “magic” in pairing off appropriate couples and ensuring a just and happy ending’ (Roberts 131). However, the wise woman of Hogsdon must be distinguished from Mother Bombie, since Bombie performs actual magic in the play while the wise woman has no special powers as such.

The wise woman of Hogsdon originated in an English society where the distinction between black and white witchcraft was still important to the cunning women and their visitors, as was the case in *Mother Bombie*. While the wise woman is interchangeably referred to as a white and a black witch, a distinction between the two is certainly made:

*Luce*: are you not acquainted with the Wise-woman of Hogsdon?

*Chartley*: O the Witch, the Beldame, the Hagge of Hogsdon.

*Luce*: The same, but I hold her to bee of no such condition. (1.2)

Strikingly, this wise woman is not generally called ‘Mother’, while she does list herself in an enumeration of well-known Mothers, including Mother Bombie. The only character that does call her ‘Mother’ is Luce, who genuinely and truly believes in the wise woman’s benign powers. Therefore, the Mother is again associated with a genuine, benign cunning woman. Chartley, the sceptic, continues calling the wise woman disrespectful names associated with witchcraft: ‘[y]ou Inchantresse, Sorceresse, Shee-devill; [...] you are too old, you Hagge, now, for consuring up Spirits your selfe’ (2.1). The wise woman immediately flares up and denies she is a conjurer: ‘I, or my Family conjure up any Spirits! I defie thee, thou yong Hare-brain’d...’ (2.1). In the same scene, Master Boyster asks the wise
woman whether she can conjure. Her answer is clear: ‘[o]h that’s a foule word! but I can tell you your Fortune, as they say: I have some little skill in Palmistry, but never had to doe with the devill’ (2.1). Even though a Mother was often confused with a black witch, as becomes evident from both Mother Bombie and this play, there still was a clear distinction between the two: a Mother was not involved with the devil while a black witch was.

While Mother Bombie reflects positive views of the Mother, The Wise Woman of Hogsdon presents a slightly more critical view of them. It becomes clear from the start that this supposed wise woman is a fraud, as opposed to Mother Bombie. Her first appearance involves a meeting with a countryman, who brings his wife’s urine for the wise woman to see what is wrong with her, which immediately emphasizes the wise woman’s deceit:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wisew.} & \text{. And where doth the paine hold her most?} \\
\text{Countr.} & \text{. Marry at her heart forsooth.} \\
\text{Wisew.} & \text{. Ey, at her heart, shee hath a griping at her heart.} \\
\text{Countr.} & \text{. You have hit it right.} \\
\text{Wisewo.} & \text{. Nay, I can see so much in the Vrine.} \\
2\text{ Luce.} & \text{. Just so much as is told her. (2.1)}
\end{align*}
\]

The play was written in a time when figures of fraud were very popular on stage, since they were so abundantly present in society (Herrington 480-81). Playwrights picked up the demands of the public and started to portray such figures in comedies and satires, which was often done quite realistically since they were accurately based on their well-known originals (Herrington 480-81). Heywood’s wise woman is an ‘inimitable portrait of this familiar figure [of fraud] in Elizabethan life’ (Herrington 481). She is a vulgar woman who has come to be reputed wise because of her trades and tricks: the wise woman has built a small closet near the door and the second Luce asks her why she has built it. Her answer explains her main trick:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wisewoman:} & \text{ [...] if any knock, you must to the doore and question them, to find what they come about, [...] Now they ignorantly telling thee their errand, which I sitting in my Closet, overheare, presently come forth and tell them the cause of their comming, with every word that hath past betwixt you in private: which they admiring, and thinking it to be miraculous, by their report I become thus famous. (3.1)}
\end{align*}
\]

In this play, these successful tricks make visitors spread the word about the wise woman’s apparently genuine powers. This seems to be a reflection of swindling practices in contemporary society, which
caused such frauds to become well-known, and sometimes even famous, for their – nonexistent – magical abilities. Another notable difference between this wise woman and Mother Bombie is that the wise woman of Hogsdon flaunts her ‘wisdom’: ‘[f]ie, fie, what a toyle, and a moyle it is,/For a woman to bee wiser then all her neighbours?’ (2.1). With this small phrase, it seems as if the wise woman expects praise for her incredible wisdom: she only helps people for her own gain, so that they can spread her fame. Furthermore, she claims to be a healer, a matchmaker and a fortune-teller, which she pretends to do by palmistry, at the same time: ‘[s]hee that is but one, and professeth so many, may well bee tearmed a Wise-woman, if there bee any’ (3.1). This indicates that the so-called wise woman actually does not at all believe in wise women herself: she knows the frauds such as herself. However, she also has a good nature and kindliness which makes the audience sympathize with her (Herrington 481). This apparent change in attitude towards cunning women did not imply that society questioned the existence of magical powers, though (Nicol 426). As becomes evident below, people did believe in magic, but because there were so many frauds it became rather impossible to distinguish the real cunning women from the abundantly present frauds. This fraud’s self-interest is exactly what sets her apart from the genuine cunning women such as Mother Bombie, I believe, who simply wanted to help people altruistically.

While in Mother Bombie and The Wise Woman of Hogsdon the term ‘Mother’ denotes a harmless and clever wise woman, the play The Witch of Edmonton shows the remarkable change of ‘Mother’ being used to refer to a diabolical witch. Almost everyone in Early modern England genuinely believed in demons and their powers and, therefore, writings on this topic should be taken seriously (qtd. in David Nicol 426). This play is the first of my sources that does not distinguish Mothers and black witches. When Cuddy Banks runs into Mother Sawyer he says: ‘[b]ut Uds me, Mother Sawyer’, which is followed by a man saying ‘[t]he old Witch of Edmonton’ (2.1). Immediately the parallel is drawn between a Mother and a black witch, instead of the previous one between a cunning woman and a Mother as distinguished from a black witch. This parallel is even enhanced when Cuddy calls her ‘Mother Witch’: a combination of terms not previously seen in Mother Bombie and The Wise Woman of Hogsdon (2.1). Apparently, the fine line between cunning women and diabolical witchcraft had now disappeared, since the – presumed – black witch Elizabeth Sawyer is also referred to as ‘Mother’. The role of black witchcraft became increasingly prominent in early modern English society, which is reflected in the following comment: ‘[w]itches themselves are so common now adays [...] they say we have three or four in Edmonton, besides Mother Sawyer’ (3.1). One might derive from this quotation that society had accepted witchcraft as being part of its life.

Even though The Witch of Edmonton very much criticizes the contemporary witch craze, to which I will return later, it does not at all question the existence of demons and witchcraft. In fact,
this play can be seen as ‘the most serious and intelligent exploration of witchcraft and devils in the drama of the period’ (Nicol 427). It certainly makes clear that there was no question of Sawyer being a witch, which belief was based on Gifford’s Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes, 1593. This argues that there are no such things as powerful witches, but that there are only demons that trick them into believing they have powers with which they can cause fear and sin (qtd. in Nicol 433). This idea is reflected in The Witch of Edmonton: Frank used to be quite innocent but, due to the devil, he gets caught in his own web of tricks. He says: ‘[o]n every side I am distracted: Am waded deeper into mischief, then vertue can avoid. But on I must: Fate leads me: I will follow’ (1.2). Eventually it is the devil that tricks him into murdering Susan, though Frank does not realize this when he tells her that ‘[t]he Devil did not prompt me: till this minute/You might have safe returned; now you cannot:/You have dogg’d your own death (3.1). Ironically, the devil did prompt him to murder Susan by rubbing him in the shape of a dog, so Frank is the character being literally dogged into murdering.

The Witch of Edmonton is ‘one of the most sober and skeptical accounts of the witch craze in the drama of the period’, which provides us with elements of the growing knowledge concerning diabolical witchcraft (Nicol 426). Mother Sawyer is an incredibly bitter woman, as a result of her community’s bullying attitude towards her, and therefore is quite cruel in her threats towards her main accuser Banks: ‘curmudgeon now thy bones aches, thy joynts cramps, and commisions stretch and crack thy sinews’ (2.1). Sawyer is so desperate that she is very willing to actually make a pact with the devil in order to obtain familiars to do her bidding. Probably, such devilish aspects of witchcraft were now well-known throughout society, since it is reflected as a characteristic of witches in this ‘realistic’ play:

Sawyer: [...] I have heard old Beldames
Talk of Familiars in the shape of Mice,
Rats, Ferrets, VVeasels, and I wot, not what,
That have appear’d, and suck’d, some say, their blood. (2.1)

Then Mother Sawyer actually makes a pact with the devil, but now the element of free will has changed into coercion. Sawyer can either make a pact with him or die, so, despite the horrific element of familiars drinking her blood, she chooses the first option:

Dog: command me
Do any mischief unto Man or Beast,
And I’ll effect it, on condition,
That uncompell’d thou make a deed of Gift
Of Soul and Body to me.

Sawyer: Out, alas! My Soul and Body?

Dog: And that instantly,
And seal it with thy blood: if thou deniest,
I’ll tear thy body in a thousand pieces. (2.1)

Eventually, though, Mother Sawyer is completely betrayed by the devil, who knows that it is always the witches who pay for their sins, not the devils: ‘[…] but when we reckoning call,/We know where to receive: th’Witch pays for all’ (3.1). The devil makes this clear to Mother Sawyer without any guilty feeling:

Dog: […] Villaines are strip’t naked, the Witch must be beaten out of her Cock-pit.
Sawyer: Must she? she shall not; thou art a lying Spirit […]
Dog: thou art so ripe to fall into Hell, that no more of my Kennel will so much as bark at him that hangs thee.
Sawyer: I shall run mad.
Dog: Do so, thy time is come, to curse, and rave and die.
The Glass of thy sins is full, and it must run out at Gallows. (4.2)

Since black witchcraft was now a prominent part of early modern culture, the growing ‘knowledge’ about it was very much reflected in popular literature, as is the case in this specific play.

This emphasis on the relation between diabolical witchcraft and the Mother continues in the sources on Mother Shipton, although she seems to start out rather as a cunning woman than as a truly diabolical witch. From the start of her literary career in 1641, she is presented as a genuine oracle, who, because of her fortune-telling ability, resembles the popular cunning woman. The difference lies in the fact that Mother Shipton rather predicts political events concerning the entire country instead of the fortunes of random people. Shipton is interchangeably referred to as a witch and a cunning woman, which conforms to the recent development where the distinction between the two was no longer clear. In the earliest source, The Prophesie of Mother Shipton In the Raigne of King Henry the Eighth, 1641, she is never actually referred to as a witch, but Lord Besley does imply what he thinks of her when he says: ‘[w]hen [Cardinal Wolsey] comes to Yorke thou shalt be burned’ (2). Her response is based on a magical act when she throws her handkerchief in the fire: ‘[i]f this had burn’d (said she) I might have burned’ (2). In A True Copy of Mother Shiptons Last Prophesies: As they were taken from one Joane Waller, 1642, Shipton suddenly is called a witch by Wolsey: ‘I will go thither because yonder Witch said, I might see York but never come thither’ (A3). This, however,
does not necessarily indicate the general perception of Mother Shipton, but rather Wolsey’s personal negative feelings towards the woman that predicts his death. *Two strange Prophesies*, 1642, and William Lilly’s *Ancient and Moderne Prophesies*, 1645, rather refer to Shipton as a wise woman, thus as a white witch. The first explains how England knows many fake prophets, of which Shipton is not one, though:

> they delude and suggest vaine imaginations unto [their schismaticall Auditors], that they are sent from heaven, and have the spirit of God, when they have nothing but the spirit of error and falsehood. (A2V)

In this phrase, it becomes evident that the author perceives true oracular powers, such as Shipton’s, as divine. Lilly adds to this praise that ‘*Mother Skiptons [sic] was yet never questioned either for the verity or antiquity; the North of England hath many more of hers*’ (A4). Conforming to the fairly recent development where black and white witchcraft were barely distinguished, the term Mother refers to both types of witchcraft, making it quite hard to define Shipton’s professional status.

While at first, Shipton is simultaneously referred to as a black and a white witch, her status as diabolical witch is soon established in Richard Head’s chapbook *The Life and Death of Mother Shipton*, 1667. It becomes fairly evident that Head perceives Mother Shipton as a diabolical witch, since he presents her as the offspring of the devil. Her mother Agatha was seduced and tricked by the devil: ‘Agatha casting up her eyes, and there seeing a face so lovely, could not suspect a Devil hid in that comely shape’, so she unwittingly made a pact with him (2). Unlike Mother Sawyer, it is rather trickery than free will which causes her involvement with the devil. However, after the tricked marriage, Agatha does willingly agree to be his servant: ‘she condescended to all the Devil would have her do’ (3). This element of trickery is also present in Thompson’s *The Life of Mother Shipton*, 1668, in which Agatha Shipton is tricked in the same way as in Head’s version: ‘[h]ow married to an Imaterial Spirit this starteles me, how sweetly could I now desire my former poverty!’ (16). She does accept the pact almost immediately, though: ‘[t]hen Fortune turn thy wheel, *I am in now and must through,* /And to all virtuous acts I bid adieu’ (16). Furthermore, in his work ‘the Political History of the Devil’ (1726), Daniel Defoe argues that oracular possession was often associated with the devil: the devil that once controlled the Delphic Oracle was thought to control ‘its modern descendants in the forms of witches, wizards and politicians’ (qtd. in McGrane 376). Obviously, this work was written almost a century after Mother Shipton’s appearance in popular literature. From Head’s work, though, we can derive that oracular powers were indeed perceived as diabolical, though at the same time they were praised: ‘though she was generally believed to be a Witch, yet all persons whatsoever that
either read or heard her Prophecies, have esteemed them little less than Oraculous, and her Memory
to this day is much Honoured by those of her own Country’ (Head 50).

Thompson’s *The Life of Mother Shipton*, 1668, and the anonymous *The History of Mother Shipton*, 1686, both build on Head’s chapbook and very much emphasize the diabolical characteristics of Mother Shipton. In Thompson’s play, the prophecies are also associated with devilish witchcraft. Radaman the devil says: ‘in recompence of my love thou must practice Murder, Witchcraft, fatal Prophecies and what not that Hell can boast off’ (23). Still, Shipton was admired for her prophecies in popular culture, so the devil does have to make sure that she is, despite the fact that he listed the prophecies among diabolical powers: ‘[t]hen i’le promise thee: Henceforward thou shalt be/ Admired by Nations for thy Prophecy’ (23). *The History of Mother Shipton* rather focuses on Shipton’s devilish parentage: ‘she never had any [F]ather of humane Race, or mortal wight, but [w]as begot (as the great Welsh Prophet Merlin [w]as of old) by the Phantasm of Apollo, or some [w]anton Airial Daemon’ (2). Furthermore, the villagers call her names from which we can derive she was perceived as a diabolical witch: ‘[t]he Devil’s Bastard, and Hag-face, and the like’ (*The History* 8). If this is not enough evidence of Shipton’s diabolical powers, she also uses her powers for her own gain against people she dislikes: ‘she was often affronted, by reason of her deformity, but she never fail’d to be revenged on [t]hose that did it’ (*The History* 8). In this text, it is actually a specific moment in which Shipton displays her prophetic powers, resulting in the turning-point of her status. Someone stole a neighbour’s petticoat and smock and Shipton is the one who identifies the thief, which results in a respectful attitude towards her:

> [she] did not go about like our lit[t]le silly Conjurers, with their Schemes and figures to give a blind description of she knew not whom, but roundly told her such a Woman by name had stoln the things, adding, that she would make her restore them with a [sh]ame to her. (*The History* 11)

It is striking that the learned magicians are considered inferior to this diabolical witch with regard to their prophesying methods. Probably the country folk had more faith in the cunning women of their own social layer than in the pompous, learned ‘magicians’.

In Mother Bombie’s time, the Mother was portrayed as a harmless, benign cunning woman. Mothers were typical crones, which is implied in the title itself, but at first they were mainly unusually benign crones such as Mother Bombie. Furthermore, the Mothers used to be clearly distinguished from the also present black witchcraft in society. Mother Bombie and the wise woman of Hogsdon firmly classified themselves as white witches, even though the latter is a fraud, which indicates that the title Mother was only to be used for good cunning women such as themselves.
Soon, however, black and white witches were no longer clearly distinguished so that both came to be referred to as Mother. While popular beliefs about witchcraft within society grew, so did their representations in popular literature. However, the popular beliefs were definitely more and more criticized in the following years, as becomes evident in *The Witch of Edmonton*. The same types of women were usually accused of black witchcraft by their communities, which resulted in criticism from the literate and learned in society. With the arrival of Mother Shipton, though, popular literature shed a positive light on the diabolical witch, strangely enough. The female prophet was usually associated with the devil, but was ironically worshipped for this exact diabolical gift of prophesying. Essentially, prophesying was simultaneously regarded as diabolical and divine in society. Furthermore, more popular spectacles of Mother Shipton appeared after the Civil War, both emphasizing her diabolical characteristics and society’s positive perception of her. This provides us with a less straightforward distinction between the two forms of witchcraft: it rather presents a merger between the two at the end of the seventeenth century.
2 - Orality and Literacy

Under the influence of the contemporary witch craze, the previously benign Mother was soon brought into relation with diabolical witchcraft, while before her unscholarly magic was respected throughout society. This was especially a result of the increasing literacy in society, which led to condescending attitudes towards the unlearned and their popular beliefs about witchcraft. Obviously, the once respected Mother was part of the illiterate classes, so this chapter focuses on the attitudes towards the unlearned Mothers as presented in the various texts from the increasingly literate city.

*Mother Bombie* reflects the contemporary relation between learning and the art of divination or palmistry, which flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The art of fortune-telling was usually based on ‘an application of one of the many schemes of prediction available to contemporaries, whether professional wizards or not’ (Thomas 282). These ‘systems of divination’ were printed and disseminated from Elizabethan times on and ‘taken seriously by many Renaissance intellectuals, however debased its practice at the village level may have been’ (Thomas 283). When Candius tries to woo Silena, he impresses her by claiming he is a scholar who can foretell her future:

*Candius:* You said you went to know your fortune, I am a Scholler, and am cunning in Palmistrie.

*Silena:* The better for you sir, here’s my hand, what’s a clocke?

*Candius:* The line of life is good, *Venus* mount very perfect, you shall haue a scholler to your first husband. (2.2)

Candius pretends to practise palmistry, which ‘had a recognized intellectual basis’ during the Renaissance, but his prediction is not a real one: he only wants Silena to realize that he might be her wedding candidate (Thomas 270-71). The character that does make accurate – but unclear and confusing – predictions is our countrywoman Mother Bombie. The manner in which she foretells Silena’s fortune, though, is very different from Candius’ scholarly-based palmistry:

*Bombie:* Hold vp thy hand, not so high, thy father knowes thee not, thy Mother bare thee not, falsly bred, truely begot: choice of two husbands, but neuer tied in bands, because of Loue and naturall bonds. (2.3)

Bombie gives no evidence of the intellectual art of palmistry: perhaps she does look at the lines on the palm, but she does not refer to them where Candius does. This difference is easily explained: while the intellectuals obviously used books to enhance their knowledge about magical theories, it
was uncommon for village wizards ‘to possess books, or for their activities to rest upon a body of self-conscious theory’ (Thomas 272). From the blunt way in which Mother Bombie tells Silena’s fortune, we can perceive that her method of fortune-telling is ‘not an application of previously worked-out theory’ (Thomas 272). Furthermore, Candius delivers a clear-cut prophecy, while Mother Bombie tends to confuse her visitors with her mysterious and cryptic predictions. Not seldom do her cryptic words result in negative attitudes towards her from her visitors, such as Serena: ‘[t]hese doggrel rimes and obscure words, comming out of the mouth of such a weatherbeaten Witch, are thought Divinations of some holy Spirit, being but Dreams of decayed brains’ (3.2). While before, Serena addressed Bombie as ‘Good Mother’, now the latter’s oral, cryptic fortune-telling makes her associate Bombie with diabolical witchcraft. Her reaction corresponds with the contemporary idea that ‘healing women’s oral traditions independent from any single authoritative text led to little but devilish witchcraft’ (Giglio qtd. in Bamford and Lamb 21). This attitude can also be found in the reaction of Serena’s alleged brother, Maestius: ‘[c]ontent sweet sister, and learne of me hereafter, that these old sawes of such old Hagges, are but false sires to lead one out of a plaine path into a deepe pit’ (3.2). In the end, however, Mother Bombie is respected for her wisdom by all the characters involved, no matter their level of learnedness and literacy:

Silena: Mother Bombie told mee my father knew me not, my mother bore me not, falsly bred, truly begot, a bots on Mother Bombie.

Dromio: Mother Bombie told vs we should be found coosners, and in the end be coosned by coosners: welfare Mother Bom.

Risio: I heard Mother Bombie say, that thou shalt die a beggar, beware of Mother Bombie.

Pri.: Why haue you all beene with Mother Bombie?

Lin: All, & as far as I can see foretold all. (5.2)

The Wise Woman of Hogsdon reflects a more sceptical view of the so-called cunning women with regard to their learning and social status. Like Mother Bombie, the wise woman of Hogsdon is well-known in the area and consulted by many people from different social layers. One great difference between the two women, though, is that the wise woman is not the typical country cunning woman, but a woman from the suburbs (Gibbons 392). They both are unlearned cunning women of low social status, but this is far more emphasized in The Wise Woman of Hogsdon than it ever was in Mother Bombie. The character second Luce draws the parallel between learning and magic, which was only slightly touched upon in Mother Bombie:

2. Luce: ‘Tis strange the Ignorant should be thus fool’d.
What can this Witch, this Wizard, or old Trot,
Doe by Inchantment, or by Magicke spell?
Such as professe that Art should be deepe Schollers.
What reading can this simple Woman have?
‘Tis palpable grosse foolery. (2.1)

Luce does not believe that a lowly woman such as the wise woman has any magical abilities, since she obviously does not have access to the books: she is an illiterate person of low social status. As Luce makes clear, the distinction between the oral tradition and the literate culture was already established: reading was for the learned, who were usually of higher social status, and the oral tradition belonged to the lowly fools. Furthermore, Luce reckons that only the unlearned, or ‘the Ignorant’, can be fooled by such an unlearned woman. However, it is not only this group that consults the wise woman, but also gentlefolk such as the gentlewoman:

_Wisewoman_: You are welcome Gentlewoman.---
_Woman_: I would not have it knowne to my Neighbours, that I come to a Wise-woman for any thing, by my truly. (2.1)

She visits the wise woman, which indicates she does believe in her magical abilities, but at the same time she is perfectly aware that it is not fitting to her social status to visit such a lowly and unlearned woman. Aristocrats must have known better than to visit cunning women: they were too well-read to believe in such nonsense. The distinction between the oral and literate culture within English society is apparently portrayed in relation with social status, as also becomes evident from the dispute between Sencer and Sir Boniface. They argue about who is the better scholar of the two and servant Taber knows exactly who to choose:

_Taber_: Nay sir, there are two Schollers, and they are spouting Latin one against the other; And in my simple Iudgement the stranger is the better Scholler [...] For he speakes lowder, and that you know is ever th[e] signe of the most learning. (4.1)

Taber bases his judgement on the scholars’ verbal volume and thinks that the one speaking loudest must be the best scholar. He probably represents the unlearned, socially lower people within society as perceived by the learned, thus the authors. Typically, Taber selects Sencer as the best scholar, even though he is only impersonating one:
Sencer seems to be confident that both Taber and Sir Harry do not understand Latin, so he can easily convince them he is the better scholar.

Not only is the relation between social status and literacy repeatedly emphasized throughout *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*, but so is the changing relation between gender and learnedness. Seventeenth-century England was a patriarchal society, which was why men had more access to learning. In this play, though, it is especially the women that are clever. At the end of the sixteenth century, the book industry started to appeal to women and both men and women could define themselves by what they read (Lamb 17). Since the second Luce is the character bringing up the distinction between the oral and the literate culture, we may assume that she is, surprisingly enough, a well-read and learned woman. The second Luce and the wise woman both consider literacy to be the basis of learning, which was usually only part of the male – and socially high – world. Another apparently learned woman in the play is Sir Harry’s daughter Gratiana. While both Sir Harry and his servant Taber misunderstand the scholar Sir Boniface, she is the character that points this out to them:

Sir Boniface: I will not bargaine, but account my selfe

Mille & mille modis, bound to you.

Sir Harry: I cannot leave my Mills, they’r farm’d already,

The stipend that I give, shall be in money.

Taber: Sure Sir, this is some Miller that comes to undermine you, in the shape of a Schoolmaster.

Gratiana: You both mistake the Scholler.

Sir Harry: I understand my English, that I know. (2.1)

Obviously, Gratiana is the only character who notices that Sir Boniface speaks in Latin, despite the fact that she is a woman. Sir Harry even employs Sir Boniface to educate his children, including Gratiana: ‘[h]e shall instruct my children; and to thee, / Faire Gratiana, reade the Latin tongue’ (2.1). Evidently, Gratiana belongs to the social class that allows her to be educated to a certain degree. The wise woman, coming from an entirely different, poorer social layer, strangely enough does possess several books of learning, which she pretends to use for her ‘art’. Luce therefore wonders what she does with them:
2. *Luce:* but Mistris, are you so
Cunning as you make your selfe: you can
Neither write nor reade, what doe you with those
Bookes you so often tumne over?

*Wisewoman:* Why tell the leaves; for to be ignorant, and seeme ignorant, what greater folly?
2. *Luce:* Beleeve me, this is a cunning Woman; neither hath shee her name for nothing, who
out of her ignorance, can foole so many that thinke themselves wise. (3.1)

The wise woman is plainly aware of the distinction between the oral and the literate culture. She
even tries to adapt to this new literate culture by pretending to support her predictions with books of
learning. Without them, she comes across as ignorant, which she apparently finds much more
degrading than actually being ignorant. In the end, though, she does rely upon her own, unscholarly
wisdom, which even trumps the learned knowledge of characters such as Chartley.

It has become clear from *Mother Bombie* and *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* that society’s
image of a Mother was one of a poor, lower-class woman from the oral tradition, but *The Witch of
Edmonton* shows that this description came to be a negative one associated with diabolical
witchcraft. This play presents a unique approach towards witchcraft, as mentioned before, in which
society is its main culprit. Mother Sawyer did not use to be a diabolical witch, but her community has
pushed her into becoming one. Throughout the play, it becomes clear that Mother Sawyer is accused
of witchcraft simply because she is the typical, poor, old countrywoman:

*Sawyer:* Have you not City-witches who can turn
Their husbands warres, whole standing shops of wares,
To sumptuous Tables, Gardens of stoln sin?
[...] Are not these Witches?
*Justice:* Yes, yes, but the Law
Casts not an eye on these.
*Sawyer:* Whye then on me,
Or any lean old Beldame? (4.1)

As the Justice mentions, the law does not focus on any type of witches except for the stereotypical
old countrywoman, even though he recognizes there are more. The fact was, however, that
community regarded one’s magical abilities to be divine when the person had a higher social status
(Mack 51). When a community needed a black sheep, then, they typically sought out the people
lowest on the social ladder, since their magic must have been diabolical. The play definitely
emphasises ‘the coercive power of rural poverty and the scapegoating of marginal figures by small communities’, thereby displaying a critical view from city towards country communities (Nicol 427).

Throughout *The Witch of Edmonton*, it is implied that the oral culture of the country was inferior to the literate culture in the city, and even considered diabolical, which is reflected in the portrayal of Mother Sawyer. It becomes clear that Sawyer is a very bitter woman who has quite a rude tongue. It even is her language that summons the devil: ‘[h]o! have I found thee cursing? now thou art mine own’ (2.1). The devil explains how especially oral sins initiate the coming of demons:

Thou never art so distant
From an evil Spirit, but that thy Oaths,
Curses and Blasphemies pull him to thine Elbow:
[...] As thy tongue slandering, bearing false witness. (4.2)

Typically, Mother Sawyer has called him through her rude language, or as the Justice calls it: ‘[y]ou are too sawcie, and too bitter’ (4.1). Despite the vulgar language, Mother Sawyer actually is rhetorically very gifted. When looking at her different soliloquies, this fact becomes fairly evident. Furthermore, Mother Sawyer tends to speak a lot, which is also noticed by Sir Arthur: ‘[p]ray, Sir, give way, and let her Tongue gallop on’ (4.1). Obviously, her rhetorical gift fits right into her oral culture. Strangely enough, after Mother Sawyer has made a pact with the devil, she can suddenly speak Latin:

*Contaminetur nomen tuum*. I’m an expert Scholar;
Speak Latine, or I know not well what Language,
As well as the best of ‘em. (2.1)

While this might refer to the relation between learning and magic, this quotation also sets Mother Sawyer apart from the true scholars. She does speak Latin here, but she is not at all sure which language she is speaking. Despite this acquired ability, she remains a poor, illiterate countrywoman who does not have the learned background to establish what specific knowledge she has gained. The attitude from the learned towards the unlearned country becomes evident from the passage in which the community tries to establish that Sawyer is a witch:

*Haml.*: A handful of Thatch pluck’d off a Hovel of hers: and they say, when ‘tis burning, if she be a Wvitch, she’ll come running in.
[...]

27
This Thatch is as good as a Jury to prove she is a Witch.

[...]

Justice: Come, come; firing her Thatch? ridiculous: take heed Sirs what you do: unless your proofs come better arm’d, instead of turning her into a Witch, you’ll prove your selves starke Fools. (4.1)

This typical seventeenth-century popular method was taken seriously by the common people in the small communities, but by having the learned Justice criticize this ‘ridiculous’ method, the authors mock rural beliefs about witchcraft (Nicol 429). Apparently, this ‘thatch-burning seems to have been a byword for foolish superstition: Henry Goodcole, in the pamphlet on which the play is based, calls the test “an old ridiculous custome”’ (Nicol 428). Evidently, the common people relied on such popular and non-scientific methods to identify witches. The more learned and literate people, thus the playwrights themselves, represented by a Justice, do not believe in such nonsense. This displayed view may have reflected contemporary attitudes from the learned city towards the unlearned, naïve country.

As opposed to the view expressed in The Witch of Edmonton, the oral culture as displayed by Mother Shipton is not at all presented as inferior to the literate culture, but rather as something to be praised and respected. Even though Mother Shipton is a typical example of the uneducated countrywoman, she ironically is worshipped by people of all social layers for her oral prophecies. She is the typical crone of low, social and economic status, but she is taken seriously by royalty. She even mystifies literate and learned persons of high social status such as Master Besley and the Lords. This becomes apparent in her first source, The Prophesie of Mother Shipton In the Raigne of King Henry the Eighth, 1641, in which the Lords have to ask Shipton for an explanation despite her low status (McGrane 373). This occurs when Shipton shows her magical abilities to the lords: ‘then shee tooke her staffe and turned it into the fire, and it would not burn, then she took it on againe; Now (said the Duke) what meane you by this? If this had burn’d (said shee) I might have burned’ (2). Male astrologers usually were academics with democratic ideals, but also disdainful toward the real female visionary, whom they ridiculed as ignorant, superstitious, and [...] distinct from themselves’ (Mack 65). The male astrologer Lilly, however, strongly respects the art of oral prophesying, which we can derive from his Ancient and Moderne Prophesies, 1645: ‘[t]here is a certaine Art knowne to few men, which doth so illustrate the faithfull and pure minde of man, that he may on a sudden be brought out of the foggs of ignorance to the light of wisedome and learning’ (A3). He himself is mainly interested in the scholarly form of divination, since he looks at ‘heavenly bodys, expectant

1 This number indicates that the speaker is one of the three countrymen in the play: they do not have names. They are continually numbered throughout the play: sometimes number one has to speak, at other times numbers two and three.
effects of Comets and blazing starres, influence and operation of greater and lesser Conjunctions of Superior Planets, famous eclipses both Solar and Lunar’ (A3-A3V). Instead of writing off Shipton’s unscholarly method of fortune-telling, he observes a relation with his own scholarly manner of predicting the future.

While on the one hand Mother Shipton is praised for her prophecies, she is seen as a diabolical witch for this same oracular gift on the other. Obviously, she is rhetorically very gifted, which is reflected in her cryptic and often rhymed prophecies. The following example comes from A True Copy of Mother Shiptons Last Prophesies: As they were taken from one Joane Waller, 1642: ‘In processe of time shall be seen/A noble King and vertuous Queen,/Out of Scotland they shall come,/And shall enjoy this Crown alone’ (A3V). It is exactly this rhetorical gift that proves her to be a diabolical witch to most people, which is also the case with Mother Sawyer. This ‘reliance on the power of words, rather than pens or swords’ was usually associated with evil witchcraft, since this type of cleverness in women ‘had the inbuilt potential to create disorder, to be an enemy to culture’ (Mack 30-31). The History of Mother Shipton, 1686, emphasizes that Shipton’s prophecies were made in verses: ‘[a]nd thereupon [...]d in mystick Verses discover to him the [gre]atest Accidents that have happen’d in England, from that day to this, as in the following Explanations will appear’ (16-17). The prophecies probably seemed a lot more mysterious and cryptic when put into verse, which is usually what they aimed at. Apparently, good speech was supposed to go hand in hand with learning, which should therefore be a characteristic of men. Now that it is a characteristic of a female, though, it is suddenly associated with the devil, as I already mentioned in the first chapter.

In his chapbook The Life and Death of Mother Shipton, 1667, Head clearly relates learning to magic and gender, which was so common in The Wise Woman of Hogsdon and The Witch of Edmonton. He portrays the devil as a scholar and Agatha Shipton as a silly girl: ‘the Devil is a great Scholar, well read in all things, and much acquainted with the constitutions of all sorts of persons’ (1). The devil claims that ‘I know all rare Arts and Sciences, and can teach them to whom I please’ (3). Agatha Shipton, Mother Shipton’s mother, is the contrary of a learned person: she is poor and a ‘simple Girle’, or a ‘poor ignorant wretch’ who therefore ‘easily believed what this Grand Deceiver of Man kind told her’ (3). It seems as if Head considers her gender to be a factor in determining her level of literacy and learnedness. Strikingly enough, the child Mother Shipton proves to be very intelligent and learned without any education: ‘to the amazement and astonishment of her Mistris; she exactly pronounced every Letter in the Alphabet without teaching’ (14). Since she is the offspring of the scholarly devil, this might be part of her inheritance. We can derive from The Witch of Edmonton and this chapbook that it was not unusual for a witch to gain certain knowledge after making a pact with the devil. Apparently, Shipton is both rhetorically gifted and confusing, as was her
she hath been often seen when alone [...] to talk by her self, uttering very strange riddles [...] as required a long study to find out the meaning’ (15). As the author of the Two Strange Prophecies, 1642, says: ‘you may enucleate the genuine sense, and signification of the words, if you doe but seriously revolve them’ (A2). This is exactly what made people respect her, though, since these riddles were compared to those of famous oracles:

he could not tell what to make of her Ambiguous Lines, which like the Oracles, formerly delivered at Delphos[,] rather brought one into a Labyrinth of confused conjectures, then satisfied the expectation, until by the Clue of Time, the Riddles were manifest, and that which at first seemed so hard, now appeared to the understanding. (Head 23)

From Head’s chapbook on, the superior attitude from the learned and literate to the unlearned people of the oral tradition becomes quite evident in the sources about Mother Shipton. Head addresses the countrymen, which indicates that this work was intended for a poorly-educated, socially lower class of people. As I mentioned before, Head claims to have found these writings in a monastery, but they were no longer legible. Still, he says, he found a so-called scientific manner to repair these sources:

I took of the best Galls I could get, beat them grosly, and laid them to steep one day in good white-Wine, that done, I distilled them with the Wine; and with the distilled Water that came off them, I wetted handsomly the old Letters, whereby they seemed as fresh and fair, as if they had been but newly written. (A2 – A2V)

Even though this method is not even that ‘far-fetched’, since ‘[t]here is no doubt that galls (from oak-trees) contain tannic acid, from which ink can be made and which has the property of darkening fading writing’, it rather comes across as something made-up, which the intended audience possibly believed because of their lack of education (Kellett 49). Later in his work, Head describes the gibberish that Shipton has to repeat from the devil: ‘Kamerzeatuph Odel Pharaz Tumbagin Gall Flemmngen Victow Denmarkeonto’ (3). It appears as though he has created some fantasy language with ‘scraps of Greek and Latin, and even perhaps Romany and Turkish’, which probably would have been accepted as a learned language by the audience (Kellett 52). Still, Head does make clear that only the devil knows what the riddles mean, which sounds like an attempt to cover himself.

In Thompson’s The Life of Mother Shipton, 1668, it is apparent that the people of higher social position looked down on the popular methods of discovering a witch, as is the case in The Witch of Edmonton. This becomes evident from the scene where Shipton is brought to trial and the
Justice does not easily believe she is a witch. One ‘witness’ states that ‘she alwaies threatned desperate things’, but the Justice’s reaction is ‘[p]ish this is but talk, can any of you prove what you surmised for the ground of your warrant that she is a witch?’ (33). He is not easily convinced: while in small communities, the villagers usually convinced each other by simply accusing someone, the higher, educated layers of society needed more scientific proof. No witness can state that Shipton is a witch, because, ironically, she has bewitched them. Eventually, the Justice is so angry with these men that he even supports Shipton:

[o]ut impu[dent Cattel: Clark drive them in, and then make each persons Minimus to the County Goal, to answer to two Indictments. The one for upbraiding and [...] mee a Justice of Peace in Coram, the other for fasly [sic] accusing Mother Shipton a woeman of good repute and conversation. (33)

*The History of Mother Shipton*, 1686, presents a more comical and vulgar picture of the above, which fits its genre of a jestbook. Shipton’s mother, being brought into court, outwits the socially much higher and more learned Justice. The Justice lectures her for being pregnant without a husband, upon which she reveals him to be an adulterer: ‘Mr. Justice, gravely you talk now, and yet the truth is, your Wo[rs]hip is not altogether free, for here stands Two [of] your Servant wenches, that are both at this time with Child by you’ (4). Thus, the lowly, uneducated Mother has proven herself superior to this high, educated Justice, which must have been hilarious to the contemporary, presumably lowly audience.

Seventeenth-century English society definitely saw a chronological development in which literacy and learnedness spread in society, resulting in a negative attitude towards illiteracy and lack of education. At the end of the sixteenth century, there was a close relation between books and magic: the learned magicians were taken seriously by intellectuals while the uneducated village wizards were not. This notion is not yet reflected in *Mother Bombie*, where all her visitors, learned and unlearned, take her very seriously in the end. Literacy and learning found their way in the socially higher classes, which resulted in greater social distinctions: the unlearned and illiterate usually belonged to the lower classes in city and country. Soon this distinction was also reflected in popular literature, as in *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*. The women of socially higher status even gained more access to education, so that the lowly Mother was soon degraded to be only part of the uneducated classes of society. The distinction grew, until around the 1620s the oral tradition was now seen as inferior in the city, and in the case of the Mother even as diabolical, as becomes evident from *The Witch of Edmonton*. It became common to accuse mainly poor, old women such as Mother Sawyer of witchcraft, since they were easy victims when something went wrong within a community:
the people lowest on the social ladder were picked as the black sheep. However, the literate and educated did not take these popular beliefs about witchcraft very seriously as their level of education grew. The city's negative attitude towards the illiterate country seemed to develop in this time, which becomes evident from several condescending attitudes in the different sources. Strangely enough, the female prophet Mother Shipton did not belong to this inferior class of illiterate Mothers, despite the fact that she was an uneducated, poor crone. Fitting right into the contemporary notion that an oral gift was diabolical, the female prophet was certainly seen as a diabolical witch. Ironically, though, she was praised for this diabolical gift and very popular among different layers of society.
3 – The Mother’s Appearance

While before, I primarily focused on how the Mother was perceived in society, I now intend to emphasize the Mother’s portrayal in contemporary popular literature as a result of the changing views of her. This chapter intends to show how the primarily negatively changing attitudes towards the Mothers are reflected in the portrayals of their appearances in popular literature. With the word appearance, I refer to the Mothers’ outer appearances as described in the texts and as portrayed in accompanying woodcuts. The seven woodcuts I discuss in this chapter have been appended to this dissertation and are referred to as figures 1 up to 7.

Throughout Mother Bombie, we get only a slight hint of what this Mother must have looked like; not once in all three editions is there a woodcut or a clear description of her. Since the term ‘Mother’ indicates an old, withered woman, the name Mother Bombie implies that she is such a character. The only references to her appearance come from Silena and Maestius. Silena tells her: ‘and because that I am so faire, therefore are you so foule’ and Maestius calls her a ‘Beldam, for her face and yeeres, and attire’ (2.3; 3.1). This is another synonym for an old woman, or even ‘a loathsome old woman, a hag; a witch’ (OED). Apparently, Mother Bombie is not only old, but also very ugly. There might be one other reference to her ugly appearance, when Halfepenie says ‘[c]rosse your selues, looke how she lookes’ (3.4). Still, this is as close as the reader can get to visualizing Mother Bombie. The sixteenth-century audience probably were presented with a more accurate image of Bombie, since they saw the play performed and thus saw her on stage. The fact that so little is known about Bombie’s appearance might be a result of the context of the play. It was a time in which the topic of witchcraft was not yet that common or popular. Authors only used the images of cunning women and witches as presented in older and foreign literary works, in which revolting details were still left out (Herrington 477). As a result, the play provides us with a very superficial and unclear description of a Mother.

At least seventeen years later, when The Wise Woman of Hogsdon was presumably performed, the textual description of the Mother had become slightly more detailed. The play does not supply many references to the wise woman’s appearance, but still they have become more concrete and are related to the devil. When the wise woman tries to distinguish her art from diabolical witchcraft, she says ‘I have some little skill in Palmistry, but never had to doe with the devill’. Master Boyster doubts this statement, though, because of her appearance: ‘[a]nd had the devil never any thing to doe with thee? thou look’st somewhat like his damme’ (2.1). Master Boyster draws a more accurate image of the wise woman’s appearance: ‘Th’art a good Grannam; and, but that thy teeth stand like hedge-stakes in thy head, I’d de kisse thee’ (2.1). The references to a Mother’s
Goodcole’s *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer*, 1621, presents a more realistic approach to the topic of witchcraft, which reflects many contemporary views of it, including of the stereotypical appearance of a witch. It not only gives a more detailed description of a Mother than *Mother Bombie* and *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* did, it also provides us with a woodcut (figure 1). This shows a regular woman, without any clear witch-like characteristics\(^2\). The only aspects that could refer to Sawyer being old and ugly are her face, which does look a bit lined, and her long, pointy fingers holding a stick. She might even be slightly hunchbacked, but that is not entirely clear. The pamphlet itself describes Sawyer as having a ‘most pale & ghoast-like [face] without any bloud at all’ and with a body that ‘was crooked and deformed, euen bending together’ (A4V). A very typical ‘characteristic’ of witches had made its entrance by that time, in the form of a teat for familiars to suck on, which was seen as a proof of diabolical witchcraft. The pamphlet describes that ‘this Elizabeth Sawyer had a priuate and strange marke on her body’, which after examination was claimed to be ‘a thing like a Teate [which] seemed as though one [the devil] had suckt it’ (B3V). This aspect is only shortly mentioned in *The Witch of Edmonton*, when Old Banks says ‘[g]et a VVarrant first to examine her, then ship her to Newgate’ (4.1).

Another woodcut of Mother Sawyer can be found in *The Witch of Edmonton*, which seems to be more witch-like than the one accompanying the pamphlet (figure 2). She is portrayed with a slightly hooked nose, a black wizard’s hat and a hunchback. Her face is quite lined, making her look old, and she is still carrying a stick. Apart from those elements, Mother Sawyer could be just a regular old woman instead of the ugly witch she is described as. She does not make her entrance until the second act, in which she delivers a soliloquy. From this pitiful monologue, in which she emphasizes how her appearance is a reason for her community to accuse her of witchcraft, we can derive what she looks like: ‘[c]ause I am poor, deform’d and ignorant,/And like a Bow buckl’d and bent together’ (2.1). In Sawyer’s second soliloquy, she speaks about how she is willing to sell herself to the devil: ‘[a]nd give this Fury leave to dwell within/ This ruin’d Cottage, ready to fall with age’ (2.1). She refers to her own body as a ruin, which implies that she is very old. Obviously Mother Sawyer has a crooked posture, which in combination with her low social status and age is a reason for her community to regard her as a black witch. Sawyer thus makes clear that one can be accused of witchcraft purely based on appearance, social status and age: ‘[n]ow an old woman./ Ill favour’d grown with yeers, if

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\(^2\) We have to bear in mind, though, that contemporary printers often used old woodcuts for illustrations. As a result, many woodcuts were used over and over again in various sources, so they were never specifically aimed at certain characters. Therefore, it is not strange that the woodcuts do not always fit the descriptions in the text: woodcuts were simply not made to accompany those specific texts.
she be poor,/Must be call’d Bawd or Witch’ (4.1). Still, this is all the information we receive concerning Sawyer’s appearance. Since this play mainly serves to criticize contemporary society for their popular beliefs about witchcraft, this aspect indicates that the authors disagreed with the fact that it was always the same type of women that was accused of witchcraft.

At the start of Mother Shipton’s literary career, she was not portrayed as more of a diabolical witch than for example Mother Sawyer. The very first prophecy, *The Prophesie of Mother Shipton In the Raigne of King Henry the Eighth*, 1641, does not mention anything about Shipton’s appearance, but does portray her (figure 3). The text only suggests what type of woman Shipton actually is, which conforms to the typical poor women of low social status that were usually perceived as witches. When one of the Dukes asks her ‘what thinke you of me?’, she answers ‘the time will come you will be as low as I am, and that’s a low one indeed’ (2). However, this lowly status is not reflected in the woodcut, which rather portrays a middle-class Tudor woman (Kellett 80). *A True Coppy of Mother Shiptons Last Propheisies: As they were taken from one Joane Waller*, 1642, only provides us with a small hint of Shipton’s appearance: ‘her head was a white as Wool’ (A2V). This naturally fits the definition of a Mother, which especially emphasizes the aspect of age. Several editions of Shipton’s prophecies were published in the next twenty years, but not until *Foureteene strange Propheisies* in 1648 is Shipton portrayed as a more typical black witch (figure 4). This woodcut presents a typical witch-like image of Shipton: her face is old and wrinkled, with the hooked nose and chin almost touching each other. She has very masculine and hairy eyebrows and wears a pointed hat, which we nowadays associate with witchcraft. She is hunchbacked and holds a staff, which contemporaries usually associated with prophesying (Kellett 83).

In Head’s *The Life and Death of Mother Shipton*, 1667, it becomes once again evident that only a crone could represent a diabolical witch. For at first, Shipton’s mother Agatha Shipton is a ‘plump and fresh’ girl, but after she has made a pact with the devil her appearance has typically changed (4). Now she looks like an old beldame: ‘there was nothing to be seen but a pale shriveled skin on her cheek, which for want of flesh seemed to fall in her mouth, to be devoured by her hunger-starved jaws’ (4). This conforms to the typical witch-like image which had become more and more elaborated over the years, due to the growing popular ‘knowledge’ about witchcraft. Even though the young and pretty girl was seduced by the devil, only an old, ugly woman could be the witch apparently. This view is carried through in Thompson’s *The Life of Mother Shipton*, 1668: ‘[w]here’s thy captivating beauty did inchant insinuating Divels? Here’s nothing left but the bare bones of a decayed face of four-score years of Age which verifies the Proverb she looks as if the Hag had rid her’ (Thompson 22). Thompson’s Shipton thus went through the same development as Head’s: when she has made a pact with the devil, she becomes a typical crone.
Head’s chapbook is positively unparalleled in its description of this apparently black witch, although the sources following Head’s clearly based their Mother Shiptons on his. Head’s description of baby Shipton is already horrific and very unrealistic: ‘her head very long, with very great goggling, but sharp and fiery Eyes, her Nose of an incredible and unproportionable length, having in it many crooks and turnings, adorned with many strange Pimples of divers colours’ (10). It goes even further in its comparison to a crone: ‘[h]er Neck so strangely distorted, that her right shoulder was forced to be a supporter to her head, it being propt up by the help of her Chin, in such sort, that the right side of her body stood much lower than the left’ (11). The anonymous The History of Mother Shipton, 1686, very clearly based its description of Mother Shipton on Head’s, though it gives a summarized version. Nevertheless, it does have the same shocking effect: ‘the body was long, but very big-bone[d,] great gogling eyes, very sharp and fiery, a No[se] of unproportionable length, having in it ma[ny] crooks and turnings, adorned with gre[...] pimples’ (5).

While the descriptions of Mother Shipton remained the same throughout the different versions of Head’s chapbook, the woodcuts accompanying them did become more ugly and repulsive in an attempt to fit the grotesque description. The 1667 version bears an image of Mother Shipton which is now more witch-like than before (figure 5). It mostly resembles her portrayal in Foureteene strange Prophesies, but, since her description is so much more overdone, an attempt seems to have been made to make her more repulsive. Her expression is quite friendly, but her nose, chin and body are, if possible, even more crooked and warts and hairs have been added. The 1687 version portrays a more diabolical Shipton: it is quite similar to the first one, but her hunch is incredibly overdone and her expression is angrier now (figure 6). Her chin and nose are brought even more closely together. The History of Mother Shipton, 1686, may be based on Head’s chapbook for the greatest part, but the displayed image of Shipton does not even slightly resemble her grotesque description (figure 7). The only aspects that remind us of a black witch are the hunchback and the slightly crooked chin and nose. For the rest, she just seems an old, wrinkled and harmless woman, which does not at all conform to the horrific description in this work.

Before popular literature started to treat the topic of witchcraft more realistically, the description of the Mother’s appearance was either left out, or very superficial. The only evident characteristic of a Mother was her age, which was implied in her title. Mother Bombie and the wise woman of Hogsdon are hardly described at all in their sources: we can only find small references to their appearances, which indeed entail old age and possibly ugliness. There are no woodcuts to support these superficial descriptions, though. When the ‘knowledge’ about diabolical witchcraft grew together with the changing perception of the Mother, the diabolical descriptions of her arose in popular literature. Of course, she was now usually associated with diabolical witchcraft instead of
with white witchcraft, which is reflected in her negatively portrayed appearance. Descriptions of the Mothers became more detailed and more horrific over the years, as is the case with Mother Sawyer and Mother Shipton. These increasingly horrific appearances are not reflected in the woodcuts accompanying the different sources, though. During the seventeenth century, the typical witch-like characteristics as we know them today made their entrance, such as a hooked nose and chin, a pointed head and a hunchback. The diabolical description of the Mother reaches an all-time height in Head’s chapbook and is followed by several more sources. There are no longer woodcuts available that can fit these grotesque descriptions, so that in the text they always remain more horrific than how they are portrayed.
4 – Specifically Literary Aspects of the Treatment of the Mother

We now know that the Mother came to be degraded from professional cunning woman to black witch due to her social status mainly, and that her appearance became more and more diabolical to fit the negative perceptions of her and to conform to the growing popular interest in black witchcraft. When looking at the portrayals of the Mothers in popular literature, though, we have to be aware of the fact that these portrayals all depended on the authors’ views of the Mother and on the purpose of their texts. This chapter therefore focuses on each source separately with regard to its intentions and how those have influenced the portrayal of each Mother and the genre she appears in.

While at the end of the sixteenth century, the topic of witchcraft came to be treated more realistically in popular literature, the play *Mother Bombie* was written before this apparent change in treatment. Still, Mother Bombie is a very English and very realistic wise woman: Lyly ‘has taken as model a racy figure (the very highest of her type, in the first place), and refined and ennobled her to fit into his useful graceful comedy’ (Herrington 473). At first sight it seems striking that a lowly countrywoman such as Mother Bombie was deemed worthy for a court comedy. However, such figures were not at all uncommon in these court plays during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, for this was a time in which cunning women flourished. Queen Elizabeth I was one of the aristocratic ladies who could perform healing activities such as the cunning women could, which helped shed a positive light on this feminine form of magic (Mack 51).

Even though Mother Bombie seems to be of minor importance with regard to her rare performances, she actually is the most important and intelligent character of the play, which fits right into the context. Mother Bombie only appears on stage four times and every time this appearance is short. Roberts even raises the argument that Mother Bombie adds nothing to the play and could have been left out (131). While this argument sounds quite solid, since Bombie indeed does not play a major part, she actually is the central character connecting all the others. A Mother is here presented as the intelligent key character of a court comedy, which seems to imply that she was worthy of such a genre and audience at the end of the sixteenth century. It also gives the impression that cunning women played an important part in contemporary society, which was not to be underestimated. Mother Bombie’s portrayal reflects this important part, since she is portrayed as a woman who is supposed to be taken seriously.

This positive attitude towards the lowly Mother seems to have partly lasted after Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, as becomes evident from the play *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*. While the genre of the play is again a comedy, the type of comedy is significantly different from Bombie’s court comedy. The play is called ‘a boisterous and bawdy city farce’, which implies that it is a mockery of
some sort (Gibbons 392). Furthermore, the wise woman of Hogsdon differs from the stereotypical cunning countrywomen, represented by Mother Bombie, since she is a wise woman from the suburbs, as mentioned before. In a sense, it is a more realistic play than *Mother Bombie*, since this wise woman of Hogsdon mirrors the frauds with their coarse humour and tricks that were so much present in Early modern English society (Herrington 481). The playwrights’ reality happened to be filled with figures that pretended to have magical abilities, which was a reason they were portrayed so often in popular literature. Even though one might expect that the wise woman is the comical figure of this comedy, the play was rather intended ‘to place her in a position of surprising authority’ (Gibbons 405). It seems as if the play mocks society for genuinely believing in the magical abilities of all the frauds, while they should know better perhaps. The wise woman herself considers her clients to be ignorant, since they are continually fooled by her tricks and even spread the word about her ‘magical’ abilities. Despite the fact that the wise woman is a fraud, she actually does turn out to be almost as cunning as Mother Bombie. The wise woman is as much the central character of this play as Mother Bombie is in hers, but while Bombie steals the show as a genuine wise woman, the wise woman of Hogsdon has forged such a plot that only she can unravel it. Eventually even the sceptic Chartley acknowledges her as the cunning centre of this plot:

Nay mother midnight theres some loue for you.
Out of thy folly, being reputed wise,
Wee, selfe conceated haue our follyes found:
Beare thou the name of all the comick acts. (5.1)

The fact that even the most treacherous and sceptical character of the play is outwitted by the lowly Mother, might represent a message that the audience should not underestimate this counterfeit character.

Around the 1620s, the genres in which the topic of witchcraft was treated became more extensive and realistic, as becomes evident from Goodcole’s pamphlet *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Savvyer*, 1621. The so-called knowledge about black witchcraft had grown tremendously from the sixteenth century on, as I mentioned in chapter one. This so-called knowledge was increasingly reflected in popular literature about the topic: authors seem to have attempted to draw an image of witchcraft as it had come to be perceived in society. In this sense, the topic of witchcraft was treated more realistically in popular literature than before. Goodcole immediately states the intention of his pamphlet: ‘[f]or my part I meddle heare with nothing but matter of fact […] which I hope shall be Authentical for the confirmation of this Narration’ (A3). Basically, he wants to provide the contemporary audience with a factual report of Elizabeth Sawyer’s confessions instead of with
the popular versions of the story. Goodcole uses his pamphlet to criticize the popular beliefs about witchcraft: ‘I was ashamed to see and heare such ridiculous fictions of her bewitching Corne on the ground, of a Ferret and an Owle dayly sporting before her [...] all which I knew to be fitter for an Ale-bench then for a relation of proceeding in Court of Justice’ (A3V). He also ridicules popular methods to identify witches: ‘an old ridiculous custome was vsed, which was to plucke Thatch of her house, and to burne it’ (A4-A4V). This aspect can exactly be found in The Witch of Edmonton, which also clearly criticises the popular witch craze. It seems that Goodcole, a man of the church, uses Mother Sawyer to proclaim his Christian message: ‘[d]eare Christians, lay this to heart, namely the cause, and first time, that the Diuell came vnto her [...] Stand on your guard and watch with sobrietie to resist him’ (D3).

The play The Witch of Edmonton was undoubtedly based on Goodcole’s pamphlet, especially in its intention to criticize contemporary society with regard to the popular beliefs about witchcraft. The tragic portrayal of Mother Sawyer reflects this main purpose. Not only is Sawyer the central character of her play, like Bombee and the wise woman are in theirs, she also becomes a truly round character who serves to criticize the contemporary witch craze within society. The playwrights provide us with a lot of insight in Sawyer’s thoughts and feelings through several soliloquies, such as in her first appearance:

And why on me? why should the envious world
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
[...] Some call me VVitch;
And being ignorant of my self, 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 Corne,
Themselves, their Servants, and their Babes at nurse.
This they enforce upon me. (2.1)

Immediately it becomes clear that Mother Sawyer is a pitiful and tragic character that should evoke the audience’s sympathy. This play therefore is somewhat unique in its approach to Mother Sawyer, or to witchcraft in general: Sawyer is treated as a social outcast ‘with a sympathy unknown to the trials, and seldom found anywhere in the literature of the age’ (Herrington 483). In addition to that, this unique approach to witchcraft indicates a certain level of criticism on the contemporary witch craze as well as scepticism towards the topic (Nicol 427). The Mother’s sympathetic and emotional portrayal in my opinion contributes to the effect of the criticism implied in the play. Sawyer probably
represents all those typical, old and poor women who, because of their social status and appearance, became their communities’ black sheep, driving them into the arms of the devil. The authors plainly intended to criticize these popular beliefs about what type of women were witches and, in this sense, proclaim a clear message, which is different from *Mother Bombie* and *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*.

From 1641 on, an attempt was made to create an even more realistic image of the Mother in the form of the alleged Tudor political prophet Mother Shipton, through the genre of political prophecies. Even though Mother Shipton was said to have lived in Tudor times, she did not appear in popular literature until England lived in a time of turmoil and on the brink of the Civil War. At the start of her literary career, Mother Shipton was used as a tool of political propaganda. Strangely enough, her prophecies were used by Parliamentarians as well as Royalists, even though they were the same prophecies. To what use they were put depended on their interpretations and the portrayal of Mother Shipton.

*The Prophesie of Mother Shipton In the Raigne of King Henry the Eighth*, 1641, the very first source on Mother Shipton, seems to advertise Parliamentarian ideas. Mother Shipton dares to prophesy Cardinal Wolsey’s death: ‘hee might see Yorke, but never come at it’, which is the prophecy that made her famous (2). The Cardinal’s reaction is mainly an angry one: ‘[h]e vowed to burne her when hee came to Yorke’ (2). It is plain that Shipton is a woman of low status, which I already mentioned in the previous chapter: ‘the time will come you will be as low as I am, and that’s a low one indeed’ (2). Despite her low social status, Shipton certainly is able to outwit these high Lords when she sees right through their disguises: ‘they knocked at the doore, shee said Come in Master Besley, and those honourable Lords with you’ (A2). Furthermore, the prophecies clearly embed criticism on previous courts and their decisions:

when the battell begins, it shall be where Crookbackt Richard made his fray, they shall say, To warfare for your King for halfe a crown a day, but stirre not, [...] for he that goes to complaine, shall not come back againe. (4)

Apparently, the people were expected to fight for their king but were underpaid and even punished when they dared to complain. Mother Shipton is a woman who represents the common people and who serves to show the incompetence of the people of the court. This very aspect can be regarded as a Parliamentarian message: the court should pay more attention to the common people, hence to Parliament. The end of the prophecy presents a Parliamentarian conclusion: ‘and whilst the world endureth, there shall never be warfare againe, nor any more Kings or Queenes, but the Kingdome shall be governed by three Lords’ (5). Basically, the pamphlet starts by establishing prophecies that have already come true, which serve as proof of Shipton’s prophetic abilities. Only then does the text
proceed with prophecies concerning the contemporary political climate, in favour of the Parliamentarians. Given that the readers were already provided with evidence of Shipton's prophecies, they must have believed that this final Parliamentarian prophecy would come true as well.

The same Parliamentarian interpretations can be found in A True Coppy of Mother Shiptons Last Prophesies: As they were taken from one Joane Waller, 1642. The final message is the same as in the first source: ‘[a]nd King or queen shall there be none, But Lords to Rule this Realm alone’ (A4V). This source attempts to create a superior image of Shipton over the court, by emphasizing her lowly status more than before. When the first Duke asks her what will become of him, she says: ‘the time shall come when you shall be in as low an estate and case as I am in, and in as mean an office, and that is both a mean one and a low one’ (A2V). Because of this emphasis on her low social status, it is more special that Shipton influences the people of the court. Not present in the previous version of the prophecy is Cardinal Wolsey’s obvious fear that Shipton might be right about his death; in the first source he was only angry and vengeful. Here it is described that ‘after supper, the Lord Cardinall fearing some evill towards him to approach, charged his house-hould and all his Officers, that no manner of person should that night more be suffered to come in’ (A3). Shipton now obviously influences higher people than the three lords, which becomes plain also after the cardinal’s threat to Shipton and the priests: ‘he would burne not onely her, but also three Priests which were at Table with her’ (A3). The priests become very afraid when they hear this, but it is the lowly Mother who puts courage in them: ‘she encouraged them, saying, content your selves, for if need require, you shall have twenty vestments, but his [Cardinal Wolsey’s] purpose will be altered’ (A3). Once again, the Parliamentarians portray Mother Shipton as a woman of the common people, who has the ability to influence the socially much higher Lords and men of the church.

The first obvious Royalist interpretation of Shipton’s prophecies appeared not long after Waller’s edition in the form of Two strange Prophesies, 1642. The Royalist intentions are noticeable from the start: ‘King Charles the first of that name reigned next in Majesty (whom God long preserve, and protect from the wicked Plots of his enemies.)’ (A2V). The author explains how there are many false prophets, but that society only needs to listen to those truly divinely-inspired:

God of his infinite mercy grant, that we may hereafter all make true use of the sincere prophecy of him, and his holy Gospell, that these various mists of errors may be expelled, these [roaring?] waves of Schisme may be calmed, and the distempers of the whole Realme cured perfectly. (A2V)
The author introduces Shipton with these lines, so he must have regarded her as such a divinely-inspired prophet. Given that this author is so clearly a Royalist, he thereby seems to relate such prophets to a monarchy: a kingdom is inspired by God and so is Shipton. The author often suggests that divinely-inspired prophets such as Mother Shipton should oppose the Parliamentarians: ‘the distracted opinions of most men are still so promiscuous, that wee want Prophets enough to exclaime against them’ (A2V). This version of the prophecies naturally lacks the additions made in Waller’s version, concerning Wolsey’s fear for example, because those mainly served to propagate the Parliamentarians. Strangely enough, the prophecy on Cardinal Wolsey is almost identical to the very first edition in 1641. That edition certainly implied some anti-Royalist ideas, such as the final prediction that England will no longer have kings or queens, which are also present in this edition. I’m guessing that this prophecy was by now so famous that one could not simply erase certain parts of it. The most that the Royalists could do was to find or add Royalist interpretations in the existing prophecy, perhaps.

Without a doubt the most Parliamentarian version of Shipton’s prophecies I used is William Lilly’s Ancient and Moderne Prophesies, 1645. He starts with an address to King Charles I, in which he warns him for the Royalists:

    Some delude you, other harden your heart, promising unto you (like vaine fellowes) a conquest and victory over your Parliament at Westminster; the Spirit of lying doth guide their shallow brains; its otherways determined, it will not be so. (A2)

Lilly obviously manifests his opinion that he considers Charles I an incompetent king and that this country would do better without him. He even calls upon his fellow Englishmen to rise against this king who has so clearly abandoned his people:

    if his Majesty [...] call those whom we have intrusted with our lives and fortunes, Rebells, and labour with his sword to Conquer us [...] then I say, he hath left the Protection of us, and we have liberty to defend our selves, our Lawes, Religion, Libertyes, and all the reason in the world to stand firme to our Parliament. (A4-A4V)

Shipton’s prophecies are the same as in previous sources, but Lilly portrays Shipton as a Parliamentarian by adding his own, anti-Royalist commentaries. The prophecy ‘[t]hen shall the Ladies cry well-a day,/That ever we liv’d to see this day’, for example, is ideal for Lilly to comment on the king’s practices (37). He remarks in the margins that:
In 1639. King Charles raised an army in the spring. [cross] How many Ladies have since 1639. lost their husbands? She that hath any thing, knows this to be true by the many taxes going [...] of his estate. (37)

Lilly apparently tries to emphasize Charles’ bad decisions, by stressing that he only harmed his people emotionally and financially. Shipton functions to propagate Parliament as opposed to the monarchy, but, unlike Two strange Prophesies, Lilly cannot make her a divinely-inspired prophet. He explains that he does not care about the prophets’ origins: ‘[w]hether any or all of these men whose Prophesies I relate, had so divine a knowledge [...] or whether they had conference with their Daemon, its not now my taske’ (A3). A Parliamentarian would probably not emphasize that Shipton was a divinely-inspired prophet, since that characteristic was already put to use in a Royalist pamphlet. Lilly rather chooses to promote Mother Shipton by relating her prophecies to scholarly science. He explains about his art of astrology and its intentions, which is ‘to that infallible way in judging of revolutions of Kingdomes; the removeall of the Aphelium of the Superior bodies out of one signe into another’ (A3V). Lilly praises such prophets who ‘wisht well to their Country’ and who many years ago ‘saw the miserable times and sad actions of this present King and Kingdome’ (A3V). By this means, he provides scientific proof that the Parliamentarians should triumph over the Royalists. Eventually, Lilly once more emphasizes his Parliamentarian message by saying that ‘[a]ll old Prophecies do intimate a final subversion of Monarchy in England’ (39).

While Harper’s Foureteene strange Prophesies, 1648, mostly repeats Lilly’s comments on Shipton’s prophecies, it unmistakably obliterates the anti-Royalist comments. This collection of prophecies includes the very same prophecies of Mother Shipton as the previous editions. Where Lilly openly criticized the king on several occasions, Harper does not do this. He merely sticks to the ‘factual’ explanations of the prophecies and passes over the elements that could be interpreted as anti-Royalist. For example, he left out the explanations of those prophecies as ‘[t]hey shall say, to warfare for your King for halfe a crowne a day’ and ‘for he that goes to complaine, shall not come back againe’ (A2V). Besides that, though, nothing else indicates that this Harper is a Royalist. On the whole, the fact that both the Royalists and the Parliamentarians used a lowly Mother to persuade the people of their ideas, seems to me as if such a woman appealed to all layers of society. She was probably common enough to evoke to the mass, but also made authoritative enough to address the socially higher classes.

Since Mother Shipton was invented to function as political propaganda during the Civil War, it would only be logical that she stopped appearing in contemporary literature after the Restoration of Charles II. However, during the Restoration period the ‘Shipton-origin narratives’ became popular,
which meant that Shipton became a leading lady in the popular literature (McGrane 379). Richard Head initiated the popularity of these narratives with *The Life and Death of Mother Shipton*, 1667.

Richard Head’s *The Life and Death of Mother Shipton* seems to have been primarily intended as a very commercial form of entertainment, which becomes evident from its context and genre. Firstly, the chapbook was published after the Civil War and Restoration of Charles II, when Mother Shipton was no longer useful as political propaganda. Secondly, Head makes quite clear that his main purpose is to entertain the reader in his address: ‘I shall here break off abruptly, wishing thee as much pleasure in the Reading thereof, as I had in the Writing of it’ (A2V). This chapbook can be classified as a jest-biography, as it is concerned with numerous jests related to one ‘heroine’: Mother Shipton (Wilson 133). Apparently, Shipton had become a popular spectacle, intended for the readers’ entertainment: ‘it is possible that Head saw the prospect of a good market [...] for a saucy chapbook about a local character’ (Kellett 45). The first half of this chapbook is definitely concerned with entertainment through jest and ridicule, but the rest of it rather seems to be a history book. Head provides his readers with the complete political history from Henry VIII until his own time through Shipton’s prophecies. Hence, Head’s chapbook could even be regarded an informative source for contemporaries. There is for example the prophecy ‘concerning the Death of Lady Jane Grey; the burning of the Martyrs; of Wyats Rebellion; the Death of Queen Mary; and of Cardinal Pool’ (28). Another one is concerned with the gunpowder plot: ‘[h]ells power by a fatal Blow,/Shall seek the land to overthrow./Which by mistake shall be reverst,/And heads from Shoulders be disperst’ (39).

By presenting the English political history in exactly this form, as though everything had been foreseen by this famous prophet, it must have been more appealing to the readers.

Head’s chapbook obviously tries to appeal to the common mass, by referring to as many jests and popular beliefs about witchcraft as possible. Head has turned both Mother Shipton and Agatha Shipton into very popular witchcraft spectacles, referring to several of these beliefs: ‘he pluckt her by the Groin, and there immediately grew a kind of Tet [sic], which he instantly suckt’ (3). Agatha Shipton suckles the devil with a strange teat and Mother Shipton is a typical, though horribly overdone, crone who has imps at her service. Some of these popular beliefs are definitely present in the more serious tragicomedy *The Witch of Edmonton*, such as the strange teat, though not so elaborately described. Agatha Shipton’s pranks also appeal to the contemporary popular culture, when she sends the villagers flying, upon which ‘the men were seen like overgrown Goats with larg horns on their heads, and women riding on their backs’ (Head 6). Such cuckoldry was a very popular way of making fun of people. Shipton should be able to do much more horrible things with her newly acquired powers, but she sticks to playing ridiculous pranks. A parallel can be drawn with Faustus here, who also wastes his diabolical powers and life with this occupation. Shipton is typically
worshipped by the common people but the higher and learned people, such as the Justice, want her condemned for her actions: different layers of society seem to have different perceptions of black witchcraft. Shipton is even more popularized when she is described as a typical cunning woman instead of the original political prophet, who is visited by:

a number of people, of all sorte, both old and young, rich and poor; Especially, of the Female Sex viz. Young Maids and Wenches, who have alwaies a great Itching desire when they shall be Married; as also, what manner of Husbands they shall have. (15)

By referring to these well-known popular rituals, a parallel is drawn between Mother Shipton and benign cunning women, which therefore authorizes the audience’s worship.

Despite the fact that Shipton’s function as political propaganda was no longer relevant, Head does repeatedly emphasize his Royalist and anti-Puritan ideas. Head comments on the Parliament, that ‘[they] brought that strange Riddle into the World, that a man might fight for, and against his King […] by them was the Church and State turned topsey turvey’ (45). When Head arrives at the prophecies concerning Charles I, he portrays Shipton as a very emotional Royalist woman: ‘who can with dry eyes repeat what must next ensue […] Beggars on Horse-back, and Princes on Foot; the Innocent condemned, and the Blood-thirsty go free’ (42). Then follows the quite emotional prophecy concerning Charles I’s death: ‘[t]he White King then (O grief to see)/By wicked Hands shall Murdered be’. Head’s anti-Puritan attitude can also be found in his compliments towards the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots: ‘[a] Lady of a sharp wit, undaunted spirit, comely person, Beautiful face, Majestick presence, a fluent Orater, and an excellent Poet’ (36). A reason for his anti-Puritan attitude may be discovered in Head’s Irish background. He was born in Ireland in 1637, in which time Protestant England tried to colonize the Catholic Irish (Durston 105). When the Civil War broke out in England, ‘the Catholic rebellion spread throughout Ireland’ and an Irish uprising led to many killings of English Protestants (Durston 105). In 1649, Cromwell reconquered Ireland by force, killing many Irish people (Durston 106). Perhaps Head tried to portray Shipton as a Royalist woman, since he probably did not want to present her as Puritan, regarding his background. Still, this is only an attempt to explain Head’s anti-Puritan attitude in a time when this was no longer relevant.

Thompson’s The Life of Mother Shipton, 1668, clearly served as Christian propaganda to the contemporary audience. In the opening scene, Shipton soliloquizes her poor conditions, as did Mother Sawyer before her:
Miserable Shipton in what poor condition has it pleased the powers to place thee [...] How pleasant and thrice happy is the fortune of other Mortalls, how bravely do they live and injoy themselves and their estates! (1-2)

Mother Shipton has apparently become a bitter woman, which becomes evident from the on-going complaints: ‘[w]hy am I so low then when others are so high? Why do I court the ground when others in their glorious pinacles grasp the sky?’ (2). It is exactly this quality that makes her vulnerable to the devil’s seductions: ‘[t]his is excellent her low condition does lay the foundation for my siege’ (1). However, this incited sympathy soon turns to contempt, when Shipton becomes a bit too excited about her future status of a rich and married woman: ‘soare high Shipton, higher yet, and think thou never wast, what too sure thou hast been! Ha, ha, ha, me thinks I shall laugh to see a poor wench beging for an Almes, though I have don’t my self, ha!’ (10). It is several times repeated that Shipton, despite her low status, is a proud woman, and that exactly this pride causes her to make a pact with the devil. Four beggars wonder what has become of Shipton, after her father died:

Jug.: I but he [Shipton] is dead, Hodge, and has left his daughter a poor Almes wench.
Bab.: and yet as proud as the Devil. (12)

Agatha Shipton herself also repeatedly emphasizes that she is a proud girl, which she even gives as a reason for being content about her pact with the devil: ‘but Pride assures me I am happy still, and on that staff i’le lean’ (Thompson 16). As we have learned from The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Savvyer and The Witch of Edmonton, it is sins that draw a devil to a person, of which pride is one. Shipton might serve as an example to the audience how not to behave, since that only results in diabolical practices.

In order to emphasize his Christian message even more, Thompson uses Faustian elements to transform Shipton into a tool of Christian propaganda. Firstly, he incorporates the allegorical characters Despair and Hope, which could represent Faustus’ good and evil angels. In Doctor Faustus, 1604, the good angel tries to convert Faustus while the evil angel intends to keep Faustus away from the right Christian path:

Faustus: Is’t not too late?
[...]
Evil Angel: Too late.
Good Angel: Never too late, if Faustus will repent.
Evil Angel: If thou repent, devils shall tear thee in pieces.
Thompson introduces the characters Despair and Hope, which were clearly based on Faustus’ good and evil angels with regard to their intentions. Despair tries to convince the characters that a late repentance never works: *I am Despair and come to tell you, late/ Repentance never can make you fortunate* (44). The characters involved strongly reject Despair: ‘Hell take Despair it shall never enter into my breast’ (44). This apparition is followed by Hope, who comes to proclaim the exact opposite, truly Christian message:

*I am that vertue which does underprop
The fainting heart of man with comfort: Hope
[...]
That if you do confide: your Hope will be
The anchor of your true Fidelity. (44)*

The men’s reaction to this is: ‘Hope thee I embrace, and friends let joyn hand and hearts in the height of sorrow to have the greatest Hope, by some learned Authors – *Wee’l take advice/To embrace all vertue, and avoid all vice*’ (44). Secondly, Shipton repeatedly wonders whether she has made the right choice in accepting devilish powers, as did Faustus before her:

*Accursèd Faustus, where is mercy now?
I do repent, and yet I do despair:
Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast!
What shall I do to shun the snares of death? (Marlowe 12.53-56)*

The difference is that Shipton immediately realises she would do better to repent, thereby making the correct, Christian choice: ‘having a heart open to embrace the delusions of the Devil, that, that alone is damnable! [...] have we not powers above that, over hels prevalency are predominant? then will I cleave to them! but is it not too late?’ (45). Faustus, though, constantly makes the wrong choices: ‘[a]nd with my blood again I will confirm/My former vow I made to Lucifer’ (Marlowe 12.62-63). Shipton convincingly outwits the devil by asking him to do something which he cannot do: ‘empty the Sea and make me sole commandress of all the riches therein lye expanded!’ (Thompson 45).

Finally, *The History of Mother Shipton*, 1686, borrows from Head as well as from Thompson, but it is obviously more concerned with Head’s jesting version of Shipton instead of with her
Christian portrayal. As is the case in Thompson’s play, Agatha Shipton calls the devil to her because of her sins: ‘much troubled with that grievous, but common disease, called by some Idleness, and by others Sloth’ (2). Thompson’s aspect of redemption is touched upon, but only very slightly. It is obviously not the main message of this jestbook, while this certainly was the case in the play. In this work, Mother Shipton’s mother Agatha:

apply[d] herself to severall Religious men of great note in those times, by whose grave advice she grew [tr]uly penitent, and [...] put her self into a [ne]ighbouring Monastery [...] [an]d so spent the remainder of her days [...] in prayers and tears, and other acts [of] Pennance. (The History 6)

While the redemption of Shipton is the climax of Thompson’s play, here it is simply passed over to proceed to more interesting events: ‘but wonderful it is to relate the troubles that befel the Nurse she [Mother Shipton] was put to’ (The History 6). The main emphasis of this chapbook evidently lies on the playing of pranks, which therefore seems to be merely intended for humour and entertainment like Head’s chapbook. Chapter four is even entirely dedicated to jests: ‘[s]everal other merry pranks plaid by Mother Shipton, in Revenge to such as abused her’ (The History 8). Most of the pranks are derived from Head’s source, such as the women with skirts over their heads: ‘while the women having all their coats turned over their ears exposed their shame to publick view’ (The History 7). The typical cuckoldry is naturally also embedded in the chapbook, but in a different context than before. When Agatha has to come before the Justice, she reveals him to be a cuckold. This typical popular joke of cuckoldry applied to such a high person as a Justice must have been very comical to the audience, which probably consisted of the lower classes, considering the copious popular jokes. For this reason, Mother Shipton is not quite the round character with a Christian message she is in Thompson’s play, but rather a very superficial personage intended for popular entertainment.

In this same jestbook, Mother Shipton is popularized with the purpose to entertain the audience, which the author seems to have based on Shipton’s popularization in Head’s chapbook. The parallel between a cunning woman and Mother Shipton is once again drawn, when Shipton identifies the thief of the smock and petticoat. Since a cunning woman had a more professional and positive status than the black witch, this would have helped to portray Shipton as a better person. This is repeated in chapter six, which opens with the line: ‘Mother Shipton had got a name far and near for a cunning woman, or a woman of the foresight’ (The History 12). This work relates prophesying to cunning women instead of to black witchcraft, which was also what Head tried to do. The jestbook proceeds in listing many of Shipton’s prophecies, displaying another Royalist view by referring to Charles I as ‘the most Excellent Prince’ and to Cromwell as a wolf (The History 20).
Furthermore, just as in Head’s and Thompson’s versions, it is said that ‘[t]ill fate to England shall restore/A King to Reign as heretofore’ (20). The only explanation for the expressed Royalist views that I can think of, is that it would no longer make sense to proclaim Parliamentarian ideas so long after the Civil War and the Restoration.

At the end of the sixteenth century, the genres which focused on witchcraft were not at all realistic. Witches, either black or white, were especially suited for the genre of comedy and were therefore not often seen in any other genre. Furthermore, the witches presented in these unrealistic genres were mostly very superficial and stereotypical characters. The exception arose in the form of Mother Bombie, who, despite the unrealistic play she features in, is quite a realistic wise woman. While she does not have the largest part in the play, she certainly is portrayed as the key character. Basically, this play seems to praise the contemporary Mothers for their wisdom. From then on, the Mothers presented in popular literature were very much modelled on their examples in contemporary society. Not only true wise women were realistically portrayed in the popular literature, but so were the abundantly present frauds such as the wise woman of Hogsdon. Even though she is not a genuine wise woman, she is, like Mother Bombie, portrayed as the most important and cunning character of the entire play. Around the 1620s, the genres in which witches could appear became more serious and realistic: they now focused on giving factual reports of existing witches, as is the case with the sources on Mother Sawyer. This Mother was presented with quite a unique function, though, which was to criticize society with regard to their popular beliefs about witchcraft. Presumably, such lowly women appealed to the usually lower-class audience, which generally compiled the part of society where the popular culture was most alive. It seems that the Mother was made suitable to deliver the authors’ messages to the contemporary audience. This becomes especially evident from the very famous Mother Shipton, who was invented as a means of political propaganda for both Parliamentarians and Royalists. It appears that the side which was taken in each source influenced her portrayal. It is quite striking that Shipton originated as an oracular prophet, used as political propaganda by the higher layers of society, but that she was put to very different uses after the Restoration. Mother Shipton was portrayed as was fitting to the intended purposes of the specific texts: popular and comical for a jestbook, but Christian and powerful for Christian propaganda. It seems to be the case that Mothers’ popular portrayals in the different texts depended strongly on the authors and their specific intentions with the texts.
Conclusion

While I have treated the topic of the Mother in popular literature in four different aspects, they all combined to influence her portrayal in contemporary popular literature. After analyzing the different texts with regard to the four Mothers’ portrayals, it is possible to answer my question: how did the context and the changing attitude of the city towards the country and its oral tradition influence the portrayal of the typical Mother in popular English literature, as reflected in popular texts about Mother Bombie, the wise woman of Hogsdon, Mother Sawyer and Mother Shipton from the sixteenth up to the end of the seventeenth centuries?

The Mother’s portrayal in English popular literature was definitely influenced by contemporary developments within society, such as the growth of London, the increase of literacy and the witch craze. Furthermore, at first sight these developments seem to have led to fairly chronological influences on the Mother’s portrayal in popular literature. Before those developments, English society was more of a unity in which city and country were not yet so distinct. The entire society depended on the oral culture mostly, to which the Mother evidently belonged. While texts were already printed in the city, the texts about the Mothers shed a positive light on them by portraying them as genuine cunning women, as we can perceive from Mother Bombie. Of the four Mothers discussed, she is the only true, benign cunning woman, which probably was a realistic reflection of the Mother’s status in society. Her outer appearance naturally fits into her status as a professional cunning woman and only refers to an old age. The seventeenth-century popular witch craze had not yet broken loose, so that all the horrific details concerning her outer appearance were still absent. Because of her function as the cunning centre of the plot, she is distinguished from diabolical witchcraft and worthy of a courtly audience.

The seventeenth century saw an increase in literacy and, as a result, class differences, which was negatively reflected in the attitudes towards the lowly Mother. The increasingly superior attitude of the learned city was displayed through the lowly Mothers in popular literature, which naturally affected their portrayals in The Wise Woman of Hogsdon and The Witch of Edmonton in particular. The ‘magic’ of the Mother, thus of the cunning women, came to be seen as something for the unlearned since it was not based on any theory. By the seventeenth century, it was mainly deemed worthy of the illiterate and unlearned classes of English society: the more learned citizens knew better than to consult a Mother. They apparently associated the term Mother with foolishness, so that this title must have been a disrespectful one to them. The unlearned rather associated the title Mother with wisdom, and thus it had a taste of admiration to them. When the presence of black witchcraft in society grew, orality was increasingly regarded as a characteristic of this diabolical
practice. Soon, this resulted in the perception that typical Mothers were black witches, since they had the age, the looks and the verbal qualities.

Authors definitely responded to the general demand for black witchcraft in popular literature, by incorporating an increasing number of popular diabolical characteristics, such as familiars and a teat for the devil to suck on, in their portrayals of the previously benign Mothers. She was soon adapted to fit the notion of a black witch in magical actions, verbal qualities and outer appearance, as we can perceive from both Mother Sawyer and Mother Shipton. Despite the fact that authors generally responded to the popular demand of black witchcraft in literature, they soon started to use their works, and thus the Mothers, to criticize this contemporary popular witch craze, as is the case with Mother Sawyer. Naturally, the authors were part of the literate and learned classes within society, who looked down on the smaller, illiterate communities and their popular beliefs. I believe they used this lowly Mother to voice their criticism, because she appealed to her own lower social classes. On the one hand, the Mother became increasingly associated with diabolical powers by her own social classes, but on the other hand she became a means for the educated to criticize these popular associations with witchcraft. The title Mother must now have rather evoked feelings of pity and superiority in the socially higher classes than the feelings of fear among the uneducated.

Strangely enough, this tendency to criticize popular beliefs through the Mother changed with the arrival of Mother Shipton; she was a worshipped figure for her diabolical, prophetic powers by all social layers. However, she did function as a tool of criticism towards both Parliamentarians and Royalists. This must have been a result of the context, which was one of political turmoil. In this context, the title Mother was suddenly associated with knowledge and wisdom throughout society, while before the educated obviously related it to a poor, uneducated woman. After the Civil War, though, Mother Shipton became rather a figure for popular entertainment because of her diabolical characteristics. Her function as political propaganda was no longer relevant, because the context had evidently changed. The feelings of superiority and fear associated with the title Mother had apparently made room for ridicule.

In this period, authors went overboard in the Mother’s descriptions with regard to her diabolical characteristics. Once more the prejudice that only typical crones could be diabolical witches was confirmed. Still, the Mother’s professional status had evidently not necessarily changed from a white witch to a diabolical one, since Shipton, for example, is simultaneously described as a cunning woman and a black witch and worshipped for her diabolical – or divine – gift of prophesying. Eventually, the descriptions of the Mother’s appearance became so grotesque, that it seems hard to believe that contemporaries took them seriously. I have no evidence that they did, and since the horrific descriptions were mainly part of jestbooks I rather believe they were intended to entertain
the audience. The woodcuts accompanying the different texts did not quite keep up with the development in textual descriptions, though, but this is due to the fact that publishers often used the same woodcuts over and over again.

Throughout the seventeenth century, the Mother underwent a development with regard to the genres she appeared in, which was influenced by the changing contexts and the authors’ intentions. At first, she was mainly suited for comedy, though not in a mocking manner: the Mother could actually be portrayed as the benign, cunning centre of the plot. By the time the witch craze had broken loose, the Mother was put to the use of voicing social criticism, which was of course not very suitable for a comedy. The Mother was made fit for a tragicomedy in which she herself was the tragic character. When England was on the brink of the Civil War, the people needed a voice of authority, which was provided in the form of the female prophet Mother Shipton. When this time of political turmoil had passed, a prophet was no longer needed and the Mother once more returned to the genre of comedy. It would seem logical that the witch craze was no longer that popular, so that the witch was now suited for jesting and popular spectacles. That does not explain the fact that she appeared as Christian propaganda against witchcraft in the same period, though. I can conclude, however, that whenever English society underwent a major change, so did the intentions of authors with regard to their texts and their main characters. Therefore, the portrayals of the Mothers were always subject to the contemporary contexts and, most of all, to the authors’ specific purposes with their texts.

However, I do have to take into account a couple of important factors that influence the outcome of this study. Firstly, all of these sources provide us with a Mother that is a subject to the author’s imagination and intentions. Even though I sometimes find influences of contemporary society in the texts, the Mother always remains an invention of each individual author. When the authors intended to criticize the popular witch craze in The Witch of Edmonton, they deliberately chose to portray Mother Sawyer as a tragic, pitiful character. The most obvious example of changing portrayals is of course Mother Shipton, because of the many different sources on her. Each text shows an entirely different Shipton: she starts out as a political prophet, who is put to use by both Parliamentarians and Royalists. When the turmoil has passed, she is portrayed as a figure of entertainment for the common people, but also as a tool of Christian propaganda, referring to the well-known Doctor Faustus. Regrettably, I cannot simply see this as a development in the Mother’s status in general. The Mother was always subject to the public’s demands and the author’s intentions with his text.

Secondly, I tried to give a chronological and generalizing overview of the development of the Mother’s portrayal in society and popular literature, but the reality was probably not that simple.
This dissertation might have been too selective in its sources to give a reliable overview of society’s perception of the Mother in the seventeenth century. I have only discussed four Mothers, while there obviously must have been a lot more. Furthermore, sometimes the time spans between the different sources were quite large, so that I passed over quite an amount of time with regard to the Mother in society and literature. Therefore, the chronological developments I speak of are sketched in very broad outlines, which makes it hard to deliver clear causes and effects. The second half of the seventeenth century is only covered by different sources about Mother Shipton, but fortunately I was able to paint a picture of her chronological development as a Mother in popular literature. However, I could not compare her developments to any other Mothers of the time, so that it is hard to generalize my findings. My initial intention was to follow the Mothers up to the twentieth century in popular literature, including their well-known aspect of bawdry, but that would have been too extensive. Perhaps that is a topic suitable for further research in the future.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Printed Sources


Electronic Sources


Secondary sources

Printed Sources


**Electronic Sources**


Appendices

Figure 1 - Mother Sawyer in Goodcole’s *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer*, 1621
Figure 2 - Mother Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton*
Figure 3 - Mother Shipton in *The Prophesie of Mother Shipton In the Raigne of King Henry the Eighth*, 1641
Figure 4 - Mother Shipton in *Fourteene strange Prophesies*
Figure 5 - Mother Shipton in Richard Head’s *The Life and Death of Mother Shipton*, 1667
Figure 6 - Mother Shipton in *The History of Mother Shipton*, 1686
Figure 7 - Mother Shipton in Richard Head's *The Life and Death of Mother Shipton*, 1687