



### **The Witch's Cauldron: Cooking and Feeding Evil on the Early Modern Stage.**

This paper studies the important cultural and political work the witch's cauldron performs on stage in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*. Shakespeare's and Middleton's plays demonstrate the power of the cauldron to inflict divine justice as a distinctive act of female labor—cooking. In each of these plays, the cauldron rises up from the hellish space beneath the stage to join the action of the play and perform its part in divine retribution. In sacred art, the entrance to hell is envisioned as a hellmouth, and the cauldron often appears as a central instrument of torture for the hellmouth in which the souls of the damned are cooked up to feed the voracious mouth to hell. The hellmouth and its cauldron gives us a fresh understanding of the ways that

early modern peoples imagined hell and damnation as a spectacle of cooking and feeding.

The visual arts of this period show us how the hellmouth opens up into a process of damnation that is often artistically depicted as kitchen space. Everyday kitchen utensils such as meat hooks, knives, and butcher blocks are instruments with which to torture the damned. The centrality of the cauldron in the visual formula of the hellmouth marks a disturbing relationship between hell's kitchen and the domestic kitchen space in a household. This sacred art of divine retribution and damnation uses cultural fears of the female labor of cooking, and exploits social and moral notions of eating. The plays I examine in this study depict these ideas of nurturance and pollution, and focus on the body as a site of constant tension that wavers between deficiency and excess. In these plays, the cooking and eating of food are meditations on the divine retribution and damnation of the protagonist. In each play, a cauldron rises from the trapdoor, often referred to as the hellmouth, to boil the ungodly.

Scholars have not yet considered the intervention these stage properties make in received ideas about hell, female labor, and the early modern stage, and this study addresses this gap. A study of these stage properties shows us how the early modern theater used the cultural memories of demonic power infused in the stage prop of the witch's cauldron to assert its authority, however transitory. This study takes as its premise W. B. Worthen's argument for the performativity of the stage—the potential of a performance to transgress its prescribed boundaries. Theatrical performance is a citational process, and the stage prop of the witch's cauldron is invested with this performative potential. Thus, this object of sacred, domestic, and theatre culture is endowed with a fearsome tension that threatens to transgress the seemingly rigid boundaries of the possible with imaginative and chaotic performances of the impossible. Many consumers of the early modern stage believed in witchcraft. Thus, appropriating and relocating this fearsome power onto the stage through the theatrical property of the witch's cauldron positions the early modern theater as housing and containing the terrible power of damnation and retribution. The early modern stage consumes this diabolic, witchy, feminized power to empower the institution of the stage while offering its theatrical productions up for public consumption.