



University  
of Glasgow

Henderson, L. (2011) 'Detestable Slaves of the Devil': Changing Attitudes to Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland. In: Cowan, E.J. and Henderson, L. (eds.) A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000 to 1600. Vol. 1. Series: A History of Everyday Life in Scotland, 1 . Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. ISBN 9780748621569

Copyright © 2011 Edinburgh University Press.

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

The content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/45397/>

Deposited on: 9 Jan 2014

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

## Chapter Ten

### **‘Detestable Slaves of the Devil’: Changing Ideas about Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland**

Lizanne Henderson

. . . that witchcraft, and Witches have bene, and are, the former part is clearelie proved by the Scriptures, and the last by dailie experience and confessions.<sup>1</sup>

#### **INTRODUCTION**

There was nothing everyday about witchcraft. It was, by definition, an exceptional crime. People could have easily lived out their days without ever knowing a witch or experiencing the trauma of a witch-hunt in their community. The possibility of witchcraft was, however, ever present. The knowledge that magical and supernatural forces were part of the natural world was something that most of society shared, including those who were sceptical about witchcraft. Even the staunchest of critics would have acknowledged the reality of the Devil and his potential influence on everyone, regardless of age, sex, or social standing. For most people, though they may have never personally been affected by a witch’s curse, they knew it could happen; anytime, anywhere, any way.

Witchcraft trials can be used as a key to unlocking the everyday experiences, attitudes, beliefs and customs of ordinary people. The confession of a witch by the name of Bessie Dunlop in 1576 revealed information not only about her life and experiences, but also of those of the people she knew and lived among. A laird’s wife paid a peck of meal and some cheese for a potion of ginger, cloves, aniseed and liquorice mixed with strong ale to be given to a young woman suffering from dwams (faintings). A chamberlain enquired about

stolen barley, two blacksmith's were accused of thieving plough irons, a woman was accused of stealing a cloak, and servants were beaten for the theft of various items of clothing and linen from their mistress. Gypsies were denounced as idle vagabonds leading wicked and mischievous lives, committing murders and theft. A man was advised to cancel his daughter's forthcoming marriage because it would end in her shameful death; she would commit suicide by throwing herself off a cliff. Instead the bride's youngest sister was wedded to the would-be groom. Bessie's own knowledge of charming and witchcraft was acquired from the spirit world, a relationship that began while she was in a state of anxiety, having recently given birth to a baby who was seriously ill and would later die. Infant mortality was high in the sixteenth century and the loss of a child an all too familiar experience. Her husband was also very unwell at the time and her cows and sheep were fairing badly. Bessie lived at a time when famine and disease was rife in Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

In 1590, Bessie Roy was out gathering flax in the fields, in the company of other women, when they drew a 'compass' in the ground out of which were conjured 'worms' that told them of future events. A fellow wet-nurse accused Roy of stealing her breast milk, an act, it would seem, of jealousy and, perhaps, a fear of competition that might threaten her livelihood. She was also accused of enchanting a plaid which caused a woman's death, was an expert thief, and bewitched domestic animals.<sup>3</sup>

The Aberdeenshire trials of 1596 contain a wealth of information on everything from calendar customs to attitudes towards sex. Folk were chastised for dancing at Halloween. Spells were bought for a variety of purposes, such as for success at fishing, for a happy marriage, to prolong life, to raise and lay the wind, or to cause harm or mischief towards others; for instance, a woman purchased a spell against her mother-in-law. One man could tell his lover that she was pregnant stating the exact time when the child was conceived. He knew the child's sex and when it would be born. Margaret Bain, a midwife, was able to

transfer all the pains and torments of childbirth to a woman's spouse. Another woman bewitched a man to switch his affections from his wife to his harlot. Helen Gray cast a spell on a man giving him a permanent erection that eventually killed him; 'his wand lay never down'.<sup>4</sup> One woman caused a cow to give blood instead of milk, while yet another produced a suspiciously large number of cheeses. Crops were blasted in the fields for no good reason and blights affected livestock. The bewitching of draft oxen was greatly feared. People were accused of poisoning food and causing animals to languish through starvation. Mills were attacked by witches, threatening food production, and several individuals were blamed with causing fevers, madness, drownings and death. Some were experts in charming or healing animals or in predicting their deaths.<sup>5</sup>

When misfortunes occurred, witchcraft was considered by many to be a plausible explanation, in much the same way that others might have believed God was punishing them for misdeeds or a weakness of faith. While the source of the witch's power was extraordinary and unnatural, the effects were almost always directed towards disrupting ordinary, natural and everyday events. The witch figure, in other words, represented disharmony, imbalance and chaos in people's everyday existence. What made witchcraft potentially even more sinister was that the witch operated from within society, a known member of the community, and was not some unseen, external force, but a living, breathing person. For many people living in the sixteenth century, the witch was a tangible reality and witchcraft a continual and ubiquitous threat.

## **DISCOVERING DEMONS**

By the time king James penned his tract *Daemonologie* (1597) Scotland had experienced its first large-scale witch-hunt (1590-91) and was about to embark upon a second major purge. The writing of *Daemonologie* was inspired, at least in part, by James's conviction that the

threat posed by witchcraft, to the good and godly citizens of Scotland, was a clear and present danger. Witchcraft had always been in existence – scriptural proof substantiated that – but James was convinced, as were many of his contemporaries, that the ‘fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches or enchaunters’,<sup>6</sup> were on the increase; ‘I pray God to purge this Cuntrie of these divellische practices: for they were never so rife in these partes, as they are now’.<sup>7</sup> And no one was entirely safe from succumbing to the Devil’s temptations to join his ever-growing army. God permitted three kinds of people to be so tempted: ‘the wicked for their horrible sinnes, to punish them in the like measure; The godly that are sleeping in anie great sinnes or infirmities and weaknesse in faith, to waken them up the faster by such an uncouth forme: and even some of the best, that their patience may bee tried before the world, as Job’s was’.<sup>8</sup> James’s overall argument seems to rest upon the assumption that although magic and general superstitious practice had been more a part of the everyday experience of people living in pre-Reformation Scotland, witchcraft and demonic interference were not only on the rise post-1560, but were of a more heinous variety, a product of ‘the greate wickednesse of the people’. God was essentially punishing them for failing to adhere sufficiently to the true protestant faith. In other words, it was the sins of the people at large that allowed witchcraft and magic to flourish. Witches and devils were breeding, it would seem, in the fertile seedbed of community wickedness. However, in the writings of demonologists, this concept was not particularly new, nor was it the preserve of protestant thinking. For instance, in the late fifteenth century, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) described witches as apostates, and witchcraft as the worst form of heresy; ‘of all superstition it is essentially the vilest, the most evil and the worst, wherefore it derives its name from doing evil, and from blaspheming the true faith’. As for why witchcraft was on the increase, three things had to concur – the Devil, the witch and the permission of God – therefore ‘the origin and the

increase of this heresy arises from this foul connexion' between humankind and the Devil.<sup>9</sup> The shared preoccupation of both catholic and protestant reformers with purity of faith goes some way to explain the widespread intolerance of witchcraft both in Scotland and continental Europe.

Magic and supernatural beliefs and practices had always played an important part in the everyday experience and worldview of the majority of people living in medieval Scotland. The preternatural world was, at times, seamlessly joined to the natural world and could, potentially, be experienced by young and old, rich and poor, male and female; there were few barriers to the supernatural world, or at least to certain aspects of it. What is less certain is how and why the function, understanding and interpretation of such magical beliefs underwent such profound change during the course of the sixteenth century, if indeed they did. On the surface, it would undoubtedly appear that radical reinterpretation, with regard to supernatural belief systems, was afoot, particularly in the post-Reformation period. But one does not have to scratch the surface too deeply to detect evidence of what might be supposed to be centuries-old folk belief and practice, continuing unabated, despite the intense pressure of religious, social, economic, and political change. As Michael Bailey has argued, the post-1500 period is 'most well known not for new systems of magic, but for new levels of legal condemnation and prosecution of magical crimes'.<sup>10</sup>

Among one of the most odious indicators of a detectable shift in attitudes towards the supernatural was the widespread persecution of persons suspected of witchcraft throughout much of Europe, a phenomenon which, on the continent, has its roots in the early fifteenth century. At the same time, the stereotype of the diabolical witch was beginning to take shape and would, by century's end, be widespread amongst demonologists and prosecuting authorities,<sup>11</sup> though there was still much scope for debate as to what constituted witchcraft. With regard to witch-hunting, in relative terms, Scotland was among one of the worst

effected European nations. In the years between the ratification of the Witchcraft Act in 1563 and the repeal of that same Act in 1736, at least 3837 known individuals were officially accused of witchcraft, with around half of that number legally executed.<sup>12</sup> There are a handful of cases dealing with witchcraft, before and after the period when it was considered a punishable offence in Scotland, and there is substantial evidence that witch belief continued to exert a powerful influence over the minds of some well into the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> However, it is with the sixteenth century that this chapter will be concerned; the century that spawned the first large-scale witch-hunts on Scottish soil and, as will be argued, was witness to a perceivable escalation in fears and anxieties about the power of the Devil and his minions in the world. What I have referred to elsewhere as the ‘rise of the demonic’ in sixteenth-century Scotland, led directly to an increase in witchcraft accusations and persecutions and, more importantly, the need felt by the authorities to introduce tougher legislation – most notably the Witchcraft Act – to combat the growing presence of evil. Alleged practitioners of witchcraft were, perhaps, the most obvious targets but the demonization process also impacted upon related supernatural beliefs, folk customs and traditions, notably, in a Scottish context, upon charming and fairy belief. As the fear of witches, and their master the Devil, spread like an epidemic across the land, ‘the fairies swiftly became so enmeshed with witchcraft that it is often difficult to distinguish them from Satan’s unholy regiments’.<sup>14</sup> The prominent role given to fairies in Scottish witchcraft confessions and accusations will be discussed, with particular reference to the widespread demonization of popular folk beliefs by the authorities, as will the attack on charmers and traditional healers. Several individuals will be discussed, though prominence will be given to the trial of Jonet Boyman (1572) – a previously unstudied witch trial. The wealth of information contained in this confession reveals much about sixteenth century customary practice and provides a glimpse into the mental world of a convicted witch, and by extension

those of her friends, family and associates. The changing attitude towards the fairies, as evidenced in the Boyman trial among others, can be a useful indicator of the changes learned ideas towards witchcraft were undergoing in Scotland; the beginnings of this transformation can be traced to the second half of the sixteenth century. King James VI of Scotland (later to become James I of England in 1603) was very much part of this ideological turn and his role, with specific reference to his short but nonetheless influential tract, *Daemonologie* (1597) will be discussed, as will the claim made by Christina Lerner, among others, that James imported 'educated witch theory' from the continent and in the process essentially introduced large-scale witch-hunting to Scotland.<sup>15</sup>

## **THE DEVIL**

All societies must confront the existence of evil and attempt to solve, or at very least explain, the dilemma. In the western world the Devil emerged as the ultimate personification of evil, though the scope and nature of his powers and influence has waxed and waned over the centuries. In the first millennium of the christian era, while present, the figure of the Devil was relatively unobtrusive, of concern mainly to theologians and philosophers rather than ordinary people. However, the image of Satan, the destroyer, began to take firm shape across Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In parallel development with shifts taking place in religious doctrine, as well as a proliferation of demonic imagery in Romanesque art, the Devil was, quite literally, becoming a more visible presence in the world. Jeffrey B. Russell has demonstrated that the christian concept of the Devil drew heavily from folkloric elements and borrowings of characteristics from earlier traditions, such as those associated with Cernunnos, the Celtic god of hunting, fertility and the underworld.<sup>16</sup> Robert Muchembled has noted that before the end of the fifteenth century, the Devil was 'remarkable for his variety'. In christianity's long-standing battle against paganism 'certain hard cores

resisted total destruction but were nevertheless gradually assimilated, cloaked in a new veil, reoriented in a different context, while retaining a peculiar evocative power'. Fragments of belief, from various 'demonic cultures' were submerged within a 'rising tide of theological Satanism', but were not fully destroyed. Thus, the Evil One took numerous forms.<sup>17</sup> By the fourteenth century, the negative features of the Devil were greatly accentuated and his frightening presence was moving out of the monastic realm and into the lay world. No longer a metaphorical concept, artistic representations of the Devil and the kingdom of Hell quite deliberately stressed 'the notion of sin' in order to provoke confession. The depiction of Satan and the 'related pastoral message encouraged not only religious obedience, but recognition of the power of Church and State, cementing the social order by recourse to a strict moral code'. Demonology, a 'science of demons', was slowly becoming defined in the fifteenth century, which obscured, but in no way obliterated, folk beliefs about the Devil.<sup>18</sup>

Early Scottish literature stressed the monstrous qualities of demons. The poem known as *Rowll's Cursing* (c. 1500), for instance, described long-tailed, dragon-headed 'vgly devillis' with glowing eyes and 'warwolf nalis', while William Dunbar wrote of 'devillis als blak as pik [pitch]'.<sup>19</sup> Eldrich poetry, which emerged at this time, is full of deformed and animalistic demons, with horns, hooves, feathers and wings, who fly through the air, breathing down poison on the earth. Curiously, such exotic and grotesque physical characteristics are not particularly acute in the witch trial evidence where demons, and even the Devil himself, can be somewhat mundane by comparison. At least two areas where learned and folk tradition seem to agree is that the Devil is a black man – though it remains unclear if this is always a reference to the colour of his skin, his hair, his clothing or something else entirely – and that the Devil is a shape-shifter, able to take the form of a human or an animal. Thomas Leys (1597) from Aberdeen, for instance, saw the Devil in the

form of a magpie and jackdaw, but there are reports of him assuming the form of a dog, cat, rat, horse and so on.<sup>20</sup>

The confessions often contain instances where learned and popular ideas and imagery of the Devil can be separated out, as demonstrably distinct from one another. For instance, while learned tradition perpetuated an image of the Devil as a cloven-hoofed male with horns and a pointed tail, the folk tradition was more likely to describe the Devil as quite ordinary in appearance, often but not necessarily dressed in black, with a hint of the trickster about him. At other times it is more certain that folk interpretations of the Devil or related supernatural beings, such as fairies and ghosts, have been twisted or altered to fit elite stereotypes. There are several examples where the combination of leading questions and the use of torture forced people to recount experiences and encounters with the Devil that they would not have otherwise confessed. The portrayal of the Devil in *Daemonologie* is closer to medieval and biblical notions of a fallen angel, able to assume the form of a man or transform into a goat at witches' sabbats. James also classified other spirits, such as ghosts, fairies and brownies as nothing more than a guise adopted by demons. The folk, on the other hand, seem to have regarded all such manifestations as distinct entities, at least throughout most of the sixteenth century and, arguably beyond, though by the 1590s the stereotype of the Devil was starting to come together. Information about learned ideas of what the Devil was and what he was capable of would have been gathered from the pulpit and probably disseminated quite quickly among the populace. What they did with that knowledge, or how it was incorporated within existing folk traditions is impossible to gauge.

The role of the Devil in Scotland is a complex one. Descriptions of his, and sometimes her, physical appearance are inconsistent and highly variable. This may have been in part for the simple reason that the Devil was a shape-shifter and a master of disguise. Jonet Boyman (1572) met with the fairies; Bessie Dunlop (1576) and Alison Peirson (1588)

communicated with ghosts; and Christian Reid (1597) and Andrew Man (1598) claimed to have met an angel. Their prosecutors, however, told them they had met demons. There was further ambiguity about the extent of his powers – a topic that fascinated and obsessed many demonologists on points of theory, though it may also have been an issue for the unlettered peasant on more pragmatic points of everyday reality.

It might be possible to confidently state that the demonic elements, including the Demonic Pact and the corporal presence of the Devil, were of more concern to the prosecutors of witchcraft than to the accused themselves. Even then, he was not particularly well-defined until post-1590 and appeared more frequently in cases conducted by the higher courts. At lower levels of authority, including some kirk sessions, anxieties about the Devil were not as pronounced as those found higher up the legal food chain, concentrating more on harms done between neighbours. For instance, the vast majority of trials from the central court of justiciary and the privy council are notable for their concern with the witch's relationship with her Satanic master, reflecting central authority's worries about the diabolical threat witches posed. What is harder to account for is that in many trials the Devil is conspicuous by his absence. Stuart MacDonald's concentrated local study revealed that the Devil rarely made an appearance in Fife, while Joyce Miller has counted only 392 mentions of the Devil in the surviving trial records.<sup>21</sup> The incomplete nature of the records might account for the distortion in the figures, as might regional particularism, or possibly the Devil's presence was so much assumed and taken for granted as to need no further introductions. He was forever there behind the scenes but not always cast in the starring role. Regardless of whether or not the Devil was featured in the witch trials as a concrete entity, walking among us here on earth, or merely an abstract concept, leading the people into sin, both Church and State were ultimately concerned with wider issues of moral and social

behaviour. Indeed the witch-hunts as a whole should be seen as part of a broader programme of reform and spiritual rehabilitation.

It is extremely difficult to measure the level of impact changes in demonological theory had on the everyday cultural activities and social lives of ordinary people, though it can be assumed that the swing towards more radical ideas of individual guilt, morality, and the punishment of sin influenced many to alter their attitudes and behaviour. As an instrument of social control and religious conformity, the ever-present threat of Hell and Satanic invasion was a powerful, if somewhat repressive, tool. In the sixteenth century, as ‘Satan became an increasingly insistent presence in European culture’,<sup>22</sup> this tool was sharpened by another wave of religious and political reform.

## **THE REFORMATION**

Scotland underwent significant religious change and conflict during the sixteenth century. A protestant establishment was set up in August 1560, some forty-three years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg in 1517, though Lutheran ideas had migrated to Scotland by 1525. The first martyr to the protestant cause was Patrick Hamilton, who was burned at the stake in St Andrews in 1528. Reformation was eventually achieved, under the watchful eye of John Knox (1510-1572), who was originally motivated by Luther but, while in Geneva, he was influenced by the awe-inspiring John Calvin (1509-1564). Both Luther and Calvin spoke out against witchcraft and endorsed the use of capital punishment against witches, while John Knox most likely had a hand in drafting the Scottish Witchcraft Act.<sup>23</sup>

Encouraged by Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536; 1559), Knox and his cohorts produced for Scotland a programme for reform, never fully implemented, in their *Book of Discipline* (1560). This work would be continued by Andrew Melville, who returned

to Scotland from Geneva in 1574, and set down a new system of presbyterianism in a second *Book of Discipline* (1578), which advocated the setting up of a full system of church courts – Kirk Session, Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. The kirk session, in particular, operated as a ‘new intermediary organ of control in the social structure’, which would have powerful ramifications for the behavioural and social life of people living within reach of the session.<sup>24</sup> Melville and his followers preached that there was no scriptural authority for a distinction between bishop and priest, *episcopus* and *presbyter*, hence presbyterian. This attack upon the hierarchies of the church caused some considerable alarm, not least for the young James VI who shrewdly anticipated the dangerous precedent this might set for the hierarchies of state, hence ‘No bishop, no King!’<sup>25</sup> And so the Scottish witch-hunts were born during a period of momentous religious change and social reform and grew to adulthood against a backdrop of political tension, warfare and protestant extremism.

There has been an assumption that the suppression of popular culture began with the Reformation, but there is ample evidence to suggest that the medieval church also took a dim view of folk practices and belief systems. Popular plays, carnivals and processions, for instance, had come under criticism by the church well before 1560, while witchcraft and sorcery had been condemned by the Scottish church since at least the thirteenth century, excommunication being the favoured punishment for ‘witches and all who countenance and protect and support them in their evil doings as well as those who are parties with them in their misdeeds’. The Statutes of the Scottish Church insisted upon excommunication for both male and female witches, as well as fortune-tellers and violators of the kirk.<sup>26</sup> That said, the subsequent attack on ‘superstition’ and popular culture in the years post-1560 greatly intensified as the church regarded its position as increasingly more besieged.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, clear distinctions were being

drawn between the sacred and secular worlds by the elite, including the clergy, and many began to distance themselves from any involvement they may have had with folk culture.<sup>28</sup>

Of even greater significance was the apocalyptic message of Calvinism, that folk were living in the Last Days, and that the world as they knew it was coming to an end. The cosmic struggle between God and the Devil was growing ever more intense and signs of the encroaching doomsday, as predicted by the book of Revelation, were detectable on a daily basis, not least the threat of witchcraft. It is a theme, which lies at the heart of *Daemonologie*; witches and demonic interference spring from two sources, human sin and the impending end of the world. As king James explained, ‘the consummation of the worlde, and our deliverance drawing neare, makes Sathan to rage the more in his instruments, knowing his kingdome to be so neare an ende’.<sup>29</sup> In this climate, anything considered magical or superstitious had to be rooted out and destroyed in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ. In fairness, this plan of attack was not originally initiated by the Calvinists, but rather they refined an agenda that had been in existence for over a century.<sup>30</sup>

It has been observed worldwide that new regimes, in order to legitimise themselves, impose strict social controls over their subjects. However, the Calvinist ascendancy in Scotland should not be regarded as a catalyst in the suppression of folk custom and tradition, but rather as part of an ongoing process. ‘What it represented was a period of heightened social control which, in turn, led the Church and State to demand a higher level of conformity in folk belief and culture’.<sup>31</sup> It was the emergence of this new system of social control, in conjunction with changes taking place within the legal system and central administration, that escalated the attack on folk customs and beliefs. In this context, witchcraft can be seen to be just another item on the list the protestants sought to extinguish. Witchcraft was, as Stuart Clark pointed out, ‘at the very heart of the reforming process’.<sup>32</sup> During the years when witch persecutions peaked – roughly between 1590 and 1662 – witchcraft represented chaos,

disorder, and evil, and followers of the Devil were the consummate social and religious deviants. Witches posed a threat, not only to the individual, but to the very fabric of society, to the security of the state, and to the harmony of the church.

The protestant reinvention of a world in which there could only be the forces of good and evil, while undoubtedly well-intended, effectively shattered the grey area once inhabited by witches, charmers and a host of magical beings, consigning them all to the ranks of the Devil, whose power appeared to be growing stronger than ever. In the late sixteenth century, we can trace the beginnings of a debate over the issue of exactly what powers witches could or could not possess, and of what the Devil was truly capable; it was a debate that would rage on until the early eighteenth century, and arguably beyond. What is less clear is the level of influence the academic arguments and musings of scholars, demonologists and clerics had on the beliefs and opinions of ordinary folk and what possible impact it may have had on their daily lives. Did magic even have a Reformation?<sup>33</sup> James VI may have insisted that no quarter was to be given to witches, charmers or magical practitioners, that any kind of supernatural visitation could only come from the Devil, and that ‘since the coming of Christ in the flesh . . . all miracles, visions, prophecies, and appearances of angels or good spirites are ceased’,<sup>34</sup> but was his viewpoint widely shared by his subjects?

### **SCOTTISH WITCH-HUNTING**

The Scottish witch-hunts were initially inspired by the ruling classes, by ministers and lay judges, who became sincerely convinced that they were engaged in a spiritual, and at times bloody war between the forces of good and evil. As both Church and State became deeply worried about the levels of non-conformity within Scotland, repressive measures were undertaken to discourage and destroy any unofficial source of empowerment that might be recognized by the people, including witchcraft. At village level, the need to purge one’s

community of the destructive threats of heresy, deviance and demon-worship, took on greater meaning. It was a battle that had been brewing for several generations before the first witch was sacrificed to the cause, but once it began it hit Scotland like a series of earthquakes – some places were situated at the epicentre of a quake, many communities lay on the fractured fault lines they created, while others were spared entirely from the aftershocks and were relatively unaffected. The first tremors were felt in the mid-sixteenth century and gained in momentum by the last decade of the century. Scare-mongering about the dangers posed by witchcraft, as exemplified in James VI's treatise *Daemonologie*, was unleashed, feeding upon the fears and conflicts which frequently impinged upon everyday life. The disappointments, frustrations, jealousies and rivalries of daily existence are often manifested in the evidence.<sup>35</sup>

What was understood by witch, witchcraft or sorcery in a sixteenth century Scottish context, can be remarkably challenging to pin down. These terms could potentially mean different things to different people and, of course, their meanings were subjected to alteration as the century progressed. As Stuart Clark has pointed out, witchcraft was 'a set of cultural practices' as opposed to a fixed set of beliefs.<sup>36</sup> Belief is, naturally, an area of historical investigation that is much harder to access than cultural practice. While we might say that believing in witches is, arguably, 'normal', the need to punish witches is 'abnormal'. In the bigger scheme of things, variations of witch belief have always been, and continue to be, around. But intensive witch-hunting, in terms of what might be labelled 'super-hunts', was restricted to a period lasting no more than a century, from the mid-1500s to the mid-1600s, a pattern that fits Scotland as well as most other European nations. The conclusion that magical beliefs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not drastically different from those of the fourteenth or fifteenth century is compelling. Rather, the 'points of focus shifted and certain pre-existing elements intensified while others declined'.<sup>37</sup>

Richard Kieckhefer has argued for a broad ‘common tradition’ of magic that permeated every level of medieval society, around which a variety of particular beliefs and traditions gathered.<sup>38</sup> Across the social spectrum, though there were some profound differences in understanding and conceptualizing what a witch actually was, there was not a strict dichotomy between elite and popular belief in magic; such models have proven insufficient.

William Dunbar was not in doubt about the nature of a witch. His poem *The Birth of Antichrist* (c. 1507) describes, in the form of a prophetic dream, that on the day of ascension of the anti-christ, he will be greeted by all manner of ‘terribill monsturis’, dragons and gryphons, and the air will be infected with their poison. Also there to meet him are the magicians Simon Magus and Merlin, the prophet Muhammad, as well as a retinue of witches; ‘Jonet the wedo on a bwsum hame rydand,/ Off wytchis with ane windir garesoun’ [‘Jonet the widow on a broom home riding, of witches with a strange/marvellous troop/company’]. Together the unholy legion will descend from the sky ‘with reik and fyre’ and ‘preiche in eird the Antechristis impyre [reign], And than it salbe neir the warldis end’. The reference to ‘Jonet the wedo’ is obscure, though Priscilla Bawcutt suggests that it might have been a type-name for a witch.<sup>39</sup> The stereotype of the witch was that she was unmarried or widowed, a reinforcement of the dangers of uncontrolled and unsupervised women. In Scotland, however, the existing evidence on marital status of accused witches points to a majority of seventy-eight per cent married, twenty per cent widowed, and a tiny two percent single.<sup>40</sup> The literary construct of the witch was therefore at odds with the reality of witchcraft accusations. The apocalyptic message of the poem takes it for granted that sorcerers and broomstick riding witches will be among the Devil’s advocates on earth, suggesting that as early as the first decade of the sixteenth century the close relationship between the witch, the Devil and the End of Days was well understood, at least in literary circles.

One might expect to find a definition of what a witch is in the wording of the Witchcraft Act. However, no explicit definition of witchcraft is forthcoming, and the word 'witch' does not even occur. One possible reason for this omission might have been that 'the crime envisaged by the legislators was not the thought-crime of being a witch, but the practice of specific acts of witchcraft'.<sup>41</sup> There are, of course, indications of what witchcraft was thought to entail, such as 'abominabill' and 'vane superstitioun' which carried the meaning of dangerous or false belief, and as Julian Goodare has argued, hints at the anti-catholic sub-text of the document.<sup>42</sup> The Act makes clear that no person, regardless of their station or condition in life, should use any manner of witchcraft, sorcery or necromancy, 'nor gif thame selfis furth to have ony sic craft or knowlege thair of, thairthrow abusand the pepill'. The implication here is that magical practitioners were actively soliciting clients and making claims to knowledge that was expressly forbidden by God. The phrase 'abusing the people' suggested that witches, sorcerers and necromancers were, in effect, tricking people into believing that their skills were desirable, even beneficial, but in reality the people were being misled as all such power was demonic in origin. The category of people this most closely fits were the charmers, many of whom provided a range of services including healing, love magic, divination and counter-magical spells. People would not have, as a general rule, sought out the company or assistance of maleficent witches, nor were witches known for seeking out clients. The suggestion put forth by Goodare is that in placing so much emphasis upon the 'beneficent' charmers, the legislation of 1563 'did not directly intend to punish the witches who were actually convicted during the following century and a half of witch-hunting'.<sup>43</sup> At this stage, the drafters of the Witchcraft Act were perhaps more concerned with what they saw as overt signs of non-conformity and the illegal use of magic, and were not yet fully aware of the lurking menace of the demonic witch. Once the protestant regime

had time to bed in, and as more demonological texts went into print, it would not be long before the focus shifted onto the more terrifying vision of a diabolical witch.

While it is a fact that many charmers and folk healers were caught up in the general panic of the witch-hunts, it should be pointed out that in practice they were often shown more leniency than accused witches, primarily because their crimes were of a less serious nature. Although the Witchcraft Act had stipulated the death penalty, the punishments typically meted out were comparable to those charged with adultery, abuse of the sabbath, observance of 'superstitious' days, and so on. While the practice of folk medicine was never condoned by the authorities, some level of toleration may have extended to healers for the simple reason they performed a much needed and highly necessary service in communities devoid of alternative medical assistance. However, if the source of a healer's powers was thought to be dubious, such as through the conjuration of spirits, or deemed to be demonically inspired, such as by the fairies, the consequences could prove fatal. In the sixteenth century, the potential for confusion between the activities of charmers, healers and witches was, arguably, more pronounced among the learned and the literate classes than the folk at large who may have had a much clearer idea of the distinctions. As Joyce Miller has pointed out, 'unlike witches, who were labelled by others, charmers knew who they were and would label themselves as such'.<sup>44</sup> A witch could be a charmer and might have had an ability to heal as well as commit murder and cause illness, but a charmer or a folk healer, though in possession of the same ability to hurt as well as cure, would not necessarily be called a witch. Furthermore, anyone, from any walk of life, could make use of charms, amulets and traditional medicine without ever being called either a charmer or a witch.<sup>45</sup>

Whatever the potential shortcomings of the 1563 Witchcraft Act, further legislative acts followed. In 1573 the Privy Council took the bold step of declaring that witchcraft was to be treated as a *crimen exceptum*, or exceptional crime, and in 1575 the General Assembly set

out articles that claimed ‘the Kirk hath power to cognosce and decerne upon heresies, blasphemie, witchcraft, and violation of the Sabbath day without prejudice always of the civill punishment’. In 1583 it would appear that the General Assembly did not consider that enough was yet being done for it issued a complaint to the king ‘that there is no punishment for incest, adulterie, witchcraft, murthers, abominable and horrible oaths, in such sort that daylie sinne increaseth, and provoketh the wrath of God against the whole countrie’.<sup>46</sup>

## THE WITCHES

It is exceptionally difficult to obtain evidence of the nature of witch belief, and related supernatural phenomena, in the period before witchcraft was criminalized. There are few traces of the crime in the Scottish records pre-1563. It is an historical irony that so often the best sources of information on folk belief and popular culture arise at the very time when such beliefs and activities were under pressure to reform or attempts made at outright eradication. There are, however, snippets of random evidence that might allow us to at least conjecture what witchcraft meant to people living in the era before the widespread persecution of witches.

Among the aristocracy, witchcraft could be closely aligned to treason. An alleged conspiracy to kill the king, James III, and his brother, the earl of Mar, led to the execution of ‘several witches’ in 1479, a case that bears striking similarities to the North Berwick trials of 1590-91 in that its focus was on treason against the king. In 1510, the Justice Ayre at Jedburgh enquired ‘gif thair be ony witchecraft or sossary wsyt in the realme’, indicating that there was some concern about this issue, at least in some localities.<sup>47</sup> In 1536, Lanie Scot was convicted ‘*de magica arte vulgo* witchcraft’ in Aberdeen.<sup>48</sup> In Alloway, in 1537, Thome Fayre was instructed by the baillies to prove his allegations against Megge Rankyn, whom he had called a ‘their carling and witche carling’ who witched ‘uther folkis mylk’.<sup>49</sup> At this early

date it was Fayre who found himself in trouble and asked to prove his slanderous remarks. While witch persecutions were extremely rare in this period, executions were not unknown as three women are believed to have been burned as witches in St Andrews in 1542.<sup>50</sup> The town records of Elgin suggest that some women suspected of witchcraft were jailed in 1559 or 1560, but no details are given. Janet Trumbill of Selkirk was accused, in 1561, of casting a spell that caused madness in another woman.<sup>51</sup> While in Stirling, in 1562, a mother and daughter were pronounced guilty of witchcraft and banished from the town, under pain of death if they returned.<sup>52</sup>

After 1563, and until the eve of the North Berwick trials in 1590, the evidence begins to mount, with well over a hundred persons investigated for witchcraft. On top of formal prosecutions for witchcraft and sorcery, an unknown number of slander cases were also present in this period. For instance, on 26 November 1563, the magistrates of Arbroath directed that ‘Richart Brown sall pass to the chapell the morne, and ask Jonat Cary and Jhon Ramsay, her son, forgyffness for calling her ane she witch and him ane he witch’. In addition, there are occasional references to witches being punished in unofficial sources, such as in Arbroath, May 1568, ‘the Counsall decernit that Agnes Fergusson, witch, suld be put in the pit’, most likely the dungeon of Arbroath Abbey tower.<sup>53</sup>

A number of these early trials contain evidence of charming and folk healing practices. Jonet Carswell in Edinburgh, was tried in 1579 for curing people with concoctions made from black snails, clay, and thread.<sup>54</sup> Tibbie Smart was burned on the cheek and sentenced to banishment for various crimes of sorcery and charming. She was accused of causing the deaths of ten people, including a man who had the misfortune to look inside her purse where he saw numerous strange items such as pieces of salt, coal, thread, barley, and small bones. She used a well-known divinatory practice to locate lost property called ‘turning the riddle’, which involved balancing a sieve, the ‘riddle’, on a pair of shears. It was further

alleged that she had transformed into the shape of a 'brok' or badger and had been caught by dogs out for a hunt. She was found later on, back in human form, with the tell-tale sign of bite marks all over her face and body. Furthermore, four members of the Findlaw family were accused of consulting with Tibbie in order to get revenge on their enemy by 'crewell slaughtereis committit be witchcraft and inchantmentis'. Their fate is not known, but the Scottish Witchcraft Act did stipulate that consulters of witches, as well as practitioners of witchcraft, were to be punished with death, though it is not common to see it put into practice.<sup>55</sup>

The earliest witch-hunt in Scotland that involved substantially more than one or two individuals occurred in 1568-9 though very little is known about it.<sup>56</sup> Slightly more is known about the next large scale hunt, which took place 1577-8 in the Highland region of Easter Ross. In total, six men and twenty-six women were charged with witchcraft. Among them was Kenneth Ower (Coinneach Odhar), the 'Braham Seer', one of the best-known prophets in Scottish history. He was executed in 1578 as a 'principal or leader of the art of magic', at Chanonry (Fortrose) on the Black Isle. Several others arrested at the same time survived only to face further allegations of witchcraft in the high profile trial of Katherine Ross, Lady Munro of Foulis, in 1590. Among their crimes, Lady Foulis and others, were accused of making 'pictours' — figures or likenesses of individuals — in butter or clay; these were then 'elfshot', by throwing so-called elf arrowheads, or flints, at them. It was further alleged that she had consulted the elf folk.<sup>57</sup>

Some parallels with the Easter Ross cases of 1577-8 and 1590 appear in the account of the Argyll witches, implicated in a conspiracy of murder, in the early 1590s. John Campbell of Ardkinglass was suspected of the assassination of his rival John Campbell of Calder in 1592 and was therefore out of favour with the earl of Argyll. He approached the

widow Margaret Campbell to ask if, through witchcraft, she could bring about a reconciliation with his chief. Margaret cleverly answered that witches could not help him unless they were fully informed of the facts. Ardkinglass came clean, admitting not only his own guilt in the conspiracy but also named his accomplices. Most of what is known of the plot against John Campbell of Calder is contained within Margaret Campbell's confession, which she gave freely and without torture. In the process, she also provided an insight into sixteenth century witch belief. For instance, second sight is emphasized and the significance of the calendar is revealed; 'all witchcraft is to be practiced in the begining of every quharter'. Realising that the harvest quarter was fast approaching, Ardkinglass was eager for Margaret to begin as quickly as possible. She duly promised that she would have something to report before Lammas (1 August). Furthermore, when Ardkinglass asked Margaret if witches invoked God or Jesus in their spells, she replied 'that the witches namit God in thair words'.<sup>58</sup>

### **THE DEVIL'S GREATEST ADVERSARY**

In the years immediately following the passing of the Witchcraft Act there was a steady flow of cases, though executions *en masse* did not ensue. The first mass trial to strike Scotland, in 1590-1, has been, rightly or wrongly, attributed to James VI, Christina Lerner arguing that 'educated witchcraft theory was imported from the continent in 1591'.<sup>59</sup> The events surrounding the North Berwick trials – as they have come to be known – therefore reflect, for the first time, the assimilation of educated, continental witch beliefs among Scotland's elite. In particular, the introduction of the Demonic Pact, the Devil's mark, the ability of witches to fly, and witches gatherings or Sabbats, all elements that featured strongly in continental witchcraft theory but had not been known in Scotland before James VI encountered these

ideas while visiting Scandinavia. The assumption that James acquired this knowledge while in Denmark has been continuously repeated since Francis Legge first suggested it in 1891,<sup>60</sup> though P. G. Maxwell-Stuart has seriously brought this into question. He has found no firm evidence that James ever discussed witchcraft while during his time abroad and that even if he had, Danish witchcraft trials were not particularly concerned with either the Sabbat or the Demonic Pact.<sup>61</sup> James's hand in all of this is further diminished by Jenny Wormald, who has argued that the Demonic Pact was known in Scotland before 1590.<sup>62</sup>

The exact role played by James in the North Berwick trials, and indeed in Scottish witchcraft beliefs in general, remains nebulous and controversial. If his actions were to be seen as a political ploy, as some have suggested, then it was quite successful. It definitely gained him the publicity his ego would have craved. An English chapbook, *Newes From Scotland* (1591), declared him as Satan's most formidable opponent: 'the witches demaunded of the Diuel why he did beare such hatred to the King, who answered, by reason the King is the greatest enemy he hath in the worlde'.<sup>63</sup>

The aftermath of North Berwick must have made an impression upon James, the target of so much diabolical wrath and treachery, that he was inspired to write a book on the subject. James claimed that his motives for writing the book were primarily to refute the ideas of the Englishman Reginald Scot and the Dutch physician Johann Weyer, in his view the two major sceptics of the witch-hunt. In so doing he set out to prove 'that such diuinish artes have bene and are' and to outline 'what exact trial and punishment they merite'. Written in the style of a Socratic dialogue it is fairly typical of the genre, though shorter than most other demonological works of the period. Its defence of continental witchcraft beliefs, its use as a political tool, and the fact that it was written by a king, are what mark this text out from the pack, as originality is not its strong suit.<sup>64</sup> *Daemonologie* (1597) is, incidentally, the only treatise on demonology composed by a monarch and was Scotland's entrance onto the

European stage of demonological discourse. As this text demonstrates, church reformers were not the only ones worried about the Apocalypse but James, with characteristic arrogance, put himself at the forefront of the last great cosmic battle. James would have also wanted *Daemonologie* to stand as an example of his intellectual and religious capabilities, but, as has been plausibly argued, the treatise, ‘in genesis and in content’, can be read as a testimonial about ideal monarchy.<sup>65</sup>

It is safe to say that king James is a key figure in the history of Scottish witch-hunting. That said, while James was indeed instrumental in bringing about the full absorption of continental witchcraft theory to Scotland’s elites, and eventually to the folk at large, it was just as much the pressure coming from the Kirk, in its pursuit of a Godly society, that fed the fires of Scottish witch-hunting. Furthermore, the preconditions for a widespread acceptance and adoption of demonological theory were already present. And this can be evidenced by the demonization of fairy belief from at least the 1570s, as exemplified in the trial of Jonet Boyman, among others.

### **JONET BOYMAN**

The rise of the demonic can be traced in the Scottish witch trials, particularly through the evidence of fairy belief, but it can also be shown to predate the king’s visit to Denmark or the North Berwick trials of the early 1590s. An association between fairies and the Devil was being drawn, among some authorities, at least twenty years earlier and was, I am suggesting, a precondition which allowed for the full crystallisation of continental witchcraft theory – specifically the importance of the Devil and the Demonic Pact – so quickly after James’s return to Scotland.

By way of example, the trial of Jonet Boyman will be analyzed. This particular confession is not the only one to provide evidence of an emerging overlap between witch and

fairy beliefs, but is among the earliest and most highly detailed of such accounts. Most importantly, this trial supplies confirmation that fairy beliefs, not to mention the accused witches themselves, were undergoing a demonic transformation, well in advance of the creation and adoption of a new, learned, witch stereotype, and before the absorption of continental witchcraft beliefs had taken root in Scotland. The so-called ‘cumulative concept of witchcraft’, as postulated by Brian Levack, was still in its infancy, in a Scottish context at least, and would not fully develop for another decade and a half.<sup>66</sup> This trial is, however, indicative of the demonization process taking place and the growing awareness of the rise of demonic power infiltrating the world. Furthermore, this account potentially has more to do with contemporary folk belief and charming practice than with intellectual theories about witches and demonology.<sup>67</sup>

The trial of Jonet Boyman, is the first Scottish witch trial for which a detailed indictment has so far been found and is one of the richest accounts of sixteenth century Scottish witch and fairy belief, as well as charming practices. Condemned as ‘ane wyss woman that culd mend diverss seikness and bairnis that are tane away with the faryie men and wemin [changelings]’, she was charged with witchcraft, sorcery, charming and diabolic incantation. Proceedings against her were first lodged in 1570 and came to an unfortunate conclusion with her execution on 29 December 1572. It is not certain where Jonet actually came from, one source claiming she was from Ayrshire, but her place of residence is given as the Cowgate, in Edinburgh, in the trial document. Her age is unrecorded, though it is known that she was married to William Steill. The record strongly suggests that she was a practising healer, and a fairly popular one at that. Many charmers claimed to have inherited their abilities from a family member, or acquired them from some sort of supernatural encounter. For instance, Christiane Lewingston (1597) from Leith confessed she could cure a variety of ailments and had some psychic ability as a result of information obtained from the fairies via

her daughter. In the course of Jonet's confession she revealed that her ability to heal people was learned, or taught, from a woman in the Potterrow who had once cured her.<sup>68</sup>

The significance of holy or healing wells to everyday life is evidenced in this account. Wells were often regarded as liminal places where the natural and supernatural worlds intersected. Jonet made contact with the otherworld at an 'elrich well' on the south side of Arthur's Seat. Here she uttered 'Incantations and Invocations' of the 'evill spreits quhome she callit upon for to come to show and declair' what would happen to her patients. To bring forth the spirits, she would conjure 'ane grit blast' like a whirlwind out of which there appeared the shape of a man who stood on the other side of the well; a further hint at the liminality involved in this ritual. She stood accused of performing this 'diabolicall incantation' to cure a sick man by the name of Allan Anderson. After raising the spirit, she commanded it in the name of the father, the son, King Arthur and 'quene Elspeth', to reveal to her the method of curing Allan. Elaborate instructions were relayed to Jonet who later communicated them to Allan's wife; mostly it involved procedures surrounding washing the ill man's shirt. That same night, on the hour of midnight, there came to the Anderson household a 'grit wind', that shook the foundations of the house, and a 'grit dyn', like the sound of hammers banging on the walls. A herd of horses galloped around the house creating further noise and general disturbance. The couple, terrified by their ordeal, consulted Jonet once again, but she offered no sympathy, reproving the man's wife for not following the instructions properly. Her failure to do so would result in Allan being 'ane cripill all his dayes'. The ritual of cleaning the sark was once more carried out, this time with the assistance of their servant woman, but must have failed again for on the second night the house was plagued, as before, with an almighty din. Though the Andersons' experience was traumatic, it presumably worked as Allan recovered. However, only three years later he fell sick again but this time the prognosis was not good.

Jonet was sent for but, unfortunately, she could do nothing to help him this time as it was past Halloween; the time of the year when the ‘good neighbours’, or fairies, arose and she had more acquaintance with them on that day than on any other. After Allan’s passing, the wife remarried and bore a son with her new husband. Shortly after the birth, Jonet saw her with the newborn but warned her to ‘tak the paine to foster that barne for it hes not ane hart and can not life’. It might be guessed that either the child did not have the heart to live or, more likely, (since ‘hart’ in Scots can also mean stomach) it was not hungry enough and was failing to suck, or breastfeed. When the child subsequently died Jonet was asked how she could foretell his fate. She answered ‘it had gottin ane blast of evill wind for the moder had not sanit [blessed] it well aneuch’ before leaving the house, and so the ‘sillyie wychs’ – or seelie wichts, another term for the fairies – had found it unsained, or unblessed, and it was ‘tane away’. As was common in fairy attacks, they had given the hapless infant the ‘blast’ and, perhaps, stolen it away to fairyland. The loss of a child is never easy and it might be safe to assume that grieving parents took some solace in the explanation that their little one was living on in the realm of the fairies. Jonet said that she had witnessed the evil blast at least twenty times over her career. There may also be overtones here of the changeling phenomenon, though this is not specifically mentioned.<sup>69</sup>

The ‘evill blast’ and whirlwinds created by the fairies seem to have led one unfortunate woman, who lived with her son at Newbattle, to take her own life. The specifics surrounding this incident are vague but Jonet told her interrogators that the woman hanged herself following such an attack. Furthermore, the woman was not allowed burial in the kirk yard, as she was a suicide, but was buried in ‘ane litill chapill’, though her precise meaning is unclear.

The confession contains quite a lot of details about her life as a ‘wyss woman’ and some of her charming methods. On one occasion she boiled woodbine leaves in a kettle of

water while reciting a prayer; ‘Blist Benedicte In the name of ye fader and the holye gost king arthor and dame elspeth’. She also described how she could use a person’s sark or shirt to diagnose and cure illness. On the noon hour, she took the shirt to the ‘eldrich well’ at St. Leonard’s and would summon a spirit through the recitation of prayers to come and remove the sickness. She describes the fairy man she encountered on one such occasion as ‘wele anewch cled . . . wele faceit wt ane baird [beard]’. He stood on the other side of the well from her and, though he seems to have been a good looking man, when he turned to depart she said he was wasted like a stick when seen from behind.

Halloween was apparently Jonet’s time to communicate with the otherworld. Despite the fact that all holidays, festivals and saints days had been banned by the protestant church, it is quite common to find convicted witches referring to significant dates, emphasizing the importance of calendar customs in people’s daily lives. Bessie Dunlop (1576) spoke of Candlemas and Christine Douglas (1579), a married woman who lived in Leith, was investigated for conversation with the Devil at Easter.<sup>70</sup> Katherine Ross (1590) highlighted Halloween and Midsummer, while Euphemia Makcalzane (1591), of the infamous North Berwick coven, was indicted, among other things, for attending a gathering at the Fairy Hills, at Newhaven, on Lammas (1 August). Aberdeenshire witch, Margaret Og (1597), was caught by the minister, casting water from a stream over her head and sweeping the dew on the first Monday of the raith (which is the First Quarter of the Year), which he said was ‘plane witchcraft and devilry and is one of the chief ceremonies thereof’.<sup>71</sup>

There is fragmentary evidence that Jonet was a recusant, though whether she did this knowingly or unknowingly is unclear as it is a feature found in several witchcraft and charming confessions throughout the whole period of the witch-hunts. Indeed, it has been argued, that a ‘principal source of charms were prayers of the pre-Reformation church’.<sup>72</sup> Some of Jonet’s charms involved prayers, one of which began ‘Blist Benedicite’ an

indication of the continued usage of catholic prayers surviving in folk medicinal practice. The charge she used to summon spirits and fairies, 'in the name of the father, the son, king Arthur and queen Elspeth' is intriguing and might be interpreted as an inversion of the Holy Trinity. The connection between invoking king Arthur, at a well on Arthur's Seat, would suggest that she is referring to Arthurian legend, but the personage of queen or dame Elspeth is obscure.

Jonet was pronounced guilty of being a common and notorious witch, charmer and sorcerer. She was burned as a wise woman who knew how to heal diverse sicknesses with a particular ability in curing children that had been 'taken away' by fairy men and women. She was condemned for her conversation, familiarity and speech with the fairy folk, or as her prosecutors put it, evil spirits. The Devil is not specifically mentioned but, at root, her interrogators were almost certainly trying to determine the source of her occult knowledge. Her crimes were against God, for she had drawn the hearts of the people away from God, but were also against the people whom she stood accused of tricking 'under cullor and pretence of medicine'. While traces of the demonic are undoubtedly present, it is not nearly as intrusive as it would become in a much better known case that took place only four years later, that of Bessie Dunlop, from Ayrshire, who was strangled and burned in 1576.

This trial has been investigated more fully elsewhere so only a few points will be made to illustrate its relevance here. There are numerous instances in Bessie's confession where statements made about fairies and witches overlap. For instance, her contact with the Otherworld, and the source of her healing powers, was through her acquaintance with Thomas Reid, a man who had been dead for twenty-nine years and who now lived with the fairies. On the noon hour she was introduced to twelve of his acquaintances from Fairyland; the eight women and four men she met were 'gude wychtis that wynnit in the Court of Elfame'. On another occasion, and notably during the birth of her child, she met the queen of Elfland herself who came to her door and predicted the death of her newborn infant. An

interesting passage in the confession seems to suggest discontentment with the new reformed faith and its aversion to folk belief. When she was questioned for her opinion on the 'new law', she replied that she had spoken with her fairy contact on the matter and he had advised that the new law was not good and the 'old faith', catholicism, should come back again, though not as it was before. Perhaps Bessie was looking back affectionately to the pre-Reformation days when life was not so risky for someone with her beliefs and talents. It may also be a tiny glimpse into contemporary attitudes, fears and doubts that were circulating among the people, who were attempting to come to terms with and adapt to the changes taking place around them, though not always, at least in Bessie's case, successfully. The fact that Bessie was not blamed with causing harm to anyone, or that her clients included persons of relatively high social standing, did nothing to sway her prosecutors from finding her guilty of using 'sorcerie, witchcraft, and incantatioune, with invocatioun of spretis of the devill; continewand in familiaritie with thame, at all sic tymes as sche thought expedient'. Furthermore, when given the choice to join Thomas Reid and enter the fairy ranks, she refused. Nor did she abjure her faith or reject her baptism. In other words, it was her relationship with fairies, and a ghost, that was now considered criminal behaviour, punishable by death.<sup>73</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The death sentences bestowed upon Jonet Boyman and Bessie Dunlop were exceedingly harsh, given that both women were essentially 'white witches', or charmers, who never actually hurt anyone. On the contrary, both were consulted, on a regular basis, primarily for their superior healing abilities. What seems to have condemned both of these poor souls to the fire was the fact that they could summon ghosts and communicated with the fairies from where they took their occult knowledge. The fusion between folk belief and learned

witchcraft theory was underway and there was no going back. The demonic seed, so to speak, had been planted and took hold like an unwelcome weed in the garden.

As for James, surely no one man – even though he was a king – could be held entirely responsible for bringing witch ‘panics’ to Scotland. The conditions had to be right in the first place. Also, it is highly probable that members of the judicial, religious, social and political elites already had some knowledge of the Demonic Pact, and other such continental notions about witches, well before 1590. There would have been other channels of information available to them besides the king’s trip to Denmark.<sup>74</sup> However, I do agree with Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts who suggest that ‘an important effect of the North Berwick trials and the publications it generated, *News from Scotland and Demonology*, was that it schooled people at various levels of society in a theory of witchcraft and a knowledge of its practices’.<sup>75</sup>

The impact of changing ideas about the nature of witchcraft upon everyday life was immense. As elite society and theological circles took an increasing interest in rooting out diabolical activities in their midst, people, at village level, had to avert the possible maledictions of witches but also avoid falling under suspicion of witchcraft themselves. Activities and opinions that had once been tolerated, albeit grudgingly, were now punishable offences. However, it can no longer be assumed that learned ideas about the Devil and educated witchcraft theory in general caused the witch-hunts but rather ‘the reverse is much more likely to have been true’.<sup>76</sup> An intermingling of belief, at all levels of society, helped to mould and shape demonic conceptualizations and discourse. Robin Briggs described the European witch-hunts as ‘a coalescence between longstanding popular beliefs and the agencies for enforcing social and religious conformity’. Such a statement could easily be applied to Scotland in the last three or four decades of the sixteenth century. The structures of the protestant church were spreading throughout predominantly lowland regions of the

country and the kirk sessions began, in part, to function as a sort of moral police force, guiding their parishioners away from sin, superstition, unlawful sex and corruption. Meanwhile, both Church and State grew increasingly worried about the possible dangers posed by Satan's trusted minions, the witches, and began to see themselves as involved in a battle to save souls and protect God and country against the forces of evil. Changes taking place within the legal system, the use of torture, harvest failure and plague, are issues that are also of great importance to the way witch-hunting evolved.

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper, 'Rise of the Demonic: Changing Ideas about Witchcraft in Sixteenth Century Scotland', was presented at the *Sixteenth Century Studies Conference*, Geneva, Switzerland, 28-30 May 2009. King James VI and I, *Daemonologie*, 1597, G. B. Harrison (ed.) (London, 1924), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Lizanne Henderson, 'Witch, Fairy and Folktale Narratives in the Trial of Bessie Dunlop', in Lizanne Henderson (ed.), *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture* (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 141-66.

<sup>3</sup> Trial of Bessie Roy (1590), Robert Pitcairn (ed.), *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland*, 1488-1624, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1833).

<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Cowan, 'Witch Persecution and Folk Belief in Lowland Scotland: The Devil's Decade', in Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (eds), *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp. 71-94.

<sup>5</sup> *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, 5 vols. (Aberdeen, 1844-52). See also Cowan, 'The Devil's Decade'.

<sup>6</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. xi.

<sup>7</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Montague Summers trans. (New York, [1486] 1971), part 1, question 2, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Bailey, 'The Age of Magicians', in *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 3/1 (2008), pp. 1-28.

<sup>11</sup> Bailey, 'The Age of Magicians', p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database* at [www.arts.ed.ac.uk/witches/](http://www.arts.ed.ac.uk/witches/) provides the most up-to-date figures on Scottish witch trials.

- 
- <sup>13</sup> Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, 'The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief', in Julian Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (Manchester and New York, 2002), pp. 198-217.
- <sup>14</sup> Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton, 2001; repr. Edinburgh, 2007), esp. chapter 4.
- <sup>15</sup> Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (Edinburgh, [1981] 2000), pp. 69, 198.
- <sup>16</sup> Jeffrey B. Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London, 1984), pp. 62-87.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Muchembled, *A History of the Devil from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 16.
- <sup>18</sup> Muchembled, *History of the Devil*, pp. 23-4, 35.
- <sup>19</sup> W. Tod Ritchie (ed.), *The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1928-34), vol. 2, pp. 282-3; Priscilla Bawcutt, 'Elrich Fantasyis in Dunbar and Other Poets', in J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (eds), *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 162-78.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas Leys, *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, vol. 1, pp. 83-4, 97-101.
- <sup>21</sup> Stuart MacDonald, 'The Devil in Fife Witchcraft Cases', in Goodare, *Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, pp. 33-50; Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560-1710* (East Linton, 2002), pp. 180-1; Lauren Martin, 'The Devil and the Domestic: Witchcraft, Quarrels and Women's Work in Scotland', in Goodare, *Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, p. 77; Joyce Miller, 'Men in Black: Appearances of the Devil in Early Modern Scottish Witchcraft Discourse', in Goodare, *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, pp. 144-65.
- <sup>22</sup> Muchembled, *History of the Devil*, p. 35.
- <sup>23</sup> On the authorship of the Act see Julian Goodare, 'The Scottish Witchcraft Act', in *Church History* 74 (2005), pp. 39-67.
- <sup>24</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, pp. 55-6. On the Kirk Session see Anne Gordon, *Candie for the Foundling* (Edinburgh, 1992).
- <sup>25</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, pp. 110-11.
- <sup>26</sup> D. Patrick (ed.), *Statutes of the Scottish Church, 1225-1559* (SHS, 1907), pp. 4, 6, 26, 75.
- <sup>27</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p. 108.
- <sup>28</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p. 113.
- <sup>29</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 81.
- <sup>30</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p. 114.
- <sup>31</sup> Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, pp. 115-16.
- <sup>32</sup> Stuart Clark, 'Protestant Demonology: Sin, Superstition, and Society c.1520-c. 1630', in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (eds), *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 45-81.
- <sup>33</sup> Bailey, 'The Age of Magicians', p. 19.
- <sup>34</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 66.
- <sup>35</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, p. 1; James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 81; Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours* (New York, 1997) p. 7.
- <sup>36</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), p. 459.
- <sup>37</sup> Bailey, 'The Age of Magicians', pp. 22-4.
- <sup>38</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976). See also Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989) and Karen Louise Jolly, 'Medieval Magic:

Definitions, Beliefs, Practices’, in Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 1-71.

<sup>39</sup> Specific reference is also made to the alchemist John Damian, abbot of Tongland, Kikcudbrightshire (1504-9), a friend of James IV, and while at court was a physician, organized morris dances, and conducted alchemical experiments. In this poem, Dunbar is mocking his alleged attempts to fly, but it is also probably an illustration of human folly and the dangers of sorcery. See, Priscilla Bawcutt (ed.), *The Poems of William Dunbar*, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 114-15, vol. 2, pp 295-6, 352-4.

<sup>40</sup> The paucity of evidence relating to marital status makes it impossible to be accurate so these figures may be impressionistic at best. Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller, ‘Some Findings from the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft’, in Goodare, *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, pp. 51-70.

<sup>41</sup> Goodare, ‘The Scottish Witchcraft Act’, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> For various opinions on the wording of the Witchcraft Act see Larner, *Enemies of God*, pp. 66-7, P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan’s Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth Century Scotland* (East Linton, 2001), pp. 37-8, Laurence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI’s Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter, 2000), pp. 90-1, and on the anti-catholic context see Goodare, ‘The Scottish Witchcraft Act’, pp. 8, 12-15.

<sup>43</sup> Goodare, ‘The Scottish Witchcraft Act’, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Joyce Miller, ‘Devices and Directions: Folk Healing Aspects of Witchcraft Practice in Seventeenth-Century Scotland’, in Goodare, *Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, pp. 90-105.

<sup>45</sup> Lizanne Henderson, ‘Charmers Spells and Holy Wells: The Repackaging of Belief’, in *Review of Scottish Culture* (2007) pp. 10-26.

<sup>46</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, vol. 1, p. 66.

<sup>48</sup> *Exchequer Rolls*, vol. 16, p. 612, qtd in G. Black, *A Calendar of Cases of Witchcraft in Scotland, 1510-1727* (New York, [1938] 1971), p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> Thome Fayre, 1537, *Court Book of the Barony of Alloway*, 4 vols., vol. 1, 624, MS. Carnegie Library, Ayr, B6/28/1-4, qtd. in Alastair Hendry, *Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire: A Calendar of Documents* (May 1998).

<sup>50</sup> Black, *Calendar*, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> *Protocol Book of Sir Ninian Bryden, 1536-1564* (Walter Mason Trust, 1997)

<sup>52</sup> *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Stirling*, p. 80, qtd in Black, *Calendar*, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> George Hay, *History of Arbroath to the Present Time* (Arbroath, 1876), pp. 129-30.

<sup>54</sup> *Canongate Burgh Court Book 1574-77* SL150/1/2, p. 370-3.

<sup>55</sup> *Process Notes* JC26/1/13 and JC26/2. See also J. G. Dalyell, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1835), p. 373.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Wasser has conducted research on the 1568-9 trials but it remains unpublished. Goodare, *Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> William Matheson, ‘The Historical Coinneach Odhar and some Prophecies Attributed to him’, in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 46 (1968), pp. 1-23; Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, vol. 1, III, pp. 192-204; Lizanne Henderson, ‘Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the Gaidhealtachd’, in Goodare, *Witchcraft and Belief*, pp. 95-118; Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan’s Conspiracy*, pp.135-41. For more on elf-shot see Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, pp. 77-9, 93-4, Alaric Hall, ‘Getting shot of Elves: Healing, Witchcraft and Fairies in the Scottish Witchcraft Trials’, in *Folklore*, 116 (2005), pp. 19-36, Hugh Cheape, ‘“Charms against Witchcraft”: Magic and Mischief in Museum Collections’, in Goodare, *Witchcraft and Belief*, pp. 227-48, and Hugh Cheape, ‘From Natural to Supernatural: The

Material Culture of Charms and Amulets', in Henderson, *Fantastical Imaginations*, pp. 70-90.

<sup>58</sup> *Highland Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 159-60, 165; Henderson, 'Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the Gaidhealtachd', pp. 102-4.

<sup>59</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, p. 198.

<sup>60</sup> Francis Legge, 'Witchcraft in Scotland', in *Scottish Review* 18 (1891), p. 257-88; A. H. Williamson, *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 61.

<sup>61</sup> P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, 'The Fear of the King is Death: James VI and the Witches of East Lothian', in William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (eds), *Fear in Early Modern Society* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 209-25. On Danish witch-hunting see Gustav Henningsen, 'Witch Hunting in Denmark', in *Folklore*, 93 (1982), pp. 131-7, and Jens Christian V. Johansen, 'Denmark: The Sociology of Accusations', in Ankarloo and Henningsen, *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, pp. 339-65.

<sup>62</sup> Jenny Wormald, 'The Witches, the Devil and the King', in Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn (eds), *Freedom and Authority: Scotland c. 1050-c. 1650* (East Linton, 2000), pp. 170-4.

<sup>63</sup> *Newes From Scotland*, 1591 (London, 1924), p. 15; Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford, 1984), p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> Stuart Clark, 'King James's *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship', in Sidney Anglo (ed.), *The Damned Art* (London, 1977), pp. 156-81.

<sup>65</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie*, pp. xi-xii; Clark, 'Witchcraft and Kingship', p. 156.

<sup>66</sup> Writing in 1900, Joseph Hansen referred to the 'collective concept' of witchcraft and traced its evolution through the witches sabbat. See Richard Kieckhefer, 'Mythologies of Witchcraft in the Fifteenth Century', in *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 1/1 (2006), pp. 79-108; Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (New York and London, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> See also Henderson, 'Trial of Bessie Dunlop'.

<sup>68</sup> Trial of Jonet Boyman, 1572, NAS, JC/26/1/67.

<sup>69</sup> For more on the 'blast' and fairy assaults see Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, esp. pp. 78-80, 85-6.

<sup>70</sup> *Canongate Burgh Court Book 1574-77* SL150/1/2, pp. 370-3.

<sup>71</sup> Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, vol. 1, p. 56. The last time Bessie saw Thomas it was the morning after Candlemas; Trial of Katherine Jonesdochter, R. S. Barclay (ed.), *Court Book of Shetland* (Edinburgh, 1967), pp. 38-9; Margaret Og, 'Trials for Witchcraft', *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, vol. 1, p. 143.

<sup>72</sup> Larner, *Enemies of God*, p. 140.

<sup>73</sup> Trial of Bessie Dunlop, Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, vol. 1, pp. 51-3, 56; Henderson, 'Trial of Bessie Dunlop'.

<sup>74</sup> Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, p. 35.

<sup>75</sup> Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, p. 79.

<sup>76</sup> Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. vii.

Coursework Assignment 2: Study in Development Changes in Crime and Punishment Katrina Joseph Changes in Crime and Punishment. (a) Between the mid-seventeenth century and the mid-eighteenth century attitudes to witchcraft in Britain changed. Source A is a mid-seventeenth century engraving that shows the swimming test of a woman accused of witchcraft. 'Evidence' of witchcraft was not difficult to find. Certain types of marks on the body would be enough, since these were supposed to be caused by witches feeding their 'familiars' (cats, toads, birds or hogs, as in source A) with their own blood. Local crowds would often take matters concerning witchcraft into their own hands and apply the old fashioned 'swimming test'.