

William Shakespeare's
Macbeth
A Sourcebook

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(2006)

Contemporary Documents

From *Newes from Scotland, Declaring the Damnable life and death of Doctor Flan, a notable Sorcerer, who was burned at Edenborough in January last, 1591. Which Doctor was registerd to the Diuell that sundry times preached at North Barrick Kirke, to a number of notorious Witches. With the true examinations of the said Doctor and Witches, as they uttered them in the presence of the Scottish King*... (1591). Reprinted in Barbara Rosen, ed., *Witchcraft* (The Stratford-upon-Avon Library, 6; London: Edward Arnold, 1969), pp. 194-7

This account of the examination of a group of witches bears on *Macbeth* in a number of ways. The obscene sexuality of the witches' dealings with the devil is characteristic of popular belief. Shakespeare transforms it into the less graphic but more profoundly disturbing sexuality of Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits to transform her body (1.5.40-50; see Key Passage, p. 142). This in turn adds an undercurrent of sexuality to Duncan's murder. Agnes Tompson's conviction of a design to kill the King links witchery and regicide, a link that operates here indirectly in the play: the witches' first set of prophecies provokes Macbeth to kill Duncan; their second set of prophecies foretells his own death. The King in question is James VI of Scotland; we see in this account his fascination with witchcraft. There are more detailed links: the witches' claim to be able to walk to stones and to control the winds is picked up by Shakespeare's witches (1.3.8-17; see Key Passage, pp. 133-4). These witches use toad venom; Shakespeare's witches use a toad steeped in its own venom as the first element of their brew (4.1.8-9; see Key Passage, p. 165). More generally, the play shows the mingled fascination and anxiety witchcraft produced in the minds of Shakespeare's contemporaries. We may also note the distance between the actual sensationalism and the more profound horror of the play.

This aforesaid Agnes Sampson, which was the elder witch, was taken and brought to Holyrood House' before the King's Majesty and sundry other of the

The royal palace in Edinburgh.

nobility of Scotland, where she was straitly examined; but all the persuasions which the King's Majesty used to her with the rest of his Council might not provoke or induce her to confess anything, but stood stiffly in the denial of all that was laid to her charge. Whereupon they caused her to be conveyed away to prison, there to receive such torture as hath been lately provided for witches in that country.

And forasmuch as by due examination of witchcraft and witches in Scotland it hath lately been found that the Devil doth generally mark them with a privy mark, by reason the witches have confessed themselves that the Devil doth lick them with his tongue in some privy part of their body before he doth receive them to be his servants; which mark commonly is given them under the hair in some part of their body whereby it may not easily be found out or seen, though they be searched; and generally so long as the mark is not seen to those which search them, so long the parties that hath the mark will never confess anything—therefore by special commandment this Agnes Sampson had all her hair shaven off in each part of her body, and her head thraven² with a rope according to the custom of that country, being a pain most grievous which she continued almost an hour, during which time she would not confess anything until the Devil's mark was found upon her privities; then she immediately confessed whatsoever was demanded of her, and justifying those persons aforesaid to be notorious witches.

Item, the said Agnes Tompson was after brought again before the King's Majesty and his Council, and being examined of the meetings and detestable dealings of those witches, she confessed that upon the night of All Hallow's Even last, she was accompanied as well with the persons aforesaid as also with a great many other witches to the number of two hundred; and that all they together went by sea, each one in a riddle or sieve, and went in the same very substantially with flags of wine, making merry and drinking by the way in the same riddles or sieves, to the kirk³ of North Berwick in Lothian; and that after they had landed, one took hands on the land and danced this reel or short dance, singing all with one voice:—

Commer⁴ go ye before, commer go ye;
If ye will not go before, commer let me.

At which time she confessed that this Gillis Duncan did go before them playing this reel or dance upon a small trumpet,⁵ called a Jew's trumpet, until they entered into the kirk of North Berwick.

These confessions made the king in a wonderful admiration, and sent far the said Gillis Duncan, who upon the like trumpet did play the said dance before the King's Majesty, who, in respect of the strangeness of these matters took great delight to be present at their examinations.

Item, the said Agnes Tompson confessed that the Devil being then at North Berwick kirk attending their coming in the habit or likeness of a man, and seeing

that they tarried over long, he at their coming enjoined them all to a penance, which was that they should kiss his buttocks in sign of duty to him; which being put over the pulpit bar, everyone did as he had enjoined them. And having made his ungodly exhortations, wherein he did greatly inveigh against the King of Scotland, he received their oaths for their good and true service towards him, and departed; which done, they returned to sea, and so home again.

(At which time the witches demanded of the Devil why he did bear such hatred to the King, who answered by reason the King is the greatest enemy he hath in the world; all which their [c]onfessions and depositions are still extant upon record.)

Item, the said Agnes Sampson confessed before the King's Majesty sundry things which were so miraculous and strange as that his Majesty said they were all extreme liars; whereat she answered 'she would not wish his Majesty to suppose her words to be false, but rather to believe them, in that she would discover such matter unto him as his Majesty should not any way doubt of.'

And thereupon taking his Majesty a little aside, she declared unto him the very words which passed between the King's Majesty and his Queen at Oslo in Norway the first night of their marriage, with their answer each to other; whereat the King's Majesty wondered greatly, and swore by the living God that he believed that all the devils in hell could not have discovered the same, acknowledging her words to be most true; and therefore gave the more credit to the rest which is before declared.⁶

Touching this Agnes Tompson, she is the only woman who by the Devil's persuasion should have intended and put in execution the King's Majesty's death, in this manner:

She confessed that she took a black toad and did hang the same up by the heels three days, and collected and gathered the venom as it dropped and fell from it in an oyster shell, and kept the same venom close covered until she should obtain any part or piece of foul linen cloth that had appertained to the King's Majesty, as shirt, handkercher, napkin, or any other thing; which she practised to obtain by means of one John Kerrs, who being attendant in his Majesty's chamber, [she] desired him for old acquaintance between them to help her to one, or a piece of, such a cloth as is aforesaid, which thing the said John Kerrs denied to help her to, saying he could not help her to it.

And the said Agnes Tompson by her depositions since her apprehension saith, that if she had obtained any one piece of linen cloth which the King had worn and fouled, she had bewitched him to death, and put him to such extraordinary pains as if he had been lying upon sharp thorns and ends of needles.

Moreover, she confessed that at the time when His Majesty was in Denmark she, being accompanied with the parties before specially named, took a cat and christened it, and afterward bound to each part of that cat the chiefest parts of a dead man, and several joints of his body; and that in the night following, the said cat was conveyed into the midst of the sea by all these witches sailing in their

2 Twisted.
3 Church.
4 Whoever comes.
5 Trumpet.

6 [Rosen's note.] In her very next statement Agnes admits to 'old acquaintance' with an attendant in the King's chamber, who may well have accompanied the king on his journey to Oslo. Since privacy in a mediæval castle was only a relative term and depended mainly on the curtains of a four-poster bed, James's surprise is a trifle naive.

riddles or sieves as is aforesaid, and so left the said cat right before the town of Leith in Scotland.

This done, there did arise such a tempest in the sea as a greater hath not been seen; which tempest was the cause of the perishing of a boat or vessel coming over from the town of Burnt Island to the town of Leith, wherein was sundry jewels and rich gifts which should have been presented to the now Queen of Scotland, at Her Majesty's coming to Leith.

Again it is confessed, that the said christened cat was the cause that the King's Majesty's ship, at his coming forth of Denmark, had a contrary wind to the rest of his ships then being in his company, which thing was most strange and true, as the King's Majesty acknowledged; for when the rest of the ships had a fair and good wind, then was the wind contrary, and altogether against his Majesty. And further, the said witch declared, that his Majesty had never come safely from the sea, if his faith had not prevailed above their intentions.

Moreover, the said witches being demanded how the Devil would use them when he was in their company, they confessed that, when the Devil did receive them for his servants, and that they had vowed themselves unto him, then he would carnally use them, albeit to their little pleasure, in respect of his cold nature; and would do the like at sundry other times.

From **William Shakespeare, King Henry VI Part One** (c.1590), ed. Edward Burns (London: Thomson Learning, 2000), pp. 259–61 (5.2.22–50)

This early history play of Shakespeare (though whether he was the sole author is frequently disputed) concerns the Hundred Years War, in which England struggled to hold on to its possessions in France. One of the play's most striking characters is the woman known to history as Joan of Arc, a country girl who claimed she had a mission, given her by the saints who appeared to her, to drive the English out of France. Though she was eventually defeated, imprisoned and executed, she began with some remarkable military victories. In 1920 she was canonized. In the play she is Joan La Pucelle (the virgin; Puzel in this edition). Far from being the saint of tradition she gets her power from evil spirits: the play is just patriotic enough to suggest that if the English are defeated it must be by diabolical intervention. Far from being a virgin, she is sexually promiscuous. The connection of black magic and sex returns in *Macbeth*.

In the extract given here, Joan, defeated in battle, calls the devils to her aid. To that extent she anticipates Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits in 1.5 (see *Key Passages*, p. 142). Like Lady Macbeth she commits her body to the powers of evil. But while Lady Macbeth's spirits remain unseen, Joan's spirits appear on stage; and while the inhuman energy Lady Macbeth shows after her invocation suggests that in some way it has worked, Joan's spirits proclaim by silence their refusal or inability to help. Like Macbeth, but more simply and directly, Joan is betrayed by the evil powers she trusted. All this makes this scene a forerunner of some key ideas in *Macbeth*: it can be taken as an example of Shakespearean recycling, in which motifs from early work reappear transformed. In particular, the externalization of evil in the appearance of stage devils is replaced by an evil

that is more alarming because it is unrealized and unseen. As in *Nerves from Scotland*, the character of Joan also plays on the audience's anxieties about women, sex and witchcraft, particularly when they appear in combination.

Alarum. Excursions. Enter JOAN Puzel.

JOAN

The regent¹ conquers and the Frenchmen fly.

Now help, ye charming spells and periapts,²

And ye, choice spirits that admonish me

And give me signs of future accidents.³

You speedy helpers, that are substitutes

Under the lordly monarch of the north,⁴

Appear, and aid me in this enterprise.

24
Thunder.

Enter Fiends.

This speedy and quick appearance argues proof

Of your accustomed diligence to me.

Now, ye familiar spirits, that are cull'd

Out of the powerful regions under earth,

Help me this once, that France may get the field.

30

They walk, and speak not.

O hold me not with silence over-long:

Where I was wont to feed you with my blood,

I'll lop a member off and give it you

In earnest⁵ of a further benefit

So you do condescend to help me now.

35

They hang their heads.

No hope to have redress? My body shall

Pay recompense if you will grant my suit.

40

They shake their heads.

1 The Duke of York, leader of the English power.

2 From Burns's note: 'Written charms, inscribed on a bandage and wrapped around a part of the body which they were deemed to protect.'

3 Burns.

4 The traditional location of evil. In *Paradise Lost* Satan assembles his rebellious forces in the north of Heaven. It is probably no coincidence that *Macbeth*, the Shakespeare play with the strongest sense of evil, is set in Scotland.

5 Promises.

