

Scots Word of the Season: ‘Besom’

By Maggie Scott

besom *n.* term of contempt for a person, especially a woman

The Scots word *besom* shares much of its early history with an English cousin of the same name which typically designated a broom or other domestic tool for sweeping. However, in modern contexts north of the border, it most often refers to a woman — in less than glowing terms. Rather quaintly, the early twentieth-century definition provided by the [Scottish National Dictionary](#) adds that a *besom* may be ‘a woman of loose character’, reminding us that not only words themselves, but social judgements regarding language and society change over time. *Besom* can also be applied as a rather dubious term of endearment, for example in the phrase ‘wee besom’, which might be used of a mischievous young girl.

But what of the older history of the word? In Old English, as documented in the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) (OED), a besom was ‘a bundle of rods or twigs used as an instrument of punishment; a birch’. The sixteenth century *Burgh Accounts of Edinburgh* document quite plainly — without apology to readers from more enlightened times — the official purchase of besoms with which people were publicly beaten, in one instance ‘three lads’, and in another ‘three tinkers’. From the Middle Ages until at least the nineteenth century, in both English and Scots, a *besom* could designate ‘an implement for sweeping, usually made of a bunch of broom, heather, birch, or other twigs bound together round a handle; a broom’ (OED). More poetically, a *besom* could signify something ‘that cleanses, purifies, or sweeps away’. The version of the Bible authorised by King James VI of Scotland (and I of England) in 1611 speaks of sweeping the kingdom of Babylon with ‘the besome of destruction’ (Isaiah XIV. 23), and mountaineer John Tyndall once wrote of witnessing a ‘cloud-besom’ grandly sweeping the Alps (1862).

The earliest recorded use of the word as a disparaging term for a woman is found in the Reverend John Jamieson’s [Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language](#) (1808), where he intriguingly notes that ‘*Bysim* is still used as a term highly expressive of contempt for a woman of an unworthy character’. This

suggests a longer history for this usage of the word, but on this point our major historical dictionaries remain silent, perhaps because of the taboo nature of words for prostitutes or promiscuous women. The *Scottish National Dictionary* notes that the development of meaning from *besom* 'broom' to *besom* 'woman' (on the basis that the woman were typically seen as wielding such domestic objects) 'has plenty of parallels — e.g. *oar* and *bat* for *oarsman* and *batsman*', and that in German, the related word *besen* has been used 'as a contemptuous name for a maid-servant or young girl', so it may be that we need look no further for an explanation of the term's etymology.

That said, there is also an intriguing similarity between *besom* and Older Scots *bysyn* 'monster', which comes from Old Norse *bysn* 'marvel, portent'. As an etymologist, I recognise that this may be pure coincidence, but as a woman, I am quite charmed by the notion that the negative meaning of *besom* might derive from something strong, powerful, and marvellous.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*