# The John Gau of Malmö Prize: ‘Superstition, Science, and Sin in Nineteenth-Century Scottish Literature’

## By Sara Gaarn-Larsen

**Introduction:**

In the 1530s, John Gau was a Lutheran exile from then-Catholic Scotland living in Malmö, at that time still a Danish city. It was here that he published *The Richt Vay to the Kingdom of Heuine*, one of the earliest books to be written in vernacular Scots. The John Gau of Malmö Prize honours this long connection by recognising and encouraging the study of Scottish literature in the Nordic region.

In the winter term of 2017, the topic set for the Researching Literature course within the English Studies programme at Malmö University was Scottish Literature since 1800. In connection with this, the editors of *The Bottle Imp* kindly agreed to read the best student essays submitted at the end of the course, and to choose a winning entry for publication.

Congratulations to Sara Gaarn-Larsen, and thank you to the editorial board of *The Bottle Imp*!

Dr Henry King,
Malmö 2018

**Superstition, Science, and Sin in Nineteenth-Century Scottish Literature**

Nineteenth-century Scotland was a period of continued innovation and reorientation from the developments of the Scottish Enlightenment in the century prior. Throughout the late eighteenth century, new discoveries in the sciences inspired a surge of intellectual discussion which established new ways of thinking

about the world that led individuals to question long-held absolutist beliefs regarding theology. As for literature, while pastoral visions of the Kailyard gained increasing popularity, as well as critique for its sentimental depictions of Scottish life, the nineteenth-century Gothic genre told tales of religion, superstition, and duality heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideas. In the works of James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson, recurring themes of religion and superstition appear that act as a window for reflection upon a not-so-distant past. This essay aims to explore the attitudes surrounding religion and superstition in post-Enlightenment Scottish literature of the nineteenth century, as well as what historical factors influenced them, through an analysis of such themes in James Hogg's novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and the works of 'Thrawn Janet' and the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson.

To properly discuss the literature of Hogg and Stevenson in a historical context, it is first necessary to provide insight into Scotland's history of superstition and the shift in thought that occurred during the period of the Scottish Enlightenment. Scotland has a long history of religious conflict and tension, beginning with the Reformation of the sixteenth century when the country rebelled against the wealth and extravagance of the Catholic church and turned to Calvinism, a creed which demanded stricter moral codes of behavior, discipline, and worship. Calvinist doctrine exacerbated superstition and the Kirk preyed on old folk-beliefs as a method of asserting authority and maintaining power, resulting in the Scottish witch-hunts occurring between roughly the mid-sixteenth and early-eighteenth centuries.[1]

However, superstition and mysticism regarding witches existed long before the introduction of Calvinism into Scottish society. Before the sixteenth century, the supernatural was either fully accepted or tolerated with skepticism as part of every-day village life. Witches only developed demonic associations when late medieval Continental theologians began pondering the connections between village witchcraft and the Devil. This led to the passing of the Witchcraft Act in 1563, making witchcraft a capital crime. Later, James VI propelled these belief systems forward by writing and publishing his book *Daemonologie*, a dissertation on black magic and demonology, in 1597. With these developments, witchcraft became seen as something malevolent and threatening, especially during periods of national crisis, and with a particular emphasis on the moral corruption of

female sexuality. The Reformation therefore had an exponential impact on not just Scottish theology, but also on the Scottish people's general attitude towards magic and superstition.[2]

The Great Witch-Hunt of 1661-2 marked the last serious witch-hunt panic in Scotland. The primary reason why is debated, but historian Brian Levack suggests that it wasn't purely the result of superstitions towards witches shifting, but more of a judicial issue, with concern over whether individuals could be proven guilty with so little proof in court. However, as Lizanne Henderson contributes, this could also be a result of philosophical skepticism influencing legal opinion.[3] Whatever the case, to some extent attitudes were beginning to change in the late seventeenth century.

In the eighteenth century, the Scottish Enlightenment further challenged long-held beliefs about the world; philosophers like David Hume elaborated on Locke's ideas of empiricism and skepticism which postulated that truth can only be known through one's 'impressions', or sense experiences, and therefore all claims of knowledge and ideas should be readily questioned.[4] With the Enlightenment came new ways of thinking regarding notions of truth — however, this isn't to say that all Enlightenment ideas were immediately or enthusiastically received. Hume's beliefs, when applied to a religious context, result in what some claim to be essentially atheism, while many of his contemporaries were horrified by his ideas, others argue against this opinion.[5] Hume's views were extremely radical, especially since his was a time of severe religious persecution by both the church and the state. Not only did his views on empiricism question many of the dominant belief systems of the time, but in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume further postulated that morality was a natural response of human nature, rather than governed by reason; this implied that humanity did not need religion to maintain a moral civil society. Hume believed that if anything, religion was likely to do more harm than good when relied upon for moral or social stability, as discussed in his work *The Natural History of Religion*.[6]

James Hogg was born in 1770 and grew up on folk tales and songs of supernatural beings. He and his family were church-goers: his father was an Elder of the church, but his grandfather was reported as being the last man to converse with fairies.[7] We begin to encounter Hogg's literary work in the early

nineteenth century, a period where Scotland's religious identity and the degree of its influence is currently debated by historians. While most would agree that a distinct religious heritage prevailed, many also argue that the age of industrialization severely weakened the Church's role in the lives of the working class.[8] However, newer evidence suggests that Church membership did not abruptly decline and that secular tendencies only began having an apparent role in society in the late nineteenth century, with religious values still holding a great deal of influence in the culture.[9]

The late nineteenth century was the era of Robert Louis Stevenson, born in 1850, with his literary career beginning in the 1880s. Even so, Stevenson's youth was also heavily influenced by Calvinist ideologies. His parents were both strictly religious, though it was his nurse, Alison Cunningham, a devout Calvinist, who had the strongest influence, being cited as rousing nightmares in Stevenson with her religious stories. Cunningham's views surely had an impact on Stevenson's childhood, but he later came to reject his family's religion.[10]

The religious upbringings of both Stevenson and Hogg inspired many of the works that they came to produce, which wove religious and superstitious elements of Scottish history throughout. Through an analysis of them, similar themes arise in these contexts, but with closer inspection, so do important differences that offer varying reflections upon Scotland's history and society.

Hogg's 1824 novel, *The Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, has been argued by literary critics as being a satire on, or criticism of, the history of Calvinism in Scotland.[11] In *Justified Sinner*, Hogg tells the tale of two brothers: the first, George, is raised by his carefree and religiously lax father, while the second, Robert, is left to a disciplined upbringing by his religiously zealous mother and her mentor, Reverend Wringhim, who preaches radical antinomian Calvinist beliefs. This leads Robert to believe that he is predestined by God for salvation and thereby unbound by the moral codes of civil society. When the brothers finally meet as young men, the bitterness between them that has cultivated over the years, and Robert's belief that it is his duty to rid the world of sinners, eventually leads to the murder of George by Robert. The story is split into two parts, with the first narrated by 'the Editor', and the second presenting a manuscript written by Robert, found in his grave. Robert's manuscript presents

the same story, but with the addition of the character Gil-Martin, the Devil on Robert's shoulder that encourages him to continue on his crusade and progressively leads him down a path of madness.

*Justified Sinner* thereby offers a dramatic representation of religious fanaticism. However, rather than a blatant criticism of Scotland's history with Calvinism, the novel appears more likely to act as a reflection on the slippery slope of a moral core fully dependent upon religion, just as Hume postulated in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *The Natural History of Religion*. In one passage, Robert states, 'then he had the art of reconciling all, by reverting to my justified and infallible state, which I found to prove a delightful healing salve for every sore'; the irony being that although Robert believes himself to be justified by God, his fanatic self-assurance of his moral infallibility is what ultimately leads him to his demise. Even when Robert occasionally doubts the morality of his actions, he stops himself from considering it further because of his belief in antinomianism: 'Had I not been sensible that a justified person could do nothing wrong, I should not have been at my ease concerning the statement I had been induced to give on this occasion … but, as to the tardy way of giving false evidence on matters of such doubtful issue, I confess I saw no great propriety in it from the beginning'. In this way, *Justified Sinner* is a reflection of Enlightenment thinking just as much as it is a dramatic representation of religious fanaticism, without it needing to be specifically Calvinist.

While Hogg's *Justified Sinner* presented a pattern of religious fanaticism leading ultimately to moral decay and ruin, Robert Louis Stevenson's short story 'Thrawn Janet' paints a different picture of Enlightenment thinking gone wrong. 'Thrawn Janet' begins with the young minister Murdoch Soulis first arriving to the small town of Ba'weary, fresh out of university. Immediately there is skepticism over both his youth and education, as the townsfolk claim that the 'Lord had left the college professors to their ain devices', and that time would have been better spent 'wi' a Bible under their oxter an' a spirit o' prayer in their heart'.[12]

Not long after arriving, Soulis recognizes the need for a servant at his manse and sets his sights on Janet M'Clour. The townsfolk are horrified by his decision, as they believe Janet to be a witch, but Soulis rebukes their suspicions and employs her anyway. Unfortunately for Soulis, it is revealed that Janice is in fact possessed by the Devil, and he is forced to exorcise the demon from her, turning her to ash

in the process. Disillusioned and deeply disturbed, Soulis degrades from a hopeful, forward-thinking young minister to the 'severe, bleak-faced old man', that the townsfolk come to fear.[13] 'Thrawn Janet' thereby presents an image of rural Scotland and its religious superstitions, while offering a reflection upon the fears surrounding Enlightenment thinking in rural communities.

As noted earlier, Stevenson was heavily influenced by his nurse's tales of religious superstitions growing up, but he also relied upon real life accounts from the Scottish witch hunts to supplement the short story.[14] Professor Coleman Parsons suggests that 'Thrawn Janet' may have been directly inspired by the case of Janet Corphat, a woman accused of witchcraft and killed by a mob in 1705.[15] Corphat was dragged through a river by a mob until half dead, and similarly, Janet M'Clour is put to trial by the townsfolk attempting to drown her to 'see if she were a witch or no, soom or droun'.[16] Only, Janet M'Clour was luckier with her minister's skepticism. Parsons notes that 'Soulis' initial freedom from superstition was woefully nontypical of his times'[17], therefore while 'Thrawn Janet' may not hold up to perfect historical accuracy, Stevenson's modernization of the tale by contrasting the period with Enlightenment rationalism presents a unique representation of Scottish history that continues the nineteenth-century Gothic theme of post-Enlightenment historical reflections of religious horror. However, we do see Hogg's pattern in *Justified Sinner* turned on its head with the rejection of superstition leading to the eventual decay of Soulis, rather than the decay of Robert stemming from a blind fanaticism over it.

Another common theme that appears within the context of religion in the works of both Hogg and Stevenson is the representation of duality in which a character grapples with their darker impulses personified as a doppelganger. In *Justified Sinner* the theme of duality first appears through Hogg's representation of Robert and the Devil, but there are multiple levels of duality exhibited throughout. In the novel, the Devil first appears overtly as an external presence in the form of Gil-Martin, who is described by Robert as physically appearing as a mirror image of himself. Robert exclaims, "What was my astonishment on perceiving that he was the same being as myself!" to which Gil-Martin responds, "You think I am your brother … or that I am your second self. I am indeed your brother, not according to the flesh, but in my belief of the same truths". Hogg maintains the ambiguity regarding Gil-Martin's representation, with Robert eventually questioning if Gil-

Martin is a part of himself, as seen in the correspondence, “If this that you tell me be true … then is it as true that I have two souls, which take possession of my bodily frame by turns”, with Gil-Martin responding, “We are all subjected to two distinct natures in the same person”. The duality of Robert is thereby explored, with Gil-Martin appearing apart from Robert as his doppelganger, his evil supernatural double, or as a part of him, as a delusion of his subconscious mind manifested from an upbringing of alienation, misguided hatred, and fanatical superstition. With this line from Gil-Martin, we also see Hogg reflecting on the duality of human nature as possessing both aspects of good and evil.

A second layer of duality appears in the contrast between the Editor’s accounts of the story and Robert’s memoirs; as explained by Professor Ian Duncan, ‘Hogg divides the novel’s narration between an editor, who compiles an antiquarian, objective, third-person history according to Enlightenment canons, and the justified sinner, Robert Wringhim, whose early eighteenth-century memoir, dug up with his corpse, is exhibited as a specimen of “the rage of fanaticism in former days”‘.[18]. The Editor’s rational and objective, but cynical, depiction of events is a stark contrast to Robert’s increasingly scattered memoirs, which offers a dual critique on both figures (Mackenzie 25), emphasised by the brief appearance of Hogg as himself in the novel, silently shaking his head at the whole ordeal.[19]

In Stevenson’s work, the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, similar themes of duality to those depicted in Hogg’s *Justified Sinner* appear. The story follows the character of Utterson as he tracks the mystery surrounding Dr. Jekyll, a respected scientist, and his relation to the malevolent character of Mr. Hyde. The style is similar to *Justified Sinner* in that it offers multiple accounts of the same story: one by the narrator, one by the character Lanyon, and finally one by Dr. Jekyll, who describes the events leading up to his suicide. From Jekyll’s account, we learn that he created a potion in order to separate the good and the evil parts of his nature because he believed that when together, each inhibited the other with resulting feelings of shame on the side of the good and restraint on the side of the evil. He explains,

> *If each [nature …] could be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path … no longer exposed to disgrace*

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The duality of Jekyll and Hyde is therefore revealed as each persona fights for absolute autonomy. Although *Jekyll and Hyde* deals with similar concepts of duality as *Justified Sinner*, they are different in the origins of their primary characters' doppelgangers. While in *Justified Sinner* the doppelganger develops out of an inflated sense of religious justification, *Jekyll and Hyde* instead sees one develop from the desire to suppress certain aspects of oneself, revealed in the example of Jekyll describing his desire to suppress the shame that he feels regarding what could be considered more sinful aspects of his nature. The theme of repressing one's perceived sins in fear of social condemnation certainly isn't a new concept in religious society, but Stevenson's acknowledgement that both sides of human nature should be allowed to exist through his representation of the self-destructive consequences that stem from such repression is certainly a rebellion against social norms inspired by a history of pious conduct.

Within the works of Hogg and Stevenson, common themes of post-Enlightenment thinking regarding Scotland's history with religion and superstition begin to form a broader understanding of the changing streams of thought, and the ideas that influenced them, occurring throughout the nineteenth-century. Scotland's continuous reflection and critique of its own history contributes to, and in many ways, continues to maintain its national identity and heritage. As Stevenson wrote, 'For that is the mark of the Scot of all classes: that he stands in an attitude towards the past unthinkable to Englishmen, and remembers and cherishes the memory of his forebears, good and bad; and there burns alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the twentieth generation'.[21] It is necessary to continue to uncover and reflect upon the past for opportunities of growth as a society, but also for the purpose of meditation upon events and ideas that shaped our modern identities.**Introduction:**

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