

Fantasy and Humour in Scottish Witchcraft Literature

By Julian Goodare

Robert Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*, published in 1791, is the most famous Scottish poem about witches. In it, Burns narrates the drunken Tam's comical encounter with a witches' sabbat. The pacing is adroit, the grotesque imagery memorable. It's a Romantic work, with the spooky ruins of Alloway Kirk at its centre; Burns was asked to write the poem to accompany an illustration of the ruins. But I'm a historian, and I'm not going to say so much about the poem as literature. I want to use *Tam o' Shanter* to introduce older Scots writings about witches, to point up some possible links and contrasts, and to place them in their historical setting.

Fictional witches today are often positive characters, so it's worth noting that Burns's witches are definitely wicked. They pursue Tam with malevolence. Leading the chase is Nannie, the young witch with the 'cutty sark' (short chemise) who has caught Tam's lustful attention. Burns carefully tells us that Nannie will later work many malefices on 'Carrick shore', killing cattle, sinking boats and damaging crops. It isn't all amusing.

Burns's most explicitly horrifying images, however, aren't about harm that the witches commit. In this Burns differs from earlier accounts of the witches' sabbat. Earlier demonological accounts sometimes had witches killing babies and boiling their fat in cauldrons to make magical ointments. Tam sees two 'wee unchristn'd bairns', but we're not told that the witches have killed them. They certainly haven't killed the 'thief, new-cutted frae a rape [i.e. rope]', the next item to meet Tam's gaze. In the original version Tam also saw 'Three Lawyers' tongues turn'd inside out, / Wi' lees seam'd like a beggar's clout'. Burns later removed these lines to avoid offending lawyers, but there was a long tradition of jokes about the sins of lawyers and about lawyers in hell. The witches have collected these gruesome but humorous items in order to enliven their dance. Earlier witches didn't do that.

Burns wrote at a time when the supernatural had become a matter for fiction and

for Gothic-horror entertainment. He didn't believe in witches; no educated person believed in them in 1791. Burns himself was widely read. He knew that his patrons saw him as a rustic 'Heaven-taught ploughman', but he managed this image carefully. He wrote about couthy topics, but he didn't affect ignorance about matters on which he was knowledgeable. He knew what he was doing. *Tam o' Shanter* is pure fiction - and fantasy fiction at that.

But could one write pure fiction about witches at a time when people still believed in them? Let's go back to an earlier period, when witchcraft belief was normal even for the elite. Burns himself pointed back in time when he headed *Tam o' Shanter* with a quotation from Gavin Douglas: 'Of Brownies and of Bogillis full is this buke'. This came from Douglas's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* into Scots verse, a major work published in 1513. Douglas's much-quoted phrase about brownies and bogles (bogles are frightening spectres) comes when Aeneas descends into the underworld.

To pursue the question of fictional witches - or not - I turn not to Gavin Douglas but to his celebrated contemporary, William Dunbar, who produced witty poems at the court of King James IV. Dunbar gives us one of the earliest mentions of witches in Scottish literature. In 'Lucina schyning', a poem written in about 1504, he includes the following verse:

*Undir Saturnus fyrie regioun
Simon Magus sall meit him and Mahown,
And Merleyn at the mune sall him be bydand,
And Jonet the wedo on a busum rydand,
Of wytchis with ane windir garesoun.*

(Below the fiery orbit of the planet Saturn, Simon Magus [wicked New Testament necromancer] and Mohammed will meet him. Merlin will wait for him at the Moon. So will Janet the widow, riding on a broomstick with an uncanny troop of witches.)

These witches appear as part of a burlesque nightmare vision, shown to the poet by Dame Fortune. At the outset of the poem, Fortune predicts that the poet will never prosper until the events she shows him come to pass. Then she shows him the nightmare vision:

An abbot will clothe himself with eagle's wings and fly high in the sky in the form of a monstrous griffin. There he will meet a she-dragon and copulate with her, and they will beget the Antichrist prophesied in the Book of Revelation. The abbot and his companions will then descend to earth, encountering Simon Magus and others on their way, and preach the coming domination of Antichrist and the imminent end of the world.

The poet wakes from his nightmare and ruefully reflects that he will, indeed, never prosper, since it is so unlikely that an abbot will fly.

The joke is that there really was a flying abbot: John Damian (or Giovanni Damiano), an Italian alchemist, who was employed at James IV's court. The king made him Abbot of Tongland to enable him to finance his alchemical projects, hoping in vain that Damian would produce gold for the royal coffers. Dunbar, who frequently lamented his own lack of royal patronage, was bitterly jealous of Damian's success with the king, and wrote this poem against him. To associate one's rival with wicked people like Simon Magus, or witches, was a standard piece of character assassination, though Dunbar carried it off with unusually mordant wit.

Oh yes, and about the flying. One of Damian's exploits was to jump off the battlements of Stirling Castle with a pair of feathered wings. He announced that he was going to fly to France, but he landed in a midden and broke his leg. According to John Leslie's account of the fiasco, Damian explained his failure by saying that he had mistakenly included some hens' feathers in the wings, since hens' feathers 'covet the midden and not the skies'. This was in line with the contemporary intellectual understanding of flight, which relied on the interrelated properties of the four elements as originally established by Aristotle. Birds were thought to fly because their feathers were 'airy', and thus feathers had an 'affinity' with the air that actually carried the birds upwards. But not hens - oops!

Dunbar also wrote another poem against Damian, narrating a satirical version of his flight in more detail. In this, Damian succeeds in becoming airborne but is ignominiously pecked out of the sky by angry birds. The fact that this account is not a literal one has led some scholars to suggest that Damian's attempt at flight never actually occurred. Leslie's history describes it but is not strictly contemporary (Leslie was born in 1527), so should be treated cautiously.

However, there are other well-documented accounts of ill-fated attempts at flight elsewhere in Europe, so there is nothing inherently implausible in the story of Damian's leap from the battlements of Stirling. It seems more likely that Dunbar would satirise a real event than invent a fictional one - and that his satire would take the form of humorous exaggeration.

So how should we understand 'Jonet the wedo on a busum rydand'? Not only is she probably our earliest named witch in Scottish literature, but she's flying on a broomstick. In 1504 this was something of a new idea. The intellectual idea of witches who conspire with the Devil had arisen gradually in Europe in the fifteenth century. Before then, flying witches were a folkloric idea that intellectuals had scoffed at. Now, however, intellectuals gradually concluded that witches could really fly, or rather, that invisible demons could and did really carry them. One notorious work arguing this was the *Malleus Maleficarum* ('Hammer of Witches'), written by the German Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Krämer and first published in Speyer in 1486. It was through works like this that the idea of witches killing babies and performing other horrifying rites was circulated. But the *Malleus*, though it endorsed the reality of witches' flight, didn't mention broomsticks; these were probably folkloric. Quite how Dunbar thought that his courtly audience would regard Janet on her broomstick isn't certain. Most likely he wanted them to laugh at her as superstitious nonsense. His whole nightmare vision was burlesque, stuffed with comical incongruities.

Our next fictional witches come from another court poet, Alexander Montgomerie, in about 1580. His so-called 'Flyting with Polwart' was a humorous contest of mutual insults with his antagonist Patrick Hume of Polwarth, performed at the court of the young King James VI. Montgomerie gives a brilliantly mocking description of Polwart's alleged begetting by an elf and an ape, who abandon their deformed offspring in horror. The 'weird sisters' - not witches, but fate women like the Norns - discover the infant Polwart, exclaim at his ugliness, and curse him elaborately. Then a troop of flying witches arrives, all flying on differently monstrous vehicles, and dedicate him to Hecate and Pluto in the name of the Devil. And so on. Here we see a group of flying witches once more placed in a nightmarish but still comical fantasy.

Jacqueline Simpson, in a detailed analysis of Montgomerie, has pointed to his 'relaxed, sportive' tone, which she contrasts with Dunbar's 'dark and sinister'

imagination.¹ She suggests that fear of witchcraft might have faded in the period between the two writers – that is, between about 1504 and about 1580. That fear would revive only with the so-called ‘North Berwick’ witchcraft panic in 1590, when witches were thought to be conspiring against King James VI and his new bride Anne of Denmark.

The shift in tone after 1590 is important, and I’ll come back to that. But I’m not convinced about the difference between Dunbar and Montgomerie. Dunbar is *usually* a bit gloomy, not just when he’s writing about witches. Montgomerie, though he has many moods, is rarely gloomy. And Dunbar is rarely *just* gloomy; his wit and energy keep bursting through, even when he’s complaining about something. Dunbar and Montgomerie strike me as more similar to each other than Simpson allows.

So I’d like to draw a conclusion here that points to a similarity between the two poets, and indeed to the general approach taken to witches by pre-1590 writers. Their amusing witch stories tell us that neither Dunbar nor Montgomerie, nor the other writers at that time, were *afraid* of witchcraft. They *believed* in witchcraft, or at least had no reason to disbelieve, but they didn’t think that real witches were important. Witches were topics for humorous fantasy fiction.

We find a similar tone of knockabout humour in part of the pamphlet *Newes from Scotland* (c.1591), published during the North Berwick panic itself in order to bring the news of King James’s defeat of the witches to a London readership. The author, probably James Carmichael, minister of Haddington, relates some horrific scenes; much of his story is a bit like *Tam o’ Shanter* without the wit or the humour. But Carmichael also tells a lighter tale about one of his featured witches, the schoolmaster John Fian. Fian lusts after a young woman and plots to use magic to seduce her: he will obtain three of her pubic hairs and work his magic on her through them. But the young woman’s mother, who is also a witch, discovers Fian’s plot and arranges for him to receive three hairs from a young cow instead. So the cow falls in love with Fian and insists on following him wherever he goes. This slapstick nonsense turns out to have been lifted from a tale told by the ancient Roman author Apuleius; it’s just as much fiction as *Tam o’ Shanter*, though it pretends to be true. In a pamphlet about witchcraft prosecutions, it’s also *logically* nonsense. If the young woman’s mother is a witch, shouldn’t she be prosecuted? But no, she’s the heroine of the tale.

Overall, though, *Newes from Scotland* isn't a humorous work. The lighter material is an interlude in a mainly grim story. And it's all supposed to be a true story. This story became even grimmer as witch-hunting took hold from the 1590s onwards. All over Scotland, for the next century or so, the courts prosecuted witches, sometimes in a trickle, sometimes in large groups during bursts of panic. Some were accused of bewitching their neighbours, while others were accused of making pacts with the Devil and attending nocturnal sabbats; often both charges were made. Witches were prosecuted throughout Europe, but the Scottish authorities' quest for godliness and moral purity led to a witch-hunt that was particularly intense.

During this grim period, some lighter and even humorous literature was produced in Scotland, such as Sir Thomas Urquhart's translation of Rabelais. However, witches themselves disappeared from Scottish fiction. Montgomerie was reprinted, but not imitated. His and Dunbar's comical, fantasy visions of witches proved unsustainable at a time when real witches were being burned at the stake.

Eventually, though, the fires of witch-burning started to die down. The last of the really big national panics ended in 1662. There were smaller panics for the rest of the century, but by the early decades of the eighteenth century the fear of witches was declining. So humorous, fictional witches could once more take to the skies. In 1720, Allan Ramsay produced a cheerfully couthy drinking song, 'Up in the Air', which began:

*Now the Sun's gane out o' Sight,
Beet the Ingle, and snuff the Light: [Make up the fire]
In Glens the Fairies skip and dance,
And Witches wallop o'er to France.*

Ramsay thus treated witches simply as a matter of popular superstition, along with fairy belief. Such superstition was no longer dangerous nor indeed particularly reprehensible; it was simply part of the vernacular culture of Scotland, which could now be appreciated, even by the elite, for enjoyment. In 1736, the British parliament finally repealed the English and Scottish laws against witchcraft, replacing the crime of witchcraft with a new crime of 'pretended witchcraft', punishable by fines or short imprisonment. If you pretended to be a witch you were obviously fraudulent, because witchcraft didn't exist.

Ramsay and Burns are similar in the way in which they employ witchcraft as a means of entertainment. And they both have a consistently demotic tone: witchcraft is popular culture, even down to the folk tunes - 'hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels' - to which the witches dance in Alloway Kirk. Dunbar and Montgomerie are just as entertaining, but more mixed in their tone. Janet the widow on her broomstick is lower-class, but she associates incongruously and bathetically with the grand necromancer Simon Magus. Some of Montgomerie's material is folkloric, but some is from classical mythology - not only Hecate and Pluto, but also the whole structure of his witchcraft section comes from Ovid. Elite and popular culture are constantly intertwining, sometimes separate and sometimes mixed.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this survey of fantasy and humour is the hole in the middle of it. Before 1590, and again from 1720 onwards, witchcraft could be entertaining. Between those two dates, though, the anger, fear and hatred generated by witch-hunting took precedence. About two and a half thousand people died at the stake, and it wasn't funny.

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