

<https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.3.04>

Piotr Spyra

University of Łódź

A review of Emma Wilby's The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland (Sussex University Press, 2010)

Approaching a book that deals with a single witchcraft case in more than six hundred pages, one may wonder whether poring over such an opus magnum devoted to a single individual's life and testimony will in the end pay off. That the book in question deals with none other than Isobel Gowdie and her sensationally vivid, viscerally sexual and altogether mind-boggling narrative featuring a host of fairy characters, an imposing Devil figure and an astounding plethora of various malefic acts is invitation enough, but one may still feel a certain anxiety as to whether the author's effort will succeed in the illumination of a single fascinating case only or rather bring to light important insights that might eventually lead to far-reaching general conclusions.

Emma Wilby's book *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* certainly delivers on both these levels. Above all, it is an excellent walkthrough of the four confessions recorded in Auldearn in 1662 in order to secure a trial commission for Gowdie. Wilby, who discovered the original documents, provides us here with a reliable edition of the text, her whole book serving as a thorough and informed commentary on the countless questions raised by the dozen-or-so pages of Gowdie's tale. These questions range from the general to the minutely specific. Did Isobel actually believe she could work the magic she described? Did she really think she witnessed toads ploughing a field? Would the notary have interfered with her words in preparing the official documents? Why would she have mentioned fairy animals and described how they made her feel? Wilby unravels the enigma, and finishing the book, one has a sense of clarity and order, seeing how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together and how the meshing of folklore, demonology and personal experience may have produced the story of Isobel's encounters with the Devil as we have it.

In almost 250 pages, Part One outlines the story behind the documents, managing both to explore the mechanics of false confession and to produce suggestive evidence for one of the chief interrogators having an extramarital affair and to probe his psychology in the context of his role in the Gowdie case accordingly. Character portrayals that Wilby offers succeed in leaving a lasting impression in the reader's mind, and one may easily appreciate the possible tensions between Isobel and her minister, Harry Forbes, or her landlord, the Laird of Park. At the same time, this part of the book gives the readers a grasp of the methodologies useful in approaching witchcraft confessions in general. The role of the notary, expectations of the interrogators, and the motivations of the accused to produce or to refuse to give a voluntary confession are all addressed, and a rule-of-thumb method for establishing the extent of Isobel's personal contribution to various passages in the documents is proffered that may be far from a sure-fire method of analysis but certainly facilitates the understanding of the creation of the confessions.

All in all, this section of the book could easily function as a stand-alone volume of substantial academic worth, and one may wonder what else there is to say about Isobel after the exhaustive analysis finally comes to an end.

Part Two introduces the notion of shamanism, which allows Wilby to return to the text of the confessions and reread them in a new light. The argument is that Isobel may have experienced visionary trances in which she would have participated in malefic activities, involuntarily or otherwise. A whole new vocabulary is introduced in order to elucidate Gowdie's mode of engagement with the spiritual plane of reality, and referring to notions such as subtle bodies or stock bodies and to shamanism at large definitely drives the message of the book home, allowing the readers to make sense of some of the most obscure passages in the confessions and to see order in the confusing patchwork of cultural references that constitute them. This is undoubtedly the greatest strength of the book. The final section of the volume then turns to the Devil figure and attempts to establish whether Isobel may have willingly signed away to him her soul. Part Three includes an informative section about spiritual covenanting, a major influence on Gowdie's imagining of the demonic pact, thought-provoking reflections on the place of the Devil and his relationship with God in the popular imagination, as well as an exploration of mutual dreaming, where Wilby delves into areas more readily associated with parapsychology than historical research.

The chapter on meshing or meeting dreams and dream-cults is where the reader may experience a sense of unease. Emma Wilby explains that she realises very well the idea of individuals having the same dreams and meeting in them lies beyond the ken of contemporary science and may be seen as bordering on telepathy, but she is quick to add that this is only so due to misconceptions arising out of limited funding, which in turn only perpetuates the notion that there is something academically suspect about the matter, thus driving the vicious circle of the lack of funding for what is considered parapsychology on and on. One may excuse the author for this infelicitous justification and play along, for the argument she makes is compelling, but it is worth bearing in mind that by this point, for more than 500 pages the book has been proffering more and more controversial theses about Gowdie, always backing up the claims with several strong arguments for each point made. Rhetorically powerful, Wilby's writing style has the potential to enthuse and sway away readers, and the final chapter is no exception. And when one comes to agree with Wilby's suggestion that a dream-cult was at work in seventeenth-century Auldearn and that Isobel and her accomplices met in their dreams to work *maleficium* upon their victims of choice and that they interacted in these visions with a being they knew to be the Devil himself, one gets dangerously close to the paranoid end of the spectrum where Isobel emerges as, from her own epistemological perspective at least, a proper witch guilty of the charges laid against her. The rhetoric of the book is so convincing that one may easily come to accept Wilby's claim that the interrogatorial documents were not so much a result of false confession as a genuine admission of self-proclaimed devil-worship and ill-intentioned visionary activity. Nevertheless, reaching this conclusion entails taking mutual dreaming seriously, and once the readers realize the concessions to scientific rigour they have made, they may just as well look back and reflect on the equally convincing arguments in the previous chapters and question these as well. The author citing dreams of herself and her husband as an example of meshing dreams certainly does not help in this respect.

Whatever the validity of the book's ultimate thesis, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* is still a significant study for a number of reasons. It is certainly important for folklore studies, for it suggests that fairy encounters may have a visionary element at their core in at least some cases. It

also brings together a number of topics of interest for the literary scholar: the intersection of the demonic and the folkloric in popular ballads, the characterisation of fairies in popular belief and literature, and the methodological aspects of using “the huge wealth of oral literature collected in the nineteenth century . . . as a guide to the sixteenth and seventeenth-century popular worldview” (469). Those interested in theology will also appreciate the breadth of speculation on the possible approach to, and understanding of, the Devil figure and on some of the finer aspects of Protestant doctrine in this particular corner of Scotland and the way they might have shaped Gowdie’s beliefs. The book’s interdisciplinary potential can easily electrify both scholars and general readers, and Wilby’s excellent edition and explication of the idiosyncrasies of the confessions may help to elevate them to the rank of a canonical text, not just within folklore studies but also in the history of British literature. If Emma Wilby’s contention that Isobel was an oral performer is right and the confessions were, partly at least, the product of (however subconscious it may have been) poetic creation, then one may actually wonder whether the extraordinary scope of cultural references and the sheer wildness of the narrative does not merit for them a place in anthologies of British literature.