

The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland

EMMA WILBY, 2010

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Emma Wilby's book *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* is a comprehensive work. In order to throw light on the Auldearn woman Isobel Gowdie's four witchcraft confessions, dated 13 April–7 May 1662, Wilby draws on wide-ranging research, and discusses a variety of hypotheses. The book is divided into three parts. Part I, 'The Construction of the Confessions', is centered around Isobel Gowdie, in terms of her life and environment, and the confessions as textual constructions as well as their semantic content, particularly fairy belief. The first part of the book also contains a new transcription of the original documents, which have recently been rediscovered after almost 200 years. During this period, historians were reliant on an accurate, but more modernized language version of the confessions published in 1833 by Robert Pitcairn in *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland*. Part II of Wilby's book, 'Shamanistic Perspectives', exemplifies the practice of shamanism in different parts of the world and suggests a relation between shamanism, fairy belief and witchcraft. In part III, 'The Demonological Elements', different interpretations of the devils and their relations to fairy men are discussed, as is folkloric elements and dark shamanism, witches' covens and dark dream cults, and church teaching and fireside covenanting. Wilby's conclusion is that Isobel Gowdie might have been a member of an Auldearn shamanistic dream cult, and that the practices of the cult were rooted in spirit-group traditions of folkloric origin. The members of

this cult might have shared visionary culture-patterned experiences and believed that they in this way magically altered the world around them.

Emma Wilby's book is an elaborate study of a number of witchcraft-related issues, in particular shamanism. A very wide definition of shamanism, dealing with epistemology as well as interpretation and rationale, is used by Wilby. A shaman is understood as a 'magical practitioner who enters into an altered state of consciousness characterized by the experience of visionary phenomena' (p. 252). Shamanism is defined by the practitioner's experience themselves or their spirits 'traveling to other realms [or places] at will, and interacting with other entities to serve their community' (p. 252). The author bases her arguments on international historical research, as well as anthropology, religious science, psychology, and philology, particularly discourse analyses. Her discussions take the reader thousands of years back in time, and to far-away cultures, for instance Corsica, Sicilia, Hungary, Turkey, Siberia and Native America, frequently referring to, among others, Eva Pócs and Carlo Ginzburg. After this long journey we finally go back to Scotland and Auldearn. This movement forms a clear structure of the book.

Emma Wilby's book raises several central questions related to witchcraft research, one of these being the distinction between experience and belief. Wilby assumes that the confessions were based on experienced witchcraft. This is a debatable point. However, the author's argumentation is consistent within the framework of her study, which should be acknowledged. Yet it is also worth mentioning that little attention is paid by Wilby to the learned demonological doctrine influencing witchcraft trials all over Europe. Since oral transmission meant that learned demonological ideas were well known among Scottish peasants by 1662, Wilby's interpretation remains open to challenge.

During close-readings of the confessions, Wilby gives interesting reflections on the basis of separate words and charms, arguing that the linguistic richness of the text is due to Isobel Gowdie's alleged position as an oral performer in the local community. By tentatively exploring the extent to which the interrogator's questions are echoed in the suspect's confession, the author suggests possible wordings to fit the 'answers' given, and she deserves praise for trying out different linguistic models. Wilby argues convincingly that Isobel Gowdie must have known several of the folkloric elements of her confession before the interrogation, thus minimizing the weight of demonological interrogational influence. The question of the merging of learned demonological ideas and traditional folklore is interestingly touched upon in the book, and could probably fruitfully have been more exhaustively discussed.

The uniqueness of Isobel Gowdie's confessions is strongly emphasized in this book. It is true that within a Scottish context these confessions are particularly detailed and rich since many of the Scottish witchcraft confessions have been lost, or are fragmentary. However, it should be mentioned that there exist other witchcraft confessions preserved in Scotland, not least those documented by the database of the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft, which contain similar elements to Gowdie's. The occurrence of fairy lore in Isobel Gowdie's confession is emphasized by Wilby, who argues that fairy belief was a link between shamanism and witchcraft. It is true that fairy elements in witchcraft confessions occur in the Scottish material more generally, but it should be noted that only 38 out of 3212 Scottish witchcraft cases in the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft database contain references to fairy belief. In that respect Gowdie's confession does seem more unusual in the Scottish context, though not unique. However, it should also be noted that the phrase 'in the devil's name', used by Gowdie in relation to spell-casting was very common in wide areas of Europe, and not an unusual feature of Gowdie's confessions in terms of the wider, European context.

By her frequent use of verbs such as ‘speculate’ and ‘assume’ when setting forth hypotheses, Emma Wilby underlines the fact that the interpretation of historical documents is based on a choice of perspective. This is a positive quality of the book, underlining the need for historians to be humble when it comes to understanding witchcraft documents written down some 400 years ago. Wilby has written an interesting book based on exhaustive reading of the literature related to shamanism, and it can be recommended to all readers interested in witchcraft research. As a whole, the book shows an original and whole-hearted attempt to interpret Gowdie’s confessions in the context of shamanism. However, it might be that Isobel Gowdie still keeps some of her secrets.

Liv Helene Willumsen
University of Tromsø, Norway
liv.willumsen@uit.no