

# The supernatural in early modern Scotland

Edited by  
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Alexander Runciman, *The Witches Showing Macbeth the Apparitions*, c.1772  
(National Galleries of Scotland).

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# The ninety-nine dancers of Moaness: Orkney women between the visible and invisible

*Liv Helene Willumsen*

Ninety-nine beings – fourscore and nineteen – danced in the fields of Moaness in the Orkney island of Hoy some years before 1643. Or so said Barbara Bowndie, who confessed to having been one of these dancers during her investigation for witchcraft. But it is not entirely clear that the other dancers were human. This chapter subjects her striking tale to detailed analysis.

The number of dancers draws attention to magic numbers in folk belief, while the dance itself is part of the lore – learned or popular – of witches' meetings. During Barbara's interrogation, several other learned ideas about witches and the Devil were introduced through leading questions from the interrogators. However, it is likely that the story of the Dancers of Moaness had been circulating in the local community for many years, and that Barbara knew it through oral transmission before her interrogation began.

The questions will then arise how learned ideas about human beings' relations with the Devil interacted with the ideas of the common people, and to what extent this interaction influenced the development of witchcraft trials. The Orkney women, who frequently struggled to maintain daily existence, were realistic in many senses. However, their beliefs also displayed an invisible and unrealistic thread, which the image of the Dancers of Moaness brings to the fore. This chapter explores the tension between the down-to-earth attitude of early modern Orkney women and the much more dangerous, but still obviously popular, dance with what seem to have been invisible spirits. I will approach the court records of Barbara's case by close reading, trying to understand how Barbara and her female associates in Orkney looked upon supernatural powers as these emerged in a narrative spanning visible and invisible worlds.

Barbara Bowndie lived in Kirkwall in Orkney. She was accused of witchcraft in November 1643, having been denounced by another woman during some linked witchcraft trials, where names of accused persons

witchcraft persecution in Orkney. The origins of Barbara's case involved Elspeth Culsetter, who had been tried for witchcraft and burned in 1642, and Marjorie Paplay, denounced by Elspeth, tried and acquitted in 1642, but still under suspicion of witchcraft when Barbara was accused. Barbara was asked several times to denounce Marjorie as a witch.<sup>1</sup>

Barbara's formal interrogation took place before the presbytery in November 1643. Two ministers were ordained to question her with the moderator, and it appears that any of the other ministers could also question her if they wished. Before this, and five days after her imprisonment, Barbara had been examined 'in private' by two brethren – one minister and one ruling elder – though no written record was made of this at the time.<sup>2</sup> It later emerged that, during this informal questioning, Barbara had been offered strong ale in order to induce her to confess. What she had confessed during this informal questioning was then used against her during the formal interrogation – but, as we shall see, Barbara's answers in the second episode were very different from those in the first.

During Barbara's formal interrogation before the presbytery, she was accused upon nine points, all of them related to the Devil, use of demonic witchcraft or witches' meetings. But even if demonological notions were emphasised during Barbara's interrogation, folkloric beliefs came to the fore in her answers. The interweaving between these two spheres of ideas is the focus of this chapter, with particular attention to ideas about witches' meetings and dances.

Barbara's investigation came to a standstill when she retracted her previous informal confessions during the formal interrogation. The presbytery decided to request a warrant from the privy council to use torture. Two brethren asked the sheriff to retain Barbara in prison until the privy council's answer arrived, and he agreed. Her name was next mentioned in the presbytery minutes on 3 April 1644, stating that the presbytery would wait for more information about her from Shetland. The sheriff once again promised to retain her in prison until this information arrived. After this point there is nothing more to be found in the records about Barbara, and her ultimate fate is unknown.<sup>3</sup> But her remarkable ideas remain for us to analyse.

The discourse unfolding during Barbara's nine-point formal interrogation gives interesting information about the questions put to her, and her answers.<sup>4</sup> However, it also leaves out some pieces of information. The idea of a witches' meeting, the dance, will be central to my analysis. This issue comes in as point eight of the interrogation. However, I would first like to mention the appearance of the Devil in some earlier points of Barbara's interrogation, as it is clear that the interrogators brought this figure on stage from the beginning.

In point one, the interrogators asked Barbara about something she had said about the Devil during her earlier informal questioning: 'concerning her

cornes should be blown in the ayre by him;<sup>5</sup> Barbara now answered that she had said this 'for weaknesses of her owne flesh, and for the feare of her [life].'<sup>6</sup> She was not accused specifically of having confessed to a pact with the Devil, but she knew that it was imperative to deny any relation to the Devil.

Barbara was next asked, in point two, 'if she upon occasion of necessitie in Zetland, did condescend to serve the Devill.' She gave an indirect answer, saying, 'that being travelling with ane unhoven childe four yeeres [i.e. an unbaptised child aged four] and being fainted by the way she became speechless, and so remained for the space of 24 hours, and was sore tormented.' Here the interrogators were again trying to obtain a confession of the demonic pact, but she avoided this. The interrogators then reminded her that she had previously explained this experience of being 'tormented' by saying that 'people said, that she had been with the Farie'. But Barbara now answered that she 'saw no Farie'. She did not want to have her accident in Shetland connected with the fairies, and when she was asked about the Devil, she chose a strategy of trying to lead the interrogation in another direction.

The interrogators continued to circle around the Devil. In point four, Barbara was asked 'in particular, concerning the Devill his apparitions in diverse shapes upon the Ball-Ley, and his having carnall copulation with Marjorie Paplay at that tyme, as a man hes adoe with a woman.' Here, the Devil is linked to sexual intercourse with a woman at the Ball-Ley, a sports field for ball games. Barbara avoided confirming her earlier statement by claiming that she had been brought strong ale 'which made her speake these wordes'. It is clear that she had described the Devil's various likenesses during the informal questioning, as well as mentioning the names of other women including Marjorie Paplay.

Point five repeats the same question as point four, as Barbara was asked

whither she knew it to be of veritie, that she had seen the Devill ly with Marjorie Paplay on the Ball-Ley? Replied that she knew nothing of it, but such as she was tryed upon, And being asked what that meant to be tryed upon? Replied that the young co[m]missar John Aitkin had said to her, tell mee about Marjorie Paplay what ane woman she is, and thou shall never want they [thy] Life.

Thus it was one of the interrogators who had introduced this theme, promising her that she would not be executed. However, Barbara now said that she 'spake more then enough of the said Marjorie at that tyme, and of sundrie other honest women whom she had named', adding that 'she never knew no ill to these women'. Points one, two, four and five show the interrogators' focus on the Devil and their pressure for denunciations.

Then in the last point of the recorded interrogation, point nine, the focus returned to Marjorie Paplay, the suspect of most concern to the

concerning Marjorie Paplay? *Ans*: he spired about the hand of the dead man, that lay above her bed head and stired about her aill; But spired he not, if the Devill lay with her upon the Ball Lay; neither yet spired he about any of her sisters, nor of Elspeth Baikie.' Clearly, the main intention here was denunciation of other women. However, the Devil was still connected to the events at the Ball-Ley.

Point eight of Barbara's interrogation is the crucial one for the present analysis. In it, the interrogators returned to the witches' meeting, the dance in 'Munes' (Moaness). Barbara was asked

to tell if she was one of the fourscore and nynteen that danced on the

Links of Munes in Hoy? At first denied, but thereafter confessed that she said it, which being conferred [i.e. compared] with her first words in saying that it was but sixe yeeres, since the Devill deceived her, is found to varie in her speeches, for it is elleven yeeres, or thereby, since the dancers in Munes were first spoken of.

The interrogators were thus still circling around witches' meetings. Clearly, Barbara had described the dance at Moaness during the informal questioning, and had said that she was one of the dancers. However, the interrogators perceived a contradiction in her story, and felt it important to clarify their view. Indeed we ourselves need to understand the 'four-score and nynteen that danced on the Links of Munes in Hoy' (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1 Looking over the Bay of Creekland (foreground) to the outjutting headland of Moaness, Hoy, Orkney.

rendered in the minutes and what are the interrogators' contributions? The core element was that 'fourscore and nineteen people danced on the Links of Moaness'. This is all we are told explicitly, but there was presumably more in the full version of the story. It seems likely that the dance had been said to have happened on a single occasion. A date was probably given, as the interrogators often asked about dates. Probably the reason for the dance would have been given – something to do with magic, as this is what would lead the presbytery to assume that the dance was a witches' sabbat. We do not know, from the records, the magical elements that might have been in question, except the number ninety-nine. Presumably the original story would have said more about who the dancers were. We do not know whether all the dancers were humans, even if some of them were said to be women. The rest might have included fairies or other nature spirits.

The story about these dancers seems to have been told in the local community during the past eleven years. The information about this is fragmentary but highly suggestive. It is recorded that it was around eleven years 'since the dancers in Munes were first spoken of'. The phrase 'were first spoken of' shows that the first speaking about the dance was not done by Barbara and that the interrogators had previously heard about the dance from other sources; it probably also shows that they had heard about it more than once. In 1642 the presbytery had noted that a previous 'deposition' by 'Elspeth Culsetter the witch' had been given in June 1633, and that there had been an accusation against Marjorie Paplay in March 1632.<sup>7</sup> At the time of Barbara's interrogation in November 1643, these events were indeed 'eleven yeers, or thereby, since', and it may well have been from Elspeth or Marjorie that the presbytery first heard about the Dancers of Moaness. During the informal questioning Barbara was presumably asked about witches' meetings, to which she answered that she was one of the fourscore and nineteen who danced on the Links of Moaness in Hoy. Whether Barbara herself was prompted by the interrogators matters less once we recognise that the story of the dancers arose in the community.

The presbytery believed that the dance of the fourscore and nineteen was a witches' sabbat, but they themselves were making this connection between the dance and the Devil. Having done so, they compared the time span of eleven years with another date given by Barbara, namely that it was six years 'since the Devil deceived her'. By combining these two periods of time in one sentence, the interrogators connected the occasion when the Devil deceived Barbara to the story of the dancers in Moaness. Their reasoning was: she said that she was one of the fourscore and nineteen dancers, but she also said that she made a pact with the Devil six years ago. So there was a contradiction, because Barbara was not yet a witch eleven years ago, when the dance was said to have taken

contradictory dates were impossible.

We, however, can see that Barbara had inserted herself into a pre-existing story about the Moaness dance, simply by confessing that she herself had taken part in it. During the preliminary questioning, she told about these dancers, that she participated in the dance, that the Devil deceived her, that Marjorie Paplay had carnal copulation with the Devil on the Ball-Ley, and that four other named women took part in the dance. The interrogators pressed for confirmation of answers to questions of demonological nature. The narrative about the Dancers of Moaness is an instance of the demonisation of folkloric beliefs during witchcraft interrogations.<sup>8</sup>

One further possibility should be discussed. When John Aitkin asked about Marjorie Paplay having intercourse with the Devil at the Ball-Ley, he may have posed this question because this theme had been part of the original story of the dancers. It is clear that during the informal questioning Barbara had said that this carnal copulation had taken place at the Ball-Ley. However, it is not known whether the link between the Ball-Ley and Moaness was established during that narration. Moreover, the Ball-Ley was a separate place from Moaness, as we see when Barbara later confessed 'that the Farie appeared unto her beside the Ball-Ley coming out of Essinquo', which is in St Andrews parish, east of Kirkwall. Unfortunately the records do not give us enough information about the original story of the dancers, the story the peasants would have known. My interpretation is that the story of Moaness and the story of the Ball-Ley most likely were combined only during the interrogation itself.

The image of the ninety-nine dancers in Hoy is a complex one. Here we find beauty in language expressed in the most serious situation a woman could find herself in at this time – as an accused person in a witchcraft investigation. The image is connected to the supernatural in the sense that the narrative about the dancers contains marked unrealistic features – in which we may catch a glimpse of the beliefs of common people in an ordinary Orkney village in the middle of the seventeenth century. The story of the Dancers of Moaness is a meeting place between visible and invisible elements. The islands, the shores and the sea formed a backdrop that all people in Orkney knew. The outward and visible frame was all ready for a pastoral celebration. The invisible element had to come from within, from fantasy, oral telling, the range of ideas that had reached the island and formed the imagination of people living there, a melting pot of old and new notions and beliefs.

Barbara's confession about witches' meetings is a poetic one. Such an image, as it is told in a confession in a witchcraft interrogation, is one out of many examples I have seen in witchcraft confessions in court records from many countries, which draws attention to an astonishing

and wonderful world. When such imagery is included in a discourse that may ultimately serve to seal the confessing person's own death sentence, it serves a purpose that is far from poetic. The beautiful image becomes an omen of death. Demonological ideas have entered the field of oral discourse in a local community and have been retold before the presbytery in a witchcraft interrogation.

Moaness is on the island of Hoy, near a crossing point from the mainland. The word 'Links' denotes a sandy and grassy area by the coast. Laura Paterson writes that the question of boundaries seems to have been in the awareness of early modern people's belief in fairies as well as their belief in witchcraft:

In the minds of the confessing Scottish witches there seems to have been little to differentiate between the boundaries that separated mortals from fairies and those that separated mortals from witches. It was believed the liminal space that was marked by boundaries, which were often represented by remote wilderness or even physical boundaries like gates, separated the known world from the dangerous unknown world ... The confessing witches appear to believe that witches inhabited the very same supernatural landscape as supernatural beings; and, as such, were almost inseparable from fairies in this respect. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many of the accused witches believed it would be appropriate to hold their secret witches' gatherings on the boundaries of this supernatural landscape.<sup>9</sup>

Barbara could have seen the dance of Moaness as occurring in such a supernatural landscape. She had been to Shetland, and it had been told locally that she had been with the fairies there. Maybe Moaness could be seen as such a boundary connection, a landscape that on one hand was inviting and beautiful, so the story could depict an idyllic pastoral scenario. Yet, on the other hand, it was placed in a marginal area, where an encounter between mortals and supernatural powers was possible.

Relationships with nature are an essential feature in witchcraft trials. Judicial authorities insist on the women confessing their pacts with the Devil, for by means of their alliance with evil forces, women are able to manipulate the universal ruler and through him also elements of nature. In the seventeenth century, people had a perspective of nature and of their own capacity to influence natural processes that is alien to modern-day society. Julio Caro Baroja stresses the existence of an outlook where the dividing line between physical reality and the imagined mythical world was more obscure than it tends to be today. 'Between what physically exists and what man imagines, or has in the past imagined to exist, there lies a region in which the evidently real and the imaginary seem to overlap.'<sup>10</sup> This was the setting for witches' activities. Why did people believe in allegations about what was physically impossible? By directing

our attention to a relationship with nature that was prevalent in the seventeenth century, we might find an answer.

In his book *The Idea of Nature*, R. G. Collingwood presents three different kinds of relationship between man and nature in the Western world: that of the Greeks, of the Renaissance and of our time. In his view, the transition between Greek and Renaissance perspectives, each of which is relevant for my source material, takes place sometime in the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

The Greek perspective of nature is organic, based on an analogy between man and nature. Man is microcosm, nature is macrocosm. Nature is alive and in constant motion and, since it is an intelligent organism, organised. Nature is permeated by a spirit that is an integral part of it, not a separate entity. Such an outlook evokes the likelihood that we can manipulate nature by means of magic. Man's spirit may in theory control that of nature. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century interest in magic and astrology demonstrates that an organic outlook lingers even when a more mechanistic and naturalistic outlook has started to supplant it.<sup>12</sup> Witchcraft confessions serve as examples of this.

Judicial authorities reflect views that coincide with a Renaissance perspective on nature. Body and soul are separate entities. This applies equally to man and to nature. A central precept of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cosmological movement is that laws of nature reflect an intelligence that is detached from nature: that of the holy creator and lord. Since witches defy God and ally themselves with the Devil, disasters descend upon the world to punish us, through God's will. This transition from one perspective of nature to another is a prerequisite for the new academic concept of witchcraft. Seventeenth-century officialdom has implicitly accepted the new outlook, whereas the common people still retain their old relationship to nature. This point of view is supported by my study *Trollkvinne i nord*.<sup>13</sup> It is likewise supported by the Norwegian folklorist and witchcraft scholar Bente Alver.<sup>14</sup>

What first draws the attention to magic in this story is the number ninety-nine. It has its outset in the number three, which is the first odd-numbered prime number, frequently used in fairy tales and other traditional tales. The number three times three, giving nine, is also frequently found in traditional tales, for instance that the hero should be whipped three nights in a row by three trolls.<sup>15</sup> Joyce Miller finds in her study of numbers in Scottish folk magic that nine was a reinforced number, being three times three. The use was always positive. However, nine was not very common, and she did not find any instances of ninety-nine.<sup>16</sup> In these ways of thinking, ninety-nine may be a reinforced nine. In his history of mathematics, David Smith states: 'The beginning of an appreciation of the wonders of mathematics is closely connected with the beginning of religious mysticism.'<sup>17</sup> Man wondered at the peculiarity of

geometric forms 'and at the strange properties of such numbers as three and seven, the two primes within his limited number realm that were not connected with his common scales of counting'.<sup>18</sup> We cannot be sure that a number expressed as 'fourscore and nineteen' was recognised as 'ninety-nine', but it was certainly one less than a hundred and thus still an unusual and perhaps magical number.

How could this image fit in with the lives of ordinary women in a small rural community? What role could ideas of magical power play as part of daily rural life? The story about the Dancers of Moaness has many down-to-earth and realistic features. The visible in the story of the Dancers of Moaness is the landscape that we still see before our eyes, the hill, the closeness to the sea. This might be what the women living on Hoy, or looking across to Hoy from the larger island of Mainland, saw every day. However, it could also be related to the boundaries where land and sea meet and where you never can catch the line of the horizon – it lies beyond what is possible to reach. The lives of Scottish women have been examined in a witchcraft context by Lauren Martin and Emma Wilby, among others.<sup>19</sup> It was a hard life, with hard work and uncertainty with regard to necessities like clothes and food. These features are reduced in the story about the Dancers of Moaness, and we get a range of invisible elements coming up – invisible in that they cannot be seen, like the landscape, they cannot be proved, they can only be entangled in a tale.

As I interpret the narrative of the Dancers of Moaness, the visible elements are taken care of by Barbara. She and other Orkney women are the ones who know about an inviting landscape in Moaness, where such a dance might have taken place. But she and the other women are also the tellers of the tale, the ones who know how to insert features of an invisible kind into a story, features appealing to hidden and illegal deeds, appealing to that part of human life that could only live in a tale: temptations, danger, break with an accepted moral code. It may be an escape from harsh daily life, but it may also be an escape from restrictions on human feelings imposed by regulations and admonitions. For those who are the tellers of the story, the story might have been a sign of a desire for freedom and free space. However, the records show us that tales of this type ought to be kept among the women themselves. They care for each other. From point five in the minutes of Barbara's interrogation, it seems that the misery she might cause for other women has become problematic for her. She refuses to denounce Marjorie Paplay and other women. We know that other women came to Barbara in prison, begging her that she should not name any names. When Barbara concludes her answers, underlining these women's innocence, it comes as a sigh from the heart.

The invisible features in a narrative like that of the Dancers of Moaness were regarded as far from innocent when interpreted in contexts that were not the women's own. And it is in this context, the minutes from

the presbytery interrogation, that we as readers encounter the story of the dancers today.

Common people in the seventeenth century lived in oral communities. Only a few people could read and write. An oral discourse differs in many ways from a written one and leads to the development of certain structural features in the remembrance and retelling of stories.<sup>20</sup> This has also put a stamp on court records of witchcraft trials.<sup>21</sup>

Witchcraft confessions are in a particular position between oral and written domains of expression, as has been pointed out by Elisabeth S. Cohen.<sup>22</sup> They are oral utterances, yet still written texts. Cohen writes:

Sharing an intermediate textual zone that has attracted increasing scholarly attention in early modern cultural studies, these several sorts of non-literary sources invite a comparative analysis and double modes of reading. On the one hand, they are 'documents' to be read as straightforward descriptions of the world; on the other, they are constructed texts conceived strategically to represent their speakers and negotiate more complex meanings.<sup>23</sup>

These reflections invite us to undertake a type of close reading of witchcraft records in which we pay close attention to the personal voices of the actors participating in the court proceedings. Cohen argues that it is possible to distinguish between individual persons' voices in court records.<sup>24</sup> This means that interpretation of court records must take account of the plurality of voices that make themselves heard in the documents. By using linguistic methods of discourse analysis, it is possible to listen out for the voice of the accused person. This method of reading witchcraft documents, pointed out by Marion Gibson two decades ago, makes it possible during analysis of witchcraft documents to concentrate precisely on the interaction between learned ideas and the ideas of the common people and in fact find fruitful answers in the sources.<sup>25</sup> It also makes it possible to argue, as Malcolm Gaskill has done among others, that distinct voices heard in courtrooms during witchcraft trials may give us a glimpse of the mentality of the time.<sup>26</sup>

The narrative about the Dancers of Moaness has been transmitted among the populace in Orkney within an oral sphere. The oral accent is strong in the records. There are clear features of orality in the discourse rendered, for instance its closeness to spoken language, a factor mentioned by Walter J. Ong as an orality marker.<sup>27</sup> There are several instances of insertions of direct discourse in passages otherwise given in indirect discourse, either uttered by Barbara or by a commissary. We see this in Barbara's uttering, 'God forgive you that beares over much with them'. An oral accent also comes through in her double negative, 'she never knew no ill to these women'. Other orality markers pointed out



by Ong are additive sentence structures, aggregative language elements, redundancy, closeness to the human life world and an agonistic (confrontational) tone.<sup>28</sup> Closeness to the human world is heard in this sentence, which points to the actual remedies that have been offered her: 'In respect that offer had been made unto her by a Ledder of a tow to hang her selfe, or of a knyfe to stick her selfe, quhilk would be ane easier death for her, then to be burnt'.<sup>29</sup> An agonistic tone, striving for effect, as well as a strong oral accent is heard in the phrase 'thou shall never want thy Life'. Several of these features are documented in the minutes of Bowndie's case. Point five in the formal interrogation also has marked features of orality. An additive sentence structure is clear; an attempt is made to draw a timeline, which has importance for the main argument about drinking ale, and direct discourse in the present tense is inserted into the narrative.

In point eight in the formal interrogation, it emerges that oral narratives with demonological content had been told by peasants in the area for many years. It is said that the story about a witches' gathering, the Dancers of Moaness, had started to be told in the area eleven years ago. Looking at Barbara's answers, it is clear that she knows the contents of the story of the Dancers of Moaness from years back. We hear a story that has been told and retold.

Much of this chapter has been about folk interaction with the natural environment. We have the survival of animistic conceptions of the landscape, and the notion that there could be threatening forces lurking at the sites of dances or ball games. These threatening forces might be understood as fairies or nature spirits, or even as the Devil or demons. When Barbara was pressed to denounce Marjorie Paplay, she had no difficulty in telling a story of sex with the Devil set in one of these magical locations.

The type of story we hear told about the dancers falls into a category that in Norway is called 'sagn' (a traditional tale dealing with inexplicable events) and that claims to have happened in reality. It is a genre, often with dark and frightening contents, where the credibility of the story is enhanced by facts – dates, personal and topographical names and descriptions of landscape and events; in the story about the Dancers of Moaness, the factual strand, so to speak, is the landscape, the grass fields – all the visible elements that tie the story to the ground on which the dance has taken place. Then there is the dark part of the narrative, the copulation with the Devil in such a place nearby, the Ball-Ley.

Barbara's interrogation is a meeting place between ideas related to traditional folk belief and learned ideas of demonology. When a group of women tell the story of the Dancers of Moaness among themselves, it might have been entertaining, but Marjorie Paplay's alleged copulation on the Ball-Ley is a shocking and frightening story.

For readers today, the way the story is presented in the presbytery minutes is important. Stuart Clark cites Julio Caro Baroja's idea that the problem of witchcraft was ultimately a conceptual one: 'His solution was to concentrate not on what witches did, but on what they were *said* to do; the reality of witchcraft was a consequence of beliefs and embodied in language'.<sup>30</sup> Caro Baroja concluded that there was a radical dissimilarity between the alleged witches' idea of reality and ours. He argued that

the beliefs of those who experienced witchcraft ought to be given priority in any attempt to understand its role in their lives. Beliefs about 'reality', likewise, did not exhaust what witchcraft meant to these people; but again, we can agree that their attitude to it must have developed largely on what they felt to be possible and impossible in the real world.

Clark maintained in 2001 that Caro Baroja's advice had been largely forgotten in witchcraft research: 'It is almost as if the experiences of those immediately involved became the last things to consider, not the first – their "point of view" the least significant component, not the most'.<sup>31</sup>

Seen in this light, I believe that Barbara Bowndie's story about the dancers in Moaness gives us a significant glimpse of what Caro Baroja emphasised, namely, in Barbara's words, contemporary beliefs embodied in language. Using the approach of Caro Baroja and Clark, the reality of witchcraft as a possible experience there and then, Barbara's acceptance of the dance taking place within the well-known surroundings of Hoy, makes sense. What for Barbara seemed possible in the real world, is echoed in the story in the description of visible elements, the dance in the landscape.

Still, it remains to be explained how Barbara depicted what was impossible in the real world, namely the beliefs that had to do with the hidden, with wild forces, possibly with sentiments in her own body. Barbara's experience of mutism in Shetland might possibly be interpreted as a visionary experience, a signal that she herself believed that she had experienced encounters with spirits.<sup>32</sup> Such spirits could be evil and threatening powers. These experiences belong to the unreachable in real life; they can only find their place and their embodiment in the language of the story. However, Barbara's attitude towards the tale demonstrates her belief in it, as there is no distancing device to be found. Her attitude is serious, and the story has been told in the community as if it might in fact have happened. Laura Paterson argues that when witchcraft suspects were questioned, it 'gave the accused witches the opportunity to weave their own beliefs and traditions into the framework dictated by their elite interrogators'.<sup>33</sup> Barbara Bowndie's belief in her own 'reality' is something that it is only possible for us to grasp through her words rendered in the minutes. This makes her story valuable for scholars today struggling to understand the mentality of people in days long past.

## Notes

- 1 Liv Helene Willumsen, 'Seventeenth-Century Witchcraft Trials in Scotland and Northern Norway' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2008), pp. 165–6.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–7.
- 3 Liv Helene Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 189–90.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 178–90.
- 5 Orkney Library and Archive, Kirkwall, CH2/1082/1, Orkney presbytery minutes, 1639–46, p. 254. Subsequent quotations concerning Barbara are all from pp. 254–7 of this document. I would like to thank Diane Baptie for help with the transcription.
- 6 The manuscript is damaged, but 'life' is likely here.
- 7 Orkney Library and Archive, CH2/1082/1, p. 203. Minutes are not extant before 1639.
- 8 On this, see Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2001), pp. 106–17.
- 9 Laura Paterson, 'The witches' sabbath in Scotland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 142 (2012), 371–412, at p. 393.
- 10 Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. Nigel Glendinning (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964), p. 13.
- 11 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965).
- 12 For changing attitudes to astrology, see Jane Ridder-Patrick, 'Astrology and supernatural power in early modern Scotland', Chapter 8 this volume.
- 13 Liv Helene Willumsen, *Trollkvinne i nord* [Witch in the north] (Tromsø: Høgskolen i Tromsø, Avdeling for lærerutdanning, 1994), pp. 68–9.
- 14 Bente Alver, *Mellem mennesker og magter* [Between human beings and forces] (Bergen: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2008), pp. 265–73.
- 15 Ørnulf Hodne, *Det norske folkeeventyret: Fra folkediktning til nasjonalkultur* [The Norwegian folk-tale: from popular poetry to national culture] (Oslo: Cappelen, 1998), pp. 43, 63, 75, 172, 169, 188.
- 16 Joyce Miller, 'Cantrips and Carlins: Magic, Medicine and Society in the Presbyteries of Haddington and Stirling, 1600–1688' (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1999), pp. 283–6.
- 17 David E. Smith, *History of Mathematics*, 2 vols (1923; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1952), I, p. 16.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Lauren Martin, 'The witch, the household and the community: Isobel Young in East Barns, 1580–1629', in Julian Goodare (ed.), *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 67–84; Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), pp. 8–17.
- 20 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 11.
- 21 Willumsen, 'Seventeenth-Century Witchcraft Trials', p. 19.
- 22 Elisabeth S. Cohen, 'Between oral and written culture: the social meaning of an illustrated love letter', in Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse (eds),

*Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800): Essays in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 181–201.

- 23 Elisabeth S. Cohen, 'Back talk: two prostitutes' voices from Rome, c.1600', *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2 (2007), 95–126, at p. 95.
- 24 Liv Helene Willumsen, 'Oral transfer of ideas about witchcraft in seventeenth-century Norway', in Thomas Cohen and Lesley Twomey (eds), *Spoken Word and Social Practice: Orality in Europe (1400–1700)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 47–83, at p. 57.
- 25 Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 26 Malcolm Gaskill, 'Witches and witnesses in Old and New England', in Stuart Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 55–80, at pp. 56, 60, 71–2.
- 27 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 37–45.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 29 'Ledder' is probably 'ladder', while 'tow' is rope. However, it is strange that the preposition 'of' is used between these words. If the expression denotes means for someone to hang themselves, one should expect an offer of a ladder and a rope.
- 30 Stuart Clark, 'Introduction', in Clark, *Languages of Witchcraft*, pp. 1–18, at p. 2.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 32 For more on visionary experience, see Julian Goodare, 'Emotional relationships with spirit-guides in early modern Scotland', Chapter 3 this volume; and Georgie Blears, 'Experiencing the invisible polity: trance in early modern Scotland', Chapter 4 this volume.
- 33 Paterson, 'The witches' sabbath in Scotland', p. 380. The following article appeared too late to be used in the present chapter, but its discussion of Marjorie Paplay provides important context for the case of Barbara Bowndle: Peter Marshall, 'The ministers, the merchant and his mother: politics and protest in a 17th century witchcraft complaint', *New Orkney Antiquarian Journal*, 9 (2020), 56–70.