

THE VISIONS OF ISOBEL GOWDIE

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Historians have always lamented the fact that it is difficult to gain insights into the inner lives of peasant women in the pre-modern period. All our records, by definition, derive from the small proportion of people who were sufficiently educated and had enough leisure time to write down their experiences. The thoughts and perceptions of the vast, non-literate majority remain largely unrecorded. Even texts celebrated for their depictions of the common people, such as *Piers Plowman* and *The Canterbury Tales*, paint vivid pictures of their rustic – and usually make – subjects from the outside.

Very occasionally a text comes along that is an exception to the norm – and the trial testimony of Isobel Gowdie is just an example. Tried for witchcraft in Auldearn in north-east Scotland in 1662, Isobel gave four long and detailed confessions which, since they first came to public attention in 1833, have been celebrated by historians and folklorists as the most remarkable of their kind to have emerged in Britain throughout the witch-hunting period. Unlike most contemporary archives, these documents give us a vivid first-hand glimpse into female peasant mentalities in the seventeenth-century.

Like all witchcraft records, the confessions are epistemologically problematic. After arrest, Isobel was probably beaten and deprived of sleep before being kept in solitary confinement for over a month. During this time, on four separate occasions, she was interrogated by local ministers Harry Forbes and Hugh Rose in the presence of at least a dozen witnesses. Hardly surprising, her testimony bears the heavy imprint of a prosecutorial mind. Anxious to convict, the prosecutors clearly had preconceptions about the kind of things witches supposedly did and plagued her with, “When did you make a pact with the Devil?” and, “When did you fly to the Witches’ Sabbath?” type questions.

Worn down by the pressures of interrogation and hoping for leniency, Isobel is likely to have told them what they wanted to hear and, in the light of recent psychological studies into the phenomenon of false confession, we can also speculate that she may have developed false memories of having performed some of the crimes alleged against her. Consequently, as you might expect, Isobel’s confessions contain much standard witch-confession fare and we find her claiming to have made a pact with the Devil, performed harmful magic and attended the Witches’ Sabbath.

But her confessions also contain a wealth of folkloric and idiosyncratic detail that could have only come from Isobel herself. Her descriptions of harmful magic, for example, are vivid and personalised. That she attempted to destroy her neighbour’s crops is standard, but the fact that in order to do so she yoked a plough with toads, made traces out of dog-grass and went “up and down” his field so that “thistles and briars might grow there” is not. Her claim to have attended the witches’ sabbath is conventional, but less conventional is her claim that while the members of her coven were waiting on by spirits clothed in yellow and grass-green who had colourful nicknames like “pickle [piss] nearest the wind”, “Thomas the fairy” and “over the dyke with it”. Like many other witches, Isobel claimed to have performed image magic, but unlike most she described in forensic detail how she kneaded the clay for the figure “very hard like rye meal” and then gave it “all the marks and parts of a child such as head, eyes, nose, hands, foot, mouth and little lips” and that “the hands of it folded down by its side like a scone or sucking pig.”

Even more remarkable are Isobel’s depictions of fairy-related activities. She claimed that she feasted under the local fairy hill with the fairy king and queen, the king being a “braw man well-favoured and broad faced” and the queen “brawly clothed in white linens”. Isobel claimed that, transformed into the likeness of a crow, she slipped into the cellars and kitchens of local castles and houses to eat good meal, steal ale from barrels and perform magical rituals. She claimed that she had travelled to the “elves’ house” where she saw “hollow and boss-backed” elf-boys whittling elf-arrow heads and, perhaps more dramatically of all, that she and her companions charmed corn straws and “windlestraws” into horses and then,

crying “Horse and Haddock in the Devil’s name!” flew through the air shooting elf-arrows at passers-by. Finally, throughout her dramatic testimony Isobel accessorised her accounts with no less than twenty-seven charms, the majority of which are unique in British folklore.

We can safely assume that these unusual and fairy-related elements came directly from Isobel. While the interrogators are likely to have asked her “Did you make a pact with the Devil?” or “Did you attend the witches’ Sabbath?” they are unlikely to have then followed such questions with “Did you have a familiar called ‘pickle nearest the wind?’” or “Did you yoke a plough with toads?” or “Did you feast with the king and queen of the fairies under the Downie Hill?” But while this unconventional content clearly makes Isobel’s confession unique, the challenge for any historian or folklorist is to try and put Isobel’s statements into some kind of context; to distil her voice out from its contaminated source and work out why she said all these extraordinary things and what she meant by them.

We have moved on from the nineteenth-century, when it was common to dismiss Isobel as mentally ill, as illustrated in the Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott’s memorable claim that: ‘It only remains to supposed that this wretched creature [Isobel] was under the dominion of some peculiar species of lunacy.’ Recent analysis suggests that most of the extraordinariness of her confessions can be attributed to the fact that her primary interrogators, Harry Forbes and Hugh Rose, possessed unusually lively and curious minds and that Isobel was herself an oral performer: these two factors converging during the interrogatorial process to generate a powerful alchemy. This explanation would account for the confessions’ vivid narrative style, wealth of detail, profusion of charms and astonishing breadth of subject matter.

It has long been suggested that Isobel may have been a magical practitioner, with her claims to have performed charms and rituals to cure fevers and broken bones suggesting that he functioned as some kind of ‘wise woman’ who, in the absence of doctors, saw to the medical needs of the poor. But more recently, comparative analysis with anthropological studies invites us to speculate that Isobel may have performed some of her magical rites through the medium of dream or trance, in a manner that can be loosely term as ‘shamanic’.

Like people in indigenous, pre-industrial cultures in all periods of history, Isobel clearly believed that the world was invisibly orchestrated by a wide array of powerful spiritual agencies that could be petitioned for aid – and that these agencies could be encountered, face to face, on a visionary level. For her, God and Christ would have played a prominent role, but they also shared their spiritual podium with a wide range of other supernatural beings, from angels, saints and spirits of the dead to a colourful array of fairies and heroes from epic tales and legends.

Isobel Gowdie’s wild claims to have flown through the air on a corn stalk, transformed into an animal, feasted in the fairy hills and performed magic in the company of fairy monarchs, folkloric hero figures and the dead, certainly seems less strange when we compare them with accounts from Siberia, Scandinavia and the Americas, where shamanic practitioners claim to have undertaken journeys to the ‘spirit world’ or the ‘world of the dead’ in order to gain magical help from nature spirits and ancestors to benefit their communities. From this perspective, we can entertain the possibility that Isobel’s more fantastic claims were memories of shamanic acts, undertaken prior to arrest in or community protection, that were retrieved during interrogation and woven, thread by thread, into the dense tapestry of folkloric belief, demonological stereotype and real-life experience that made up her complex testimony.

Isobel’s is a lone voice and in the last analysis the dearth of complimentary sources means that many of the conclusions reached concerning her confessions must remain speculative. But there is no doubt that her testimony gives us a tantalising glimpse into a largely uncharted world. While it is clear that Isobel considered herself to be a Christian, her Christianity was something we cannot recognise or understand, as it was not recognised or understood by the strict university educated Presbyterian ministers who interrogated her.

Isobel may well have attended church, sung psalms and listened to sermons one day out of seven, but she would also have worked in the fields and sat by cottage firesides listening to charms, folk tales, songs and ballads for the remaining six. These folkloric influences, as Isobel’s confessions testify, made the inner world of the seventeenth-century peasant woman

more colourful and creative than many of us might imagine. However oppressed a woman like Isobel Gowdie may have been by the manual drudgery of subsistence level living, in the arenas of magical and oral tradition she found rich opportunities for self-exploration and artistic expression.

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This article was first published in *Circle* magazine #109 (Summer 2011).

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