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## Session 2: Panel 1: Presenter 3 (Paper) -- Hunting Power through Witch Hunts in Early Modern Scotland

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“Be ane great storme: it wes feared that the Queine wes in danger upone the seas,”<sup>1</sup> read King James VI of Scotland in a letter from Lord Dingwal.<sup>2</sup> The festivities celebrating his recent marriage would have to wait, King James VI needed to ensure his new wife, Queen Anne, would arrive safely in Scotland. King James VI stayed at the Seton House, watching the sea every day for approximately seventeen days, but the Queen did not come.<sup>3</sup> The king would have to retrieve her himself. The sea threw the king’s boat back and forth and rendered him fully powerless against the waves. The King and Queen were lucky to have survived their journey, one of Queen Anne’s gentlewomen, Jean Kennedy, having drowned in the same storm.<sup>4</sup> Upon returning to Scotland, King James VI immediately ordered all of the accused witches of the North Berwick witch hunt to be brought to him, believing that the witches caused the dangerous sailing conditions, intending to kill him.<sup>5</sup> To protect himself, he tortured and executed witches, prosecuting them for both witchcraft and conspiring against the King. Although King James VI escaped the tumultuous sea, his Kingdom was no more stable: the Presbyterian Scottish church was claiming that the King should be subservient to them because their orders came directly from God. Again, King James VI relied on the current witchcraft trials to preserve his sovereignty. He refuted the Kirk’s claim to power by showing them that he took orders from God

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Dingwall, letter message to King James VI, September, 1598.

<sup>2</sup> King James the VI of Scotland is also King James I of England. For the purposes of this paper, focusing on his reign in Scotland, he will be referred to as King James VI. “King James I and VI,” British Broadcasting Corporation, accessed December 3, 2020, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/james\\_i\\_vi](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/james_i_vi).

<sup>3</sup> Seton House was the residence of King James VI’s friend, Robert, 6<sup>th</sup> Lord Seton. The house was situated by the coast, providing a clear view of ships approaching Leith. “Seton House,” Canmore National Record of the Historic Environment, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://canmore.org.uk/site/54940/seton-house>.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI’s Demonology and the North Berwick Witch Trials*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Publications, 2000), 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

as well, acting as God's soldier on earth against witchcraft. King James VI continued to prosecute witches to ensure the protection of his political power over the Kirk. Moreover, the King used this assertion of power over the Scottish Kirk to prove his eligibility as the successor to Queen Elizabeth I of England by mirroring Queen Elizabeth's role as the head of the Church of England. Thus, King James the VI supported the prosecution of witches and subsequently increased witch trials to serve as both catalyst for his political power and protection of said power.

Prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, witchcraft was deemed a pagan superstition, holding no importance in the churches of all Christian denominations. In 1486/7, theologians Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer's wrote *Malleus Maleficarum*, which argues in favor of the existence of witches by challenging all counterarguments.<sup>6</sup> They suggest that magistrates must actively work to identify, interrogate, and convict witches. In his book analyzing the *Malleus Maleficarum*, titled *The Malleus Maleficarum and the construction of witchcraft: Theology and popular belief*, Hans Peter Broedel reasons that the *Malleus Maleficarum* first established that witchcraft was one absolute evil.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Broedel suggests that it solidified the term "witchcraft."<sup>8</sup> Broedel points out that before the *Malleus Maleficarum*, "people spoke in terms of heretics, of *Maleficarum*, of monstrous female spirits—the *lamiae* and *strigae*, but not of one single composite category, "witch."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Kramer and Sprenger reveal that, at the time,

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<sup>6</sup> Malleus Maleficarum is Latin for the Hammer of Witches  
 "Malleus Maleficarum," Britannica Encyclopedia, accessed November 10, 2020,  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malleus-maleficarum>.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Peter Broedel, *The "Malleus Maleficarum" and the construction of witchcraft: Theology and popular belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 53.

destroying witches was seen as impractical. They question whether fighting against witchcraft would be impossible without using some element of sorcery.<sup>10</sup> Kramer and Sprenger explore whether it is actually legal to employ the devil's help. They question, "is it lawful to remove witchcraft by means of further witchcraft, or by any other forbidden means?"<sup>11</sup> Kramer and Sprenger ultimately reveal that it is not.<sup>12</sup> However, they uphold that the only ultimate removal of witchcraft is to eliminate all witches is by executing them. Additionally, in Wolfgang Behringer's book titled *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History*, he contrasts the skepticism the Church regarded witchcraft with during the era of the Carolingian Dynasty with the later powerful influence Christianity would have on witch trials.<sup>13</sup> There was one fundamental shift in the Christian doctrine that caused the religion to move from rejecting to accepting witchcraft as a real threat: the decision that devils could support earthly activities and use humans to commit crimes. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Catholic priest and philosopher, outlines this shift in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, written in 1259. Aquinas first establishes that humans can be controlled by spiritual forces, good or bad: he asserts, "upon suggestion of these spiritual agents there sometimes follows an effect in the lower world."<sup>14</sup> Aquinas explains that actions influenced by a spiritual agent are considered "magical," and that "magical arts [...] usually serve to bring about adulteries, thefts, killings, and like evil practices."<sup>15</sup> Thus, Aquinas argues that a spiritual being

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<sup>10</sup> Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger. *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. Montague Summers (New York: B. Blom, 1970), 328.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 102.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 197.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

which “draw[s] men away from good things, and allure[s] them to trifles, is the conduct of [a spiritual being] of a perverse bent,” establishing that witchcraft is the workings of the Devil.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Behringer unveils that Aquinas’ argument “confirmed Augustine’s semiotic theory [...] according to which magical rituals indicated a secret pact with demons.”<sup>17</sup> In Robert A. Markus’ article, *Augustine on Magic, a Neglected Semiotic Theory*, he reinforces Aquinas and Augustine’s similar stances on magic. Markus explains Augustine’s theory, stating that Augustine believed that “any power that allowed men to communicate with them, were sinister powers of evil.”<sup>18</sup> Although Aquinas and Augustine argued the same thing, Markus points out that Augustine’s theory was neglected whereas Aquinas’ became very popular. He attributes this discrepancy to the varying time period the two scholars worked in, asserting that “theorizing about [magic] was rare [...] during late antiquity.”<sup>19</sup> Aquinas’ contrasting success in the 13<sup>th</sup> century furthers the considerable shift in Christian theology that classified witchcraft as a threat. Therefore, the existence of witches had been accepted in the Christian Doctrine by 1578, when King James VI ascended the Scottish throne.

King James VI involved himself in the North Berwick witch hunts by proclaiming that the witches were directly attempting to murder the King. Although Scotland had participated in witch trials well before King James was in power, having passed the first act criminalizing witchcraft three years before King James’ coronation, the witch trials shifted their focus after King James VI ascended the throne of Scotland. Rather than concerning local conflicts or fears

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<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, 197.

<sup>17</sup> Behringer, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Markus et al. “Augustine on Magic, a Neglected Semiotic Theory” *Augustine on Magic, a Neglected Semiotic Theory* 40, no. 2 (1994): 375-388.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

of witchcraft, the trials began to focus on the dangers of demonic conspiracies towards King James.<sup>20</sup> For instance, in 1549, before James' rule, the Scottish Kirk had to petition for parliament to be more involved in the prosecution of witches. In a letter to the parliament, a minister complains that the workers commissioned to try the accused people have not done anything: asserting "we humble beseech their highness's honourable Court of Parliament that the commission may be renewed [...] whereby justice may be administered."<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, witch hunting had been left to the church and the monarch played an insignificant role in the process. In their collection, *A Source Book of Scottish Witchcraft*, authors Christina Larner, Christopher Hyde Lee, and Hugh V. McLachlan point out that before James, witchcraft prosecutions were still exceedingly rare.<sup>22</sup> This parliamentary apathy towards witch trials drastically changed after James ascended the throne. In 1585 the marriage between Princess Anne of Denmark and James was finalized and on the trip to Scotland back from Denmark, and the King encountered treacherous sailing conditions.<sup>23</sup> Soon after the dangerous voyage, he involved himself in the current witch trials, ordering the accused brought to him.<sup>24</sup> The King took special interest in two of the accused, Agnes Sampson, a local healer, and John Fian, a local schoolteacher, examining their bodies for the devil's mark himself rather than allowing a worker of the Kirk to examine

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<sup>20</sup> The act of parliament criminalizing witchcraft, the Scottish Witchcraft Act, was passed in 1563. Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witch Trials*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Publications, 2000), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Minister, letter message to Parliament, June, 1549.

<sup>22</sup> Christina Larner, Christopher Hyde Lee, and Hugh V. McLachlan, *A Source Book of Scottish Witchcraft* (Edinburgh: University of Glasgow Press, 1979,) 197-200.

<sup>23</sup> Normand and Roberts, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Robert W. Thurston, *The Witch Hunts: A History of Persecutions in Europe and North America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 201-205.

them as was traditional, thus, displaying his abnormal focus on witch trials.<sup>25</sup> Both Sampson and Fian pled guilty of witchcraft in 1591; confessing that they were ordered by the devil to cause a storm intended to kill King James the VI on his way back from Denmark.<sup>26</sup> Such confessions were given after extreme torture: Sampson was tortured with the witches bridle and Fian was tortured with pillwinks and bootes.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Fian had already escaped only to be recaptured by King James' guards and tortured again.<sup>28</sup> This time, Fian had his fingernails removed and legs mangled.<sup>29</sup> *Newes From Scotland*, a 1591 witchcraft pamphlet, discloses the change in King James the VI's outlook on witchcraft. The pamphlet unveiled that he had regarded witches as "extreme lyars,"<sup>30</sup> until, the confession of Agnes Sampson where she allegedly recited a conversation the King had with his fiancée in private, leading the King to believe in the witches' confession that they had attempted to kill him.<sup>31</sup> The pamphlet also outlines Agnes Sampson's confession where she revealed that the Devil believed "the king is the greatest enemie hee hath in the world."<sup>32</sup> In their book, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*, scholars Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts explain that *Newes From Scotland* "seek[ed] to intensify the horror of witchcraft

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<sup>25</sup> Thurston, 206.

<sup>26</sup> Thurston, 206.

<sup>27</sup> A witches bridle was a torture device consisting of an iron framework that was worn like a muzzle and could suffocate its user. Pillwinks and bootes were torture devices that crushed the feet and legs. Robert W. Thurston, *The Witch Hunts: A History of Persecutions in Europe and North America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 206.

<sup>28</sup> Thurston, 210.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>30</sup> James Carmichael, "Newes From Scotland," *University of Glasgow* 15, no.6 (2000)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

as a threat directed specifically at James as king,”<sup>33</sup> labelling it a “propaganda pamphlet.”<sup>34</sup>

While there is no direct authorship for *Newes From Scotland*, it is generally agreed upon that the pamphlet was most likely written by James Carmichael, a leader of the Presbyterian church.<sup>35</sup>

Carmichael and King James had spent approximately eighteen months together searching for witches during the North Berwick witch trials, and many of the first editions of *Newes From Scotland* concerned justifying this witch hunt.<sup>36</sup> In 1597 James wrote his own account of

witchcraft in a book called *Daemonologie*, which condemns witchcraft as the highest evil. In his book, King James denounces witches as “detestable slaves of the devil,” displaying his overt

aversion to witchcraft.<sup>37</sup> Within *Daemonologie*, King James included editions of *Newes From*

*Scotland* in which he presided as judge, including the trial and conviction of Agnes Sampson and

John Fian.<sup>38</sup> In Diane Purkiss’ *The Witch in History Early Modern and Twentieth-Century*

*Representations*, she asserts that narratives like *Newes From Scotland* and *Daemonologie* can

have a significant effect on ongoing witch trials.<sup>39</sup> Both *Newes From Scotland* and

*Daemonologie* were published for public use and would have the ability to influence the

common outlook on current witch trials, convincing their readers that the witch trials focused on

preserving the monarch because witches were threatening his life. King James defied the

traditional role of the Scottish monarch in witch hunts by not only taking on a significant role in

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<sup>33</sup> Normand and Roberts, 353.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>35</sup> Normand and Roberts, 73.

<sup>36</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History Early and Twentieth-Century Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 87.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



the hunt, trial, and prosecution process, but also by advertising the dangers of witchcraft to his subjects. Thus, King James VI successfully crafted a perception of personal threat and ensured his own protection.

Additionally, King James the VI used the North Berwick trials to preserve and elevate his political and religious power as the Scottish King. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, conflict between the Kirk and King had escalated. Although King James VI's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was Catholic, she abdicated the throne when King James VI was only thirteen months. Scholars Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts note that the Presbyterian church had been fighting against Catholicism to create a fully protestant system and confirm their control over the national church.<sup>40</sup> After parliament became fully Presbyterian, the Bishops of Kirk decided to assert their dominance over both Catholicism and the crown. Published in 1578, a Presbyterian book regulating the ecclesiastical order, titled *The Second Book of Discipline*, details the Kirk's declaration of supremacy over King James VI: stating, "the power ecclesiastical flows immediately from God [...] not having a temporal head on earth"<sup>41</sup> The Kirk argued that it had sovereignty over Scotland because its right to exist came directly from God, thus taking away power from King James VI and setting up a system in which the Kirk reigns supreme over both their monarch and nobles. In response to the Kirk's display of sovereignty, King James the VI passed the Black Acts in 1584, which established the Bishop's power over Kirk ministers and asserted that the King had power over all people and institutions, including the Kirk.<sup>42</sup> However, the Black Acts were not successful because Presbyterianism continued to grow in power despite

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<sup>40</sup> Normand and Roberts, 93.

<sup>41</sup> *Second Book of Discipline*, (Scotland: Presbyterian Kirk, 1578), 102.

<sup>42</sup> Normand and Roberts, 93.

the law. During the friction between the Kirk and King James in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, hunting witches was one of the primary objectives for both the Kirk and the King, becoming the “battleground in their fight for supremacy.”<sup>43</sup> Normand and Roberts suggest that the North Berwick trials helped King James VI fight against the Kirk by establishing that the King was “God’s agent on earth and the witches’ main enemy.”<sup>44</sup> King James VI’s proclamation that he worked directly under God disputed the Kirk’s argument that their power was the only one which came directly from God. In doing so, James not only continuously labelled himself as the main enemy of the devil but criticized the Kirk’s effectiveness in condemning witches. In King James VI’s *Daemonologie*, he argued that “the minister[s] sent by God teacheth plainly at the time of [the witches] public conventions how to serve him in spirit and truth, so that the unclean spirit in his own person teacheth his disciples at the time of their convening how to work all kind of mischief.”<sup>45</sup> With this statement, King James suggests that the teachings of the church are not adequate in preventing witchcraft, proclaiming that it is the witches “own unclean spirit” that will lead them to the work of the devil.<sup>46</sup> Normand and Roberts analyze that King James’ work against witchcraft not only lessened the Kirk’s power, but also “required [the church and state’s] cooperation.”<sup>47</sup> King James VI’s proclamation that he worked directly under God disputed the Kirk’s argument that their power was the only one which came directly from God. By taking over much of the Kirk’s role in prosecuting witches, King James VI preserved his sovereignty over Scotland and elevated his position as a political and religious figurehead.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>44</sup> Normand and Roberts, 211.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 211.

Furthermore, through the witch trials, King James VI showcased his ecclesiastical power over the Scottish Kirk in order to prove that he would be a suitable successor to Queen Elizabeth I in England. When Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558, she sought to ease religious tensions in England. A year later, she reinstated an official Church of England and passed the Second Act of Supremacy, which declared herself and her successors as Supreme Governor of the Church.<sup>48</sup> King's desire to confirm his position as the successor to the English throne is made apparent in the proposal from John Oglivy, a Scottish noble, to King James VI regarding his potential succession of Queen Elizabeth I. Oglivy highlights the "desire of the said King of Scotland for vengeance for the death of the Queen, his mother, against the Queen and the heretics of England."<sup>49</sup> To secure his spot as Queen Elizabeth's successor and the first Stuart King of England, King James VI of Scotland upheld his divine right to be God's representative on earth,<sup>50</sup> which he exhibited by influencing the Kirk through the process of witchcraft prosecutions. Scholars Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts suggest that the King's involvement in said prosecutions forced the Kirk to cooperate with him.<sup>51</sup> Thus, King James VI's control over the North Berwick witch trials and subsequent control over the Scottish Kirk helped his expansion of power into England.

King James VI manipulated the witch trials in Scotland to benefit himself: protecting his safety, his power, and his position as the English monarch. Rather than pursuing witches due to religious ideology, King James VI used the hunts as a catalyst for his personal and political

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<sup>48</sup> "Act of Supremacy." The National Archives United Kingdom. Accessed December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020. [www.legislation.gov.uk/a](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/a).

<sup>49</sup> John Oglivy, *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society* (Scotland: National Library of Scotland, 1595), 110-134.

<sup>50</sup> King James VI, *The Political Works of King James VI: Reprinted from the Edition of 1616 with an introduction* ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 92.

<sup>51</sup> Normand and Roberts, 406.

success. Both *Daemonologie* and *Newes For Scotland* promoted public fear of witchcraft, gathering support for King James to continue hunting witches for his political gain. This use of fear tactics and perversion of religious ideology resulted in the torture and execution of numerous people, including Agnes Sampson and John Fian. King James VI's misuse of the witch trials for his own power at the expense of his subjects is reflective of the power political leaders have in employing fear and superstition for their own personal benefit.

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