

# LAWRENCE NORMAND

## Modernising Scottish Witchcraft Texts

The process of turning sixteenth-century texts into twenty-first-century printed books that can be readily understood by present-day readers is one that is fraught with the possibilities of error, distortion and falsification. While an editor's aim is ideally to present early modern texts in an authentic way, the editing process shows the impossibility of achieving that. The more remote the sixteenth-century text is from any recognisably modern form of textuality, the more difficult the process of presenting it to the modern reader while maintaining its specific historical identity. The postmodern idea that literary editors now readily embrace is that an edition of, say, a Renaissance play is one more instance of the play's reproduction in history which has several forms: theatrical production, critical discussion, canonical location, reproduction in film or television. But that idea is not one that is embraced by historians when they seek to edit historical documents for the modern reader. Historical documents are deemed to be significant and useful to the modern reader in trying to understand the past inasmuch as they still carry upon them the signs of their initial production and context. Literary texts, on the other hand, are usually reproduced in new editions with blithe disregard for their original material form (even if this survives, which in many cases it does not). This essay discusses a case of

editing sixteenth-century texts which posed challenges of this sort for the editors. The texts have value primarily as historical documents yet they range in genre from the non-literary to the literary, and so would seem to demand a different set of priorities in their editing. The texts are in various kinds of sixteenth-century Scots English, and they are so remote from the cultural setting of modern readers as to require extensive explanation. After these, and other, editing processes have been applied to this varied set of texts the theoretical questions arise of what remains of the aim to present early modern texts in an authentic way, and what exactly is the nature of edited text that emerges from this process.

My subject is modernising Scottish witchcraft texts, and the texts I am discussing are those produced during and following the North Berwick witch-hunt of 1590-91 when a group of witches supposedly conspired treasonable witchcraft against King James VI and his newly-wed Danish princess Anne. The texts are the product of a historical situation, and they are, with the possible exception of James VI's *Demonology*, from beyond the literary canon. The texts are of different kinds and consist of the manuscript records of the interrogations, confessions and depositions of those accused of witchcraft (all referred to as depositions), the trial records of the court cases which followed (known in Scots as dittays), the pamphlet about the witch-hunt *News from Scotland* published in London probably in late 1591, and James VI's book *Demonology* about witchcraft in general. All these different texts were edited by Gareth Roberts and myself and published in 2000 as *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's "Demonology" and the North Berwick Witches* by University of Exeter Press in their series Exeter Studies in History.

The aim of the series is to make primary materials available to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as researchers, in "a readable, modernised and annotated form." The aims of Gareth Roberts and myself as editors were more specific: we wanted to provide a resource in the thriving, interdisciplinary field of witchcraft studies by publishing material previously unavailable (i.e. the legal documents) along with other, more familiar, documents that were also produced as a result of this witch-hunt (i.e. *News from Scotland* and *Demonology*). By doing that we wanted to lay bare the social, political, legal and textual processes which combined to

create that, and maybe other, witch-hunts. But why should literary scholars edit what might be argued to be essentially historical material? The answer to that question lies in the approach that we as editors took to the texts and the assumptions we made about them, from the start regarding them as having dimensions which are best understood in literary terms. We not merely linked texts that were produced chronologically; we argued that they form an interrelated series each of which draws on and elaborates earlier texts for its particular purposes. So, the records of the trials (dittays) draw on the earlier records of the questioning of the accused, as does the pamphlet *News from Scotland*; and James's *Demonology* depends for its evidential grounding on the whole episode. We believed that the full sense of the witch-hunt, as of the individual texts which sprang from it, can best be understood by seeing those texts as parts of a sequence, and by seeing that sequence as representing a typical textual process in witchcraft cases: namely that the initial, oral accounts of witchcraft activities that are inchoate, dispersed, confused, become narrowed and defined to fit dominant ideas of the crime. Secondly, we took the view that since witchcraft is partly an imaginary crime, the literary activity of creating narratives forms a central part in establishing the reality of the crime. Finally, we had in mind a quasi-feminist aim: to present documents which bring to mind the existence and point of view of the accused being questioned or appearing in court. By placing first in the edition the legal documents which record the interviews with the accused it is possible to see these documents as a source for the other texts that follow. This gives those mostly women's voices some existence, and shows how their words are subject to rewriting and reinvention by those in authority; how each text is a version of those that precede it. Positioning the texts together as a linked series brings into view "a metanarrative of textual production" that is as important to understanding the texts as the content of the texts themselves.

The texts edited and combined in this volume were not, of course, combined at the time of their original composition, nor would they have been thought of as constituting an interrelated series. Their combination is an editorial fabrication. It was our intention as editors to show how the texts are interrelated, despite the differences in their institutional origins, generic formation, and intended readerships. A brief account of the different texts involved will indicate the editorial challenges posed in presenting them to modern readers: first, the surviving depositions which are in manuscripts located in the Scottish Archive in Edinburgh (formerly the Scottish

Record Office). They are produced as the accused speak or give replies to questions from an investigator or interrogator seeking to discover if there is enough evidence to substantiate a prosecution for witchcraft. The manuscripts of the depositions bear the traces of having been written as the interrogation is going on; there are mistakes in names which are corrected, repetitions, omissions, words or phrases noted in the margin or at the top of the manuscript, often as *aides memoires* of pertinent information for this or some future interrogation. These marks on the page reveal how the scribes shape the words of the accused in order to fashion prosecution documents suitable for the courtroom. In fact, the manuscripts bear the marks of an editing process determined by a legally defined end. For modern editors making these texts available to modern readers, and committed to demonstrating the constructedness of the texts, it is important that the edited text carries as many of the signs of its process of production as possible in the scribe's reactions. What is sought then, is not a single, ideal text, but a record of how the text came to be produced. The next set of texts is the dittays or indictments against four of the principal accused in the witch-hunt, which are again manuscripts forming part of the Books of Adjournal, the minute books of the judiciary court in Edinburgh. The significance of dittays is that they represent the version of the events of the witchcraft conspiracy accepted by the court as actuality and therefore as grounds for finding the accused guilty. They contain the fullest account of the supposed witchcraft conspiracy, with consistent time schemes and narrative completeness. *News from Scotland* is the next text to be included, an anonymous, sensational, printed witchcraft pamphlet of a kind familiar in England. It was printed in London probably in late 1591, after the worst of the witch-hunt was over but before it had come to a complete end. Again as editors we were concerned to present this pamphlet not as a record of what happened (as it has sometimes naively been read) but rather as part of the ongoing process of controlling interpretation of the witch-hunt through textual means. To that end we were keen to show the constructedness of this text too, with material from several writers and woodcuts from several sources. *Demonology* is the final text contained in the edition: an apparently simple case of a printed book in a familiar form by a named author printed by the authoritative William Waldegrave, but probably also a collaborative production by James and at least one scribe-cum-editor.<sup>1</sup> By placing *Demonology* alongside these other texts, however, it appears more clearly as an occasional piece written in response to the witch-hunt that had just run its course.

Two major intentions of the edition, then, were to allow readers to register the differences among these texts while at the same time to be able to see them as a series of linked texts. The twenty-eight texts in the edition should be read neither as an anthology, i.e. a set of disparate texts assembled by editorial dictat, nor as a composite text with separate subsidiary parts, such as *Tottel's Miscellany*, but rather as a sequence of separate but linked texts whose relatedness lies in their being produced from the same matrix of social, ideological and discursive forces. There is an editorial dilemma in this case, however, for in order to make these texts accessible and comprehensible to present-day readers, the materiality of their first production may be transformed and lost in the fairly homogeneous, smooth surface of a modernised edition. In other words, how can the texts be represented in a readable way—modernised, repunctuated, annotated and glossed—while still enabling readers to recognise the multiplicity of discourses and of materials evident in the texts, and to explore and make sense of those for themselves without having the range of their interpretation narrowed or short-circuited by the form of the edition?

In order to provide readers with the maximum range of interpretative scope the introductory material in this edition is even more important than it usually is in a Renaissance edition. We assumed that because these texts are culturally remote they require far more contextualisation, and that the more they can be read within the appropriate contexts the better founded will be the uses to which they can be put. Again the different texts required different degrees of contextualising but the overall plan was to provide hierarchised contextualisations, ranging from what is relevant for all the texts to what is specific to a particular one. So first there is a short “Introduction” which provides an overview and a theoretical justification for the edition and its methods. Next, in a part headed “Context,” there are introductions to the political, social, cultural and religious contexts, along with an outline of earlier Scottish witchcraft cases, an account of the Scottish legal process from the moment of accusation to conviction and execution, and a brief note of the aftermath of the witch-hunt. In addition, in the part of the book headed “Texts” there are lengthy introductions to each of the four sets of texts in the pages preceding each set of texts themselves. So the records of the witchcraft trials (the dittays) have their own introduction, as do the other texts. Finally, in the case of the most fragmentary and inaccessible texts, those recording examinations, confessions and depositions, there are separate introductions providing details of the manuscript, dating and suggested

significance, pointing to what the manuscript contains and, sometimes, to what it does not. These introductions are of varying length, the longest being two pages, the shortest four lines. Here is some of the material that introduces document 2 which contains the examination and confession of Agnes Sampson on 4-5 December 1590: “This is a series of three leaves, with writing in a very neat hand on all sides. At various points the letter ‘S’ appears in the margin. We have assumed this is the abbreviation for ‘scribe,’ ‘scriptum’ or ‘scripta,’ that is, these passages were to be copied to form the substance of the accusation in Sampson’s dittay.” Other editorial comments include: “There are also some things in this document that we do not find again in later ones... [and these are detailed];” “We also find some traces of leading questions in this document [and an example is given];” “There is nothing about either Barbara Napier or Euphame McCalzean [other accused women] in this document as we have it;” and interpretative comments: “This deposition is seminal, as its contents were to form the basis of what is reported in Sampson’s dittay and [the letter] which Robert Bowes [the English ambassador in Scotland] sent to Burghley on 23 February 1591.”<sup>2</sup> This separating and dispersing of introductory material—in effect, contextualising at different levels of the edition—is intended to allow readers to locate the information and interpretative support they need at the right level of generalisation and detail in the place in the book where it is most needed. In this respect the Contents page is important as the way of indicating the principles of division and the apparatus of support. Whether it succeeds in that remains to be seen when reviewers and readers report on their actual use. For the editors the challenge was how to differentiate and separate the kinds of material that would be best placed in different introductions. And in doing that the uncertainty of the dividing line between information and interpretation became evident.

While extensive contextualisation in introductions was one way of making these texts readable, another was annotation. Michael Steppat has recently reminded us that “those who theorise editing empower themselves by constructing their reader’s identity and capacity of response.”<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps most true when it comes to editors imagining what level of glosses and notes their edition requires. In the case of these witchcraft texts we imagined their being read by, or wanted them to be read by, on the one hand, intelligent undergraduates who might also be familiar with using, say, an Arden edition of Shakespeare, and on the other hand scholars of witchcraft who might want to study this witch-hunt in relation to other Continental or English witch-hunts.

In between these extremes we as editors, and the university press as publishers, constructed other readers: graduate students, graduate researchers and the never-to-be-forgotten educated reader. This array of imagined readers with their imagined interests and capacities of response compels a level and range of annotation that is fairly full. Notes appear in a double column at the foot of each page of text, in a design copied from the World's Classics Shakespeare editions, which makes them as accessible as possible. But how useful will actual readers find them? On each page of text there are about thirteen notes, some glossing difficult words or, and this was a large category, familiar Scots words with an unexpected sense; some quoting biblical texts referred to; others providing historical information; while others again provide references to witchcraft treatises and other witchcraft cases. The annotations are a continuation by other editorial means of the kinds of information and interpretation provided by the introductions. But do the diverse readers constructed by the annotations happily coexist when they encounter material that is useful to another reader, or are they a fractious crew, irritated and uncomfortable with each other's needs?

I want to consider two other aspects of modernising these witchcraft texts, both of them problematic: first, how best to represent textual variants, and second, how best to represent the texts in modern English.

Since this edition aims to expose to view the constructedness of a witch-hunt by exposing the constructedness of the texts on which it depends, it tries to identify the matrix of social forces out of which the texts emerge. But it should also be able to present the constructedness of individual texts too. In the case of the court records, *News from Scotland* and *Demonology* this is done in the introductions and notes, but in the case of the depositions this should ideally be done at the level of the visual presentation of what are fragmented texts. The texts of the depositions are the product of the encounter between the popular, oral culture on the side of the suspect and the literate, elite culture on the side of the scribe, and so collaboratively produced. The scribe does more than record the words of the accused; in his attempt to produce texts that will be effective in court, that is, complete and watertight, he edits as he writes. Ideally an edition would keep in view the deletions, additions, corrections, repetitions, marginal notes that constitute the document. In first drafts of these documents we included many of these physical marks of what I am calling scribal editing by means of a system of conventions including square brackets to indicate something missing or

damaged in the text; round brackets to indicate a space left by the scribe; vertical lines indicating an insertion in the manuscript, braces to indicate a deletion. But the series editor decided that the look of the edited text was too complex and forbidding, and he was probably right. Most of these variants disappeared from the text (only square and round brackets remained) to be relocated in textual notes placed after each set of documents. Since we wanted to keep the constructedness of these texts to the fore, it might have been better to have selected textual notes printed among the regular notes at the foot of the page along with glosses and annotations. That would perhaps have made them part of the critical apparatus to help readers understand the particularities of each text, though editions regularly keep textual notes separate from general ones. But ironically, just as the scribe edited the words of the accused to give just those words a truth value in his documents, so we as editors found ourselves having to select and narrow further as we edited his documents.

The series in which this volume appears is committed to publishing modernised texts but what does modernising these texts from sixteenth-century Scots entail, and what are its gains and losses? Modernising all these texts entailed modernising the orthography and spelling (including place and personal names), repunctuating and, in the legal documents, paragraphing. Words and phrases with a Scottish form were rendered into their modern Scottish equivalent as found in the *Scottish National Dictionary*. So, for example, the word “ken” appears along with its past participle “kenned;” it is not translated into the English words “know” or “knew.” Words without a modern spelling were left more or less in their form in the texts. Notes gloss unfamiliar words. Other Scottish forms, no doubt puzzling to a modern reader, are retained: so James’s use of a singular form of the verb “to be” with a plural predicate—e.g. “the error that there is no witches” or “the rules... that was fasting and prayer” —remains. Similarly the presence of “-s” in present tense, plural verbs is also retained: he writes “but thereof the doctors doubts” (and the edition only gives a gloss on “doctors” as “the learned”). This is a borderline case for modernising into a modern English form. It would certainly make the sentence easier to understand if it read “the doctors doubt” but we decided that this was a small but substantial linguistic usage that ought to be retained. In other cases, though, such as past participles ending in “-it” or “-id” (presumably sounded in Scots) we silently modernised to the (unsounded) English form “-ed:” so “allegit” and “denyit” become “alleged” and “denied.” Perhaps the biggest contribution to making the texts comprehensible was

the addition of punctuation, or the modernising of existing punctuation. In the surviving fragment of James's holograph first draft of *Demonology* his punctuation is very light and his sentences long. The clauses are loosely attached to one another in long strings. This editorial intervention involved repunctuating in order to indicate the logical relationships among clauses and phrases to achieve the aim of readability; and to achieve that, punctuation was revised throughout the texts.

Other recent editors of Scots texts have adopted different tactics. Barbara Rosen who edited *News from Scotland* for the 1969 collection of witchcraft pamphlets modernised the text but retained "obsolete words and grammar ([which] are marked with an asterisk in the text)... and referred to the glossary."<sup>4</sup> Akrigg's 1984 edition of James's letters uses a different technique. He modernises, retains Scottish words, marking them with an asterisk and explaining them in a glossary. However, he does keep some words in "the original spelling of the manuscripts," and they appear within the text of the letters in quotation marks "to signal the brief departure from a modernized text."<sup>5</sup> This produces the odd effect of old-spelling words erupting into modernised text, though it serves the useful purpose of reminding readers that what they are reading is modernised. In our modernisation of the witchcraft texts we left no old-spelling words in quotation marks but rather included them in the flow of the modernised English. The edited text that results from modernising is a wholly artificial creation: in its combination of modern and obsolete words and phrases, and its sixteenth-century syntactic forms repunctuated to suit modern conventions. Modernising these texts entails losing the distinctiveness of the Scots English in which they were written, though these are arguably superficial features.

The tensions between, on the one hand, modernising and providing accessibility and, on the other, presenting readers with reliable and authentic materials were acute in the construction of this edition. It is obviously impossible to present sixteenth-century historical or literary documents in any way that simply transfers their historical authenticity into the medium of a twenty-first-century scholarly edition. The extensive editorial processes that have to be applied to a culturally and linguistically remote set of texts, such as those from the North Berwick witch-hunt, in order to make them readable, entail their transformation through processes of representation into a complex, artificial textual fabrication. In order to make these texts usable, they must be provided with a set of frames, political, social, legal, etc., which was done in this edition by interleaving contextual and introductory materials

throughout the edition, with these being presented at different levels of detail according to their particular location in the edition. The intention to provide extensive reading support results in a book structured in a complex, multi-layered way that requires much sign-posting to make it accessible, as well as readers skilled in editorial protocols so that they can find the guidance or information they want. However, a particularly acute problem of editorial presentation arose from the editors' wish to lay bare the historical processes that went to create the witch-hunt, and therefore to present the series of documents in ways that showed how one text shaped the production of later ones. Readers are supposed to be able to see from the sequence of documents the steps by which this witch-hunt, and possibly others, was formed, how the materials were assembled and shaped into an ideologically coherent story. In that sense, then, the documents, and the witch-hunt itself, have a dimension best understood using literary terms and a literary approach. However, the editorial complexities, and costs, of producing printed pages of text that retain the marks of the circumstances of their first production—that show selection and elaboration taking place—proved to be too great, and so such marks had to disappear from the pages of printed text, thus diminishing their historical usefulness. Similarly problematic was the modernising of the Scots of these documents. Modernising the sixteenth-century Scots produced a text containing modern Scots forms of words alongside early modern word- and grammatical forms, all repunctuated so as to make explicit the logical relationships within the writing, which were more lightly suggested in the original punctuation. The resulting texts aiming for authenticity turn out to be in no language that was ever written in the sixteenth century or now, but an artificial language existing only for the purposes of these texts. The same can be said of most early modern literary editions, though it is generally ignored, but when texts from beyond the literary canon are edited in a similar way, the strangeness of the outcome, and the danger of the intellectual aims of authenticity being lost in the representational processes of editing, become sharply highlighted. Editors need to be aware of the dilemmas but not put off the attempt.

**Notes**

1 James Craigie, ed., *Minor Prose Works of King James VI and I*, prepared for the press by Alexander Law (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1982), 160, 174.

2 Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, eds., *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's "Demonology" and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000), 141-2.

3 Michael Steppat, "(Un)Editing and Textual Theory: Positioning the Reader" in Andrew Murphy, ed., *The Renaissance Text: Theory, Editing, Textuality* (Manchester and London: Manchester University Press, 2000), 73-90: 73.

4 Barbara Rosen, ed., *Witchcraft*, London: Edward Arnold, 1969 (reissued with new Introduction as *Witchcraft in England, 1558-1618* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), xi.

5 G. P. V. Akrigg, ed., *Letters of King James VI and I* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), 36.