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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

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 The texts have value primarily as historical documents yet they range in genre from the non-literary to the literary, and so would seem to demand a different set of priorities in their editing.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

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 justiciary 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 completenee to be s

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 subs

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

In between these extremes we as editors, and the university press as publishers, constructed other readers: graduate students, graduate re

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

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 Massuchusetts 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.