

CHAPTER SEVEN

ORKNEY AND SHETLAND—CLOSE-READINGS

Orkney

Barbara Bowndie, 1644

The first part of this chapter will deal with the case of Barbara Bowndie, living in Kirkwall in Orkney, accused of witchcraft and interrogated before the presbytery in 1643. She was accused in a linked trial, being denounced for witchcraft by another woman. Bowndie's case is chosen for analysis because it is a rich text which interestingly might throw light on some central questions within witchcraft research. Firstly, the context of her case offers information about the functioning of the courts in Orkney and the relation between the presbytery and the Sheriff Court with regard to prosecution of witchcraft. Secondly, the case offers insight in pre-trial questioning as well as interrogation before the presbytery. The discourse is rendered in an accurate way, with questions as well as answers clearly marked. Therefore it is possible to analyse the interplay between the interrogator and the accused, and examine the strategies used by both parties. Thirdly, demonological notions as well as folkloric beliefs come to the fore during the interrogation of Barbara Bowndie, and distinction between these two spheres of ideas as they appear in this case, will form part of the analysis. Fourthly, oral transference of new ideas about witchcraft among peasants in the local communities is a topic which will be approached due to information implied in the sources. Fifthly, the role of the scribe will be discussed, and relate to international research on this topic. These questions in total fathom widely and will contribute to the comparison of Scotland and Finnmark as well as well as a broader scope of research.

The Context

The case of Barbara Bowndie had a pre-history, and it is necessary to go back to 1642 to see why she came in the searchlight for witchcraft. This year, a woman named Elsbeth Culsetter was tried for witchcraft and burnt. She denounced another woman, Marjorie Paplay. As the focus on

Marjorie Paplay is a recurrent theme also in the trial of Barbara Bowndie, some information about Paplay is relevant. On 3 November 1642, Mr Henry Smith, Minister of Shapinshay, tried to start a trial against Marjorie Paplay. He referred to laws and former practice, stating that no person reported to the civil judge as guilty of witchcraft, 'be any who hes been convict and execut for witchcraft should be heard to complaine that they are slandered'.¹ If they wanted to have their name cleansed of slander, they had to go to the civil judge, where the case was filed, or else stand the trial. Henry Smith called in the sheriff depute, Mr Henry Aitken, 'to declare if Elspeth Culsetter witch did delate that Marjorie Paplay mother to James Baikie of Tankernes was a witch; Answered that the said Elspeth did indeed declare that the said Marjorie was the greatest witch of them all'.² He required that Paplay 'might be enacted in the Shirref court bookes to underly the Law, as others who were delated be the said Elspeth Culsetter as gultie of witchcraft, were'.³

However, Paplay's son protested against the slandering of his mother. He desired a summon against certain persons whom he alleged to be slanderers of his mother. The brethren could not condescend unto this, in respect of Henry Smith's protestations, and their approbation thereof. So the situation was that the minister, Henry Smith, argued that Marjorie Paplay should herself pursue her slanderers by giving in a bill of complaint, as he had argued before, and he requested the presbytery to take the same considerations. Apparently the presbytery agreed with Smith's protestation and thus refused to allow a slander case or to hand over relevant documents. In practice this means that Henry Smith on formal grounds tried to make it difficult for Marjorie Paplay to get herself cleansed of slander. Instead he pressed for her being tried for witchcraft before the presbytery. He had many accusations against Marjorie, among them the death of his mother-in-law, related to 'some hard speeches uttered be the said Marjorie to her quinto Martii 1632' as well as Marjory cursing other people.⁴ Marjorie was left with a warning in 1642, but she was still in the searchlight for witchcraft. When the case against Barbara Bowndie started one year later, she was frequently asked to name Marjorie Paplay as a witch, as will be seen in the following.

¹ OLA, OPR, CH2/1082/1, p. 203.

² OLA, OPR, CH2/1082/1, p. 204.

³ OLA, OPR, CH2/1082/1, p. 204.

⁴ OLA, OPR, CH2/1082/1, p. 203.