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Re-imagining witchcraft: Gender, voice, and violence in Philip Paris's *The Last Witch of Scotland*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine Philip Paris's *The Last Witch of Scotland* (2023), a historical novel that reimagines the life and death of Janet Horne, the last person executed for witchcraft in Britain. Drawing on feminist theorists such as Silvia Federici, Mona Chollet, and Julia Kristeva, the article situates the novel within a broader discourse on gender, voice, and social exclusion in early eighteenth-century Scotland. It argues that through Aila Horne's first-person narration and the compassionate portrayal of her mother Janet, Paris transforms archival absence into narrative presence and gives voice to those who were silenced before.

Keywords

Janet Horne; witchcraft; feminism; feminist historiography; voice and silence

Nowe spojrzenie na czary: Płeć, głos i przemoc w powieści Philipa Parisa *The Last Witch of Scotland*

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza powieści historycznej Philipa Parisa *The Last Witch of Scotland* (2023), która na nowo opowiada życie i śmierć Janet Horne, ostatniej osoby straconej za czary w Wielkiej Brytanii. Opierając się na teoriach feministycznych Silvii Federici, Mony Chollet i Julii Kristevy, artykuł sytuuje powieść w szerszym dyskursie na temat płci, głosu i wykluczenia społecznego w Szkocji na początku XVIII wieku. Autorka dowodzi, że poprzez pierwszoosobową narrację Aili Horne i pełen współczucia portret jej matki Janet, Paris przekształca archiwalną nieobecność w narracyjną obecność i oddaje głos tym, które zostały wcześniej uciszone.

Słowa kluczowe

Janet Horne, czary, feminizm, historiografia feministyczna, głos i cisza

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."
(*King James Bible*, Exodus 22:18)

1. Introduction

On International Women's Day in 2022, the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, officially apologized on behalf of the Scottish government to those accused under the Witchcraft Act 1563 stating that: "Those who met this fate were not witches, they were people and they were overwhelmingly women. […] This was injustice on a colossal scale, driven at least in part by misogyny in its most literal sense: hatred of women" (Brooks 2022). The Church of Scotland followed with apologies for its part in the persecution of those accused of witchcraft in May 2022.

The Scottish witch-hunt was one of the more severe in Protestant Europe. According to the *Survey of Scottish Witchcraft*,[1] an estimated 3,837 people, 84 percent of whom were women, were tried as witches under the Scottish Witchcraft Act, which came into force on the 4th of June 1563. The Act declared both the practice of witchcraft and any form of consultation with witches to be capital offences. It has been suggested that about 2,500 of those accused under the Act were executed and burned, but this figure is probably not accurate, as a significant amount of the evidence is missing.

Historians have proposed several explanations for the Scottish witch-hunt and its greater intensity compared to that in England, including economic distress (Wormald 1991) and the rise of a "godly state" in which the reformed Kirk was closely aligned with an increasingly intrusive Scottish state (Larner 1981; Sharpe 2002). Scholars also note that the reformed Kirk, established after 1560, was strongly influenced by Calvinism and Presbyterianism, which means it regarded women as a greater moral threat (Mitchison 1983, Goodare 1998). Indeed, a number of scholars have interpreted the witch-hunt (in Scotland and elsewhere) as a mechanism for controlling women.[2]

In her pivotal publication, *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici argues that witch hunts were integral part of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. She discusses at length how primitive accumulation required the control of women's reproductive capacities to ensure a future supply of labour:

> But the main initiative that the state took to restore the desired population ratio was the launching of a true war against women

[1] *The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft* is an online database, created by Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin, Joyce Miller, and Louise Yeoman, which contains information on nearly 4,000 people accused of witchcraft in Scotland between 1563 and 1736. It serves as a comprehensive electronic resource for the history of witchcraft in early modern Scotland, providing details on accusers, trials, and social and cultural aspects of the accusations.

[2] See Federici (2021), Goodare (1998), Martin (2002), McLachlan and Swales (1980).

> clearly aimed at breaking the control they had exercised over their bodies and reproduction. […] this war was waged primarily through the witch-hunt that literally demonized any form of birth-control and non-procreative sexuality, while charging women with sacrificing children to the devil. (Federici 2021: 174)

As she elaborates further, the witch hunts served to destroy women's previously held power, including their social and economic autonomy:

> The witch-hunt, then, was a war against women; it was a concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power. At the same time, it was in the torture chambers and on the stakes on which the witches perished that the bourgeois ideals of womanhood and domesticity were forged. (Federici 2021: 322)

In Scotland, King James VI also played his role in the rise of the witch trials. James's obsession with witchcraft began around the time of the North Berwick witch trials (1590–1591), one of Scotland's most infamous episodes of mass accusation and execution. Convinced that a coven of witches had conspired to raise storms to sink his ship during his return from Denmark with his new wife, Anne of Denmark, the king personally involved himself in the interrogations. He saw witchcraft not merely as a crime, but rather as a direct threat to divine order and royal authority. His interest culminated in the publication of his 1597 treatise, *Daemonologie*, a work that includes a study of demonology and gives the theological basis for hunting witches.

The Witchcraft Act was in force between 1563 and 1736. Between these years, there were five episodes that stand out as periods of high-level accusation and prosecution of witches: 1590–1591, 1597, 1628–1630, 1649 and 1661–1662. After the Glorious Revolution of 1689, the state became more secular and no longer needed to prove its godliness by executing witches. However, in certain parts of the Scottish Highlands, the fears

and superstitions associated with witchcraft remained strong. The last person in Britain to be tried and executed for allegedly practising witchcraft was a woman called Janet Horne, who was executed in Dornoch in 1727 (Goodare, Martin, Miller and Yeoman 2003).

This article examines the novel *The Last Witch of Scotland* by Philip Paris, a fictionalized retelling of the life and death of Janet Horne. It argues that Paris's novel reclaims the voice of a historically silenced woman, transforming archival absence into narrative presence through feminist reimagining.

2. The historical Janet Horne

Janet Horne was an old woman who lived together with her daughter in Kintradwell, in the Sutherland parish of Loth, about twenty miles north of Dornoch in the Highlands of Scotland. The daughter had a deformity in one of her hands (some sources say hands and feet). Her superstitious neighbours thought that the deformities resembled the hooves of a pony and accused Janet Horne of being a witch and of changing her daughter into a pony so that she could ride around the countryside carrying out the Devil's work. The deformed hand was supposed to be proof that one night Janet failed to change her daughter back to human form. Both women were arrested for witchcraft and put in the old Tolbooth in Dornoch. The daughter managed to escape, but Janet was found guilty of witchcraft and sentenced to death (Munro 2004: 11, Hook 2005: 33–34). Allegedly, one of the tests Janet had to undergo during her trial was to repeat the Lord's Prayer in Gaelic. She made the mistake of saying: "Ar n-Athair a *bha* air neamth" [Our Father who *wert* in Heaven] instead of "Ar n-Athair a *tha* air neamth" [Our Father who *art* in Heaven]. As it was a common belief that a witch cannot recite the Lord's Prayer, this was regarded as proof positive that Janet worshipped the devil, and Janet was sentenced to be burned as a witch (Historylinks Museum). Michael Hook thus describes Janet's execution:

> Tradition has it that her execution took place on a dreich, bitterly cold early spring day in 1727. […] The poor old woman was stripped, tarred and feathered, and paraded about the town on the back of a cart as a warning to others never to follow her evil path. When she arrived at the side where she was supposed to be burned, Janet was said to have warmed her hands at the fire that was shortly to consume her, delighted by the warmth it offered on such a cold morning. This was a harmless old woman suffering from some form of advanced dementia, clearly completely unaware of where she was or what was about to happen to her. (Hook 2005: 34)

As Philip Paris writes in the Author's Notes in *The Last Witch of Scotland*, there appears to be no concrete evidence whether she was burned alive or strangled first – "wirreit at the stake" (the latter was the usual practice in Scotland). There are no surviving kirk session records for the parish of Loth for that part of the 1720s, and no court records regarding the case itself. Although *The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft* contains a record for "Janet Horne", there is some uncertainty about the name of the person who was executed. As Paris points out, "No name is given for many decades after the execution until 'Janet Horne' is suddenly mentioned and this has become the reference that has been used ever since. However, 'Jenny Horne' was apparently a generic term for a witch in early eighteenth-century Scotland so it does seem rather a coincidence" (Paris 2023, Author's Notes, 335).

In 1763, nine years after Janet Horne was burned, the Scottish Witchcraft Act was repealed when the British Parliament decided to repeal the parallel English act. The 1736 Act abolished the crime of witchcraft and replaced it with a new crime of "pretended witchcraft" with a maximum penalty of one year's imprisonment. The act of 1763 was not repealed in its entirety until 1951 (Goodare, Martin, Miller and Yeoman 2003).

Today, the story of "the last witch of Scotland" is part of the historical heritage of the Scottish Highlands. Her story features prominently in the permanent exhibition at the Dornoch

Historylinks Museum. Also, one of the present-day attractions of the town is the so-called "Witch's Stone", which marks the spot where Janet Horne met her tragic fate. There is no information on when the stone was erected, or by whom and the date on the stone – 1722 – is generally accepted to be a mistake.

3. The fictitious Janet Horne

The Last Witch of Scotland (2023) by Phillip Paris is a historical novel that tells the story of Janet Horne and her daughter Aila. Set in the Scottish Highlands in 1727, the novel follows Janet and her daughter as they move to a remote village after a tragic fire that killed Janet's husband and left Aila badly scarred. Struggling to fit into the superstitious community, the women become targets of suspicion when a zealous minister arrives, convinced witchcraft is at work. As fear and mistrust spread, Janet and Aila are accused of being witches and brought to trial. Aila manages to escape from the tolbooth the night before the execution, but Janet is burned alive.

In historical accounts of witch trials, the voices of the accused are often absent, reduced to fragments of testimony mediated by hostile clerks. Paris's novel fills this archival silence with fiction, foregrounding Janet and her daughter as protagonists. The novel blends historical realism with the imagined biographies of both women. It opens with a story of a tragic fire that kills Aila's father and burns her hands and feet as she attempts to save him. By opening with the explanation of Aila's deformities, Paris foregrounds the story firmly in realism, stripping the story of any supernatural dimension – her burns result from a tragic accident and nothing more. The first chapter also explores the relationship between Aila and her father as well as Janet and her husband. Their backstory is crucial to seeing them not just through what happened to them, but as protagonists in their own right.

The novel features both historical and fictional characters, and the narrative alternates between the first and third person

narratives. Paris decides to frame the story of Janet through the perspective of Aila producing a first-person intimacy that privileges memory, attachment, and wounded subjectivity over dry historical description. The narrative humanizes the accused women by describing their feelings and emotions and foregrounding the filial bond between mother and daughter as the novel's moral center. The embedded story of the travel troupe also expands the characterization of the protagonists and positions Janet and Aila as one of many people who lived on the margins of the communities in 18th-century Scotland.

From the opening, Paris presents both Janet and Aila as intelligent, educated, and opinionated, which is something that defies cultural expectations of the time. As one of the characters puts it: "Woman need to know their place and we men have a responsibility to show them what it is" (Paris 2023: 4).

The novel goes on to depict how, in pre-Enlightenment Scotland, women were often silenced. Paris offers a vivid portrayal of a world in which a woman's confidence in her own opinions is considered "unnatural" and marks her as a threat to the patriarchal order. Reverend McNeil, the temporary minister in Loth and the novel's most overtly patriarchal figure, interprets female independence as unmistakable evidence of the devil's influence. When he confronts Aila in Chapter Seven, and she refuses to be intimidated, he immediately takes her defiance as confirmation of her guilt:

> A tiny smile played at his lips which he tried to hide by taking a sip of the ale. The minister was enjoying this game of trying to catch me out, although to what purpose I couldn't fathom.
> 'I've heard that you and your mother are known in the area for being quarrelsome.'
> 'Then you've heard wrong.'
> 'You deny holding opinions that go against the natural order and that you announce them forcibly to others, even your betters?'
> 'There is no law against a woman holding an opinion, although there are some misguided people who would make out there is.

> Perhaps if you could give me an example of what you mean by quarrelsome, I could more easily set your mind at rest.'
> Any glimmer of humour faded from his face. […]
> 'Your obvious disrespect towards a minister of the kirk is not healthy!' (Paris 2023: 85–86)

Similarly, when Janet and Aila are summoned to a kirk session and questioned, the accusations revolve around being "unnaturally confident", holding "strong opinions" and feeling "equal to men" (216–217). The silencing of the female voice is most evident during their trial when Revered McNeil is repeatedly trying to silence Aila. When the Sheriff finally announces that he will not permit the accused to speak again, the fate of both women is sealed. As Aila puts it: "We're guilty of being women and of having no man to speak for us. We're guilty of being intelligent and educated, of speaking out when we see injustice or cruelty" (Paris 2023: 265).

Paris portrays both Aila and her mother as misunderstood and marginalized people. After moving to the village, they never really fit in. In *Czarownice: Niezwyciężona siła kobiet*[3] [The Witches: The Invincible Power of Women, my translation] Mona Chollet (2019) discusses various factors that would contribute to a woman being called a witch and lists the kind of women that were most likely to be accused: those who were economically independent, living alone without a male protector, childless and ageing. The characters of Janet and Aila Horne embody these traits. From the start, their economic situation marks them as outsiders:

> The land was fertile and we still had money enough to have sufficient stone brought in to build a much more substantial house than the usual low sod-and-turf constructions, where people and animals lived almost side by side during the winter months. We also had a stone barn built adjoining the house. Whether our coin

[3] The title of the original publication in French: *Sorcières. La puissance invaincue des femmes* (Editions La Decouverte, 2018).

> had been spent wisely was perhaps debatable, for it enforced in the minds of local people that we were different. (Paris 2023: 32).

Secondly, Aila is unmarried and childless. Moreover, her burns mark her as "abject" in Julia Kristeva's sense: her body does not conform to ideals of purity and beauty and thus becomes both fascinating and repellent. In her narrative, Aila repeatedly mentions people staring at her with horror and morbid curiosity. The fact that people recoil from her touch highlights her status of the Other. Since Aila's body cannot perform normative beauty, it destabilizes her social legibility as a woman. The community interprets this instability as moral deviance, a slippage that makes the accusations of witchcraft plausible. During the court case trial, her body is transformed into evidence – she is asked to take off her boots and show her feet to everyone present:

> I was grabbed roughly from behind and dragged down the stairs to stand in the open area, where all could see me clearly. Campbell [who] loved to show off his control and held my arms in such a tight grip that I was grimacing in pain. The officer was playing his part in a game where the rules had been written by powerful men. We all had our parts to play. (Paris 2023: 258)

Despite the overwhelming structures of control, Aila resists by first insisting on removing her boots herself and next by taking control of the narrative:

> People pushed forward and strained against the rope to obtain the best view and when I stood there were gasps of revulsion and fear from those who could see all my injuries. […] I turned my back on the sheriff, raised my arms high in the air and addressed the crowd with as much confidence as I could find within me.
>
> 'There…Hands and feet burned in a fire and nothing to do with ponies, evil deeds or the Devil practising his skills at the forge. […]'
>
> 'An accident is just that, but to deliberately burn a person is a wickedness that has no place in Dornoch amongst decent people.' (Paris 2023: 258–259)

Finally, the character of Janet Horne embodies another category of female vulnerability: old age. On the one hand, she is portrayed as an intelligent, educated woman who travelled abroad and can even speak Italian; on the other hand, her speech occasionally becomes fragmented, she is lost for words or behaves "inappropriately", for example, when she wanders off in the middle of the night and speaks to the moon, or throws the contents of the chamber pot over the minister. As Aila puts it, "It was as though she was losing some of her understanding of the normal rules that governed our lives" (Paris 2023: 109). Paris depicts Janet's old age and dementia with compassion, showing both moments of confusion and lucidity. Yet in the community's eyes, her muttering and forgetfulness become evidence of a pact with the devil. Janet's "strange behaviour" reinforces her construction as the Other, but she is also targeted because of her age. As Silvia Federici argues in *Caliban and the Witch*, post-menopausal women, who were freed from the demands of the reproductive labour, were often cast as socially expandable. Their persecution functioned as a means of eliminating female bodies that no longer served patriarchal or economic interests.

Paris's *The Last Witch of Scotland* thus functions not only as a historical reconstruction, but also as a feminist intervention that challenges patriarchal narratives embedded within both history and historiography. Through Aila's narrative voice, Paris reclaims a space for those women whose testimonies were erased or distorted by the male-authored records of witch trials. The novel turns what Foucault might call the "confessional apparatus" of witchcraft interrogation into an arena of resistance, in which speech, albeit constrained, becomes an act of defiance. The act of storytelling itself, framed through Aila's memory and embodied pain, counters the archival silence surrounding Janet Horne. By re-inscribing empathy and subjectivity into a story historically dominated by accusation and punishment, Paris transforms trauma into testimony. In this way, *The Last Witch of Scotland* invites readers to reconsider how narrative form can

restore agency to those historically denied a voice, particularly women whose lives were defined and destroyed by patriarchal systems of knowledge and control.

4. Conclusion

Paris's reimagining of Janet Horne's story foregrounds the intersections of gender, power, and violence that underpinned both the witch trials and their historical representation. The novel reframes the accused witches as kind, intelligent and open-minded women. Through the figures of Janet and Aila, Paris exposes the ways in which patriarchal societies construct physical and behavioural difference as a pretext for control. The violence enacted upon women's bodies in the novel becomes symbolic of the epistemic violence that silences female voices within history. By giving narrative authority to Aila, Paris offers a counter-discourse that challenges both the juridical logic of the eighteenth century and the historiographical silence that followed.

The novel also illustrates how the language of religion and law, as embodied by the figure of Reverend McNeil, functions as an instrument of discipline. The kirk's insistence on female obedience reflects what Foucault terms "the internalization of surveillance" – the process by which women learn to police their own speech and bodies (Peggy, Butcher's wife is a perfect example of this). Yet Aila and Janet resist this control through acts of speech and female solidarity. Their courage transforms the narrative from one of persecution into one of moral endurance and symbolic survival.

In the broader context of feminist historiography, *The Last Witch of Scotland* contributes to what Silvia Federici and Mona Chollet identify as a continuing need to recover suppressed female histories. Paris's fiction reclaims the witch not as an emblem of evil, but as a metaphor for women's resilience in the face of systemic oppression. Through its reimagining of the story of Janet Horne and her daughter, Paris's novel restores dignity to

those who were denied it in the past. Thus, in the case of *The Last Witch of Scotland*, the act of storytelling becomes an act of historical justice. At a time when intolerance and persecution are on the rise, the novel also serves as an important reminder of the past that should never be allowed to repeat itself.

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