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The Burning in its Historical Context“

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

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HINWEIS

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Szüleimnek, akik szeretete és támogatása nélkül ma nem lennék az, aki vagyok.

JAMES....You cannot have a man put down, without proof having been found against him. [...] Justice must *be seen* [my italics] to be done.¹

¹ Conn, Stewart. *The Burning*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1973. 18.

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1. Introduction

The case of North Berwick¹ doubtlessly constitutes the heart of those few large-scale national witch-hunts that attracted immense public attention and special political interests at the same time. Although it had begun as a relatively marginal affair, by the time the official hearings were held in Edinburgh – under the careful supervision of King James VI – the case was already becoming one of the most important and complex political crises Scotland ever saw. As the aim of this paper is to provide a critical comparison between the historical incident and its portrayal in Stewart Conn's play, *The Burning*, the importance of a vantage point, from which one can evaluate the fictionalized world of the playwright is truly crucial. Starting out from the accusation of Gilles Duncan – that had been perceived first by the local authorities as an act of simple sorcery – we shall see during the course of this thesis, how King James VI's unstable supremacy, his hasty marriage proposal to the Danish Princess Anna, together with his disputed succession to the English throne influenced and determined the fierce fanaticism of the upcoming witchcraft trials².

This work also aims to prove that the North Berwick witch-hunt was more than an indirect result of unfortunate coincidences, for as Barstow pointed out “public witch executions were more [...] than purging: they affirmed that the ruler who ordered them was godly, and even more important, that his power was greater than the forces of evil.” (143) It will be argued that, the case of North Berwick was nothing less than the disastrous consequence of a clever state propaganda and the predictable side-effect of a highly sophisticated state machinery. Given the fact that Conn's play lacks both extensive academic criticism and widespread public attention, this paper blazes its own trail as it invites the reader to draw a comparison between the historical background and the fictionalized events. In doing so, it displays a historical epoch that had a highly controversial and influential impact on Scottish history, valuable of serious critical attention “both in historical reality and [in] the dramatic

¹ The name is used in this study to refer only to the trials of 1590-1 and not to the whole national witch-hunt of 1590-7.

² Cf. Normand, Lawrence and Gareth Roberts. *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*. Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2000.

representation of history.” (Wetschka 1)

First, the author, Stewart Conn will be introduced (chapter 2), together with a plot summary and a short description of the origin and creation of his play. The early 1970s – when the play was staged – witnessed serious academic transitions concerning the reexamination and reevaluation of the stereotypical prejudices surrounding the court and person of King James VI and I. Yet the ruler Conn presented in *The Burning*, has many strikingly different characteristics than those suggested by the academic research of his time. These crucial differences between fact and fiction will be systematically analyzed and discussed.

The next chapter (chapter 3) explains the theoretical basis of the play, with particular emphasis on the relationship between witchcraft, absolutism and the doctrine of divine right. This conceptual introduction also aims to provide the reader with a comprehensive overview on the history of Scottish witchcraft and the most common stereotypes of witches.

Chapter 4 offers a detailed analysis of the historical and theatrical setting, timeline, (historical) background and the alleged conspiracy. Chapter 5 deals with the witchcraft trials. Chapter 6 identifies and measures the major characters of the play against their historical pairs, including those characters, whose historical counterpart is – out of various reasons – untraceable. These will be analyzed in an additional chapter, with a focus on their specific dramatic purpose.

Finally, the historical outcome (chapter 7) of the witch-hunt will be compared to Conn's fictional ending and the thesis will come to a conclusion.

2. *The Burning*

The following chapter aspires to introduce the reader to the author, Stewart Conn and his two-act play, *The Burning*. After sketching the theatre landscape of Edinburgh during the 1970s, the paper is going to focus on the historical significance, the main motives and the inspiration the author had while creating his fictional account of the past.

2.1. The Author – Stewart Conn

Stewart Conn was born in Glasgow on 5 November 1936, as the son of a Church of Scotland minister and a schoolteacher (Brown 2001, 78). It is hard to resist the temptation to assume a strict religious family background, a childhood kept in firm fatherly hands, and a culturally sensitive boy threatened by local shortsightedness. Such an assumption however, would be rather speculative. The major pull-factor that brought Conn to the theatre in his early twenties was his own desire to challenge and break with the pre-war traditions of Scottish drama, and not his authoritarian, uncompromising father, John Conn³. The new theatrical trend that emerged in the late 1950s in England offered Conn an excellent possibility to question and bring attention to the creation of a modern Scottish identity and a critical assessment of the historical past. His first major breakthrough came at the age of 25 with a play called *Break Down*⁴.

Stewart Conn, together with many of his contemporary fellow writers dreamed about staging the 'unique' Scottish identity, and were focused on creating a tradition that is able to unite the romanticized past – marked by the pioneering work of Sir Walter Scott – with a clear and adequate understanding of the country's present⁵. His early works show already signs of his “recurring interest

³ In an interview Stewart Conn states that his father “was enlightened in many of his attitudes” and neither tried to prescribe him what he should do with his life, nor did he persuade him to join any religious denominations or sects. (Nicholson 53).

⁴ *Break Down* was staged in the Citizen's Theatre in Glasgow in 1961.

⁵ Conn explored Scotland's national traditions and historical past along the lines of the new research and findings of such scholars as Professor Gordon Donaldson and Geoffrey Barrow

in mythic, literary, and historical models” (Brown 2001, 79), a cultural heritage, he readily applies in his later plays and poems as well. *The Burning* was staged ten years after Conn's first success as a playwright and marked at once the beginning of a new era in the history of Scottish national drama; partly because it breathed fresh air into the anglicized 'theatre machine' of Scotland, and partly because it was one of the first direction of the new, trendsetting general director Bill Bryden. Stewart Conn, as Brown aptly concluded, has deservedly been famous for his strident criticism over heavily loaded political issues – such as witchcraft, the misuse of royal power or the birth of the absolutist Scottish nation state – and thus contributed to the revival of a “modern Scottish identity” (2001, 79). Conn has also welcomed from the very beginning the constructive dismissal of the sentimental drama tradition and contributed actively to the advent of a new theatrical era where 'creativity' and 'modern interpretation' became the first and foremost watchwords. According to Brown, this successive generation of Scottish playwrights appearing in the early 1970s were the ones who championed the national and political cause of Scotland in front of the British government and the wider world (1996, 85).

Conn, who has remained an active playwright until this very day, appears to be a seemingly ambivalent person: on the one hand, he is a mentor, who has firmly guided the development of Scottish literature and music during the past decades, but on the other, he is “a typically restless figure”, a cultural daredevil, someone who “engages, excites, and even enraptures his audiences.” (Brown 2001, 83) Unlike most of his contemporary compatriots (Tom McGrath and Liz Lochhead) – says Brown – Conn has not yet been a household name in Scottish national poetry when he turned to the genre of drama. As an author, who is highly self-aware and reflective of his personal environment, Conn believes to “hear the voices”, which later serve and influence him “to give them poetic or dramatic expression.” (Brown 2001, 78) These voices have eventually become manifest throughout the last five decades in a diverse stylistic and typological artistic range. As time passed by Conn learned to master “both arts [poetry and drama] with equal fluency” (Brown 2001, 78). In 2006, after *Chapman*, one of Scotland's most celebrated literary journals published a

(Brown 1996, 85).

special issue on the occasion of Stewart Conn's seventieth birthday, there was little doubt about whether he is considered as a poet or a dramatist in his motherland. The front cover remembered him as “the Lyric Muse” and praised him for his poetic achievements throughout the last decades. Although, Colin Nicholson argues in his article that “like any true poet, Conn is *un autre* in Arthur Rimbaud's phrase – an outsider, observing society, art, his life” (79), it is difficult to decide whether his poetry or his plays carry more personal, intimate and inward characteristics. The complex linguistic differences between his poems and plays – in his poems he usually uses standard English, whereas in the plays he employs both Scots and English dialogues (Brown 2001, 78), – seem to reveal significant artistic and historical purposes and suggest an exceptionally talented way of differentiating ancient Scottish traditions from the English cultural heritage. Ian Crichton Smith noted that “the interesting thing about his [Conn's] work is that it has got better and more individual the more he has progressed.” (Crichton Smith qtd. in Brown 2001, 82) In any case, when Conn retired in 1992 from BBC Scotland, to concentrate more on his literary career, he meant a return both to his beloved poems and to tackle new challenges of the stage.

2.2. Re-visiting the Scottish Court of King James VI

As mentioned earlier, *The Burning* takes its place in the revisionist theatrical tradition, which means that Conn strives to join the ends of the heroic past and its contemporary reflection. He considers the bridge between past and present to be the uniformity of fundamental human nature. “Our own age” – he writes at the beginning of the play – “is as 'mocking and hostile' as that of James and Bothwell; as brutal towards those caught in the middle of any battle of creeds, or for power; and as ready to identify 'evil' with the other side.” (Conn, Author's Note) So, while *The Burning* is, on the one hand, a play of historical importance in Scottish national drama, on the other, it was rather the theatrical potential Conn had in mind than the historical magnitude of the theme when he was writing it. His original attempt was to explore and reflect upon such universal themes as dishonesty, disloyalty, blood feud, (high) treason and superstition

through the lens of the royal court and King James VI's Scotland. In Conn's view, we experience the cycles of history as repetition, thus the errors of the past are hardly acknowledged as mistakes at the time they are made and future generations find themselves again and again facing the same problems their forefathers did. The more deeply and critically one contemplates about his history however, the more significant the insight he gains will be. The human tragedy, which is gradually unfolding as *The Burning* progresses, places a politically and mentally neurotic king (James VI) and a vile rebel (Bothwell) into its centre, whose struggle against each other can either be seen as a fight of the titans (for leadership and power) or as a spiteful desire for revenge cloaked as a divine hunt for witchcraft. The appeal of their conflict is that – due to their privileged position – none of them has to take responsibility for their demented drives or drastic actions. Those who suffer the consequences (in the play and in reality as well) are either innocent or indirectly related to the ringleaders.

The idea that the Devil was hunting James VI in the shape of the Black Earl (Bothwell) – his own cousin Francis Stewart – and many other local sorcerers is central in *The Burning*. In reality however, James VI was rather skeptical about the possibility of a magical conspiracy until he recognized – either out of fear or with the help of a third person (probably his Chancellor, Lord Maitland) – the political and diplomatic potential of the accusations⁶. The frantic witchcraft paranoia – that demands more and more victims – is portrayed in *The Burning* on the one hand, as a supernatural phenomenon aiming at the total destruction of James VI, and on the other, as a legal crime that is cleverly used against the fearful and cautious King. The bitter fight that results out of James VI's deep-seated feud against his own cousin reveals some, rather complex and perplexing question: whose pride and ambition is more overweening? Whose oversensitivity and arrogance exposes the country to bigger danger?

While Bothwell is strengthened by his 'genuine' Scottish identity and dubious moral advantage, the government and the law are on James's side. Bothwell resists James VI's oppressive ways with bravery and courage and his thorough

⁶ Such an assumption provides a logical explanation for the fading interest of the monarch towards supernatural issues after his claims for the English throne seemed to bring success at the end of the sixteenth-century.

understanding and compassion for those who are not in favour of English-friendly politics make him appear as a rational relativist and not a hot-headed rebel. James VI, on the other hand, is the legitimate ruler of Scotland, someone who believes that his birthright is God-given and eternal, and as such, refuses to see his judgement less than wise and divine. In other words, Bothwell symbolizes Scotland as it once in the mythological times was (fierce and wild), whereas James represents Scotland's future (covert and devious). The identity of the 'real' evildoers becomes less and less evident towards the end of the play, and, finally, what is left is a petty rivalry camouflaged as a deadly conspiracy.

Besides, the audience gains a deeper insight – on a symbolic level – into the bitter power battles of the Reformed Church for more authority and significance as well. These ongoing religious and political machinations are partly addressed in overt conversations, but most of the time are introduced to the audience indirectly in connection with an alleged witchcraft conspiracy.

2.3. Plot

The Burning consists of two different plot-lines which run parallel in Act 1 and interweave later at the beginning of Act 2. The main plot deals with the political intrigues and machinations of the Scottish royal court during the reign of King James VI, while the sub-plot focuses on the social and religious double-dealings of the people from Tranent.

The action is set in Scotland (possibly) in the year of 1590, just before the outbreak of the North Berwick accusations. After a brief reflection on the remarkable year of 1563, when the first official Witchcraft Act was passed in England and Scotland, the focus of the play shifts to the local community of Tranent, the countryside near Edinburgh. Gilles Duncan, housemaid of the local

deputy bailiff David Seaton has repeatedly left her home in the middle of the night, in order to 'heal with her hands'. Local rumour has it that, she joins forces with the Devil and serves him secretly instead of helping the ailing in need. While her master is desperately searching the countryside for her, the royal chamber of Holyrood is concerned with the temporary release of King James' VI cousin Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell. Bothwell has been long suspected to plan a coup d'état against his legitimate ruler, yet no persuasive evidence has been found against him so far. His eventual freeing from the state prison is assumed to boost his self-consciousness and irresponsibility high enough as to encourage him to take control over the conspiring group again. His closest 'partner in crime' – as it soon turns out – is his 'queen-of-hearts', Effie McCalyan, who is the wife of a wealthy noble statesman. Meanwhile in Tranent, Gilles has been found guilty of witchcraft and her actual interrogation (meaning serious physical torture) is being conducted by her own master and the local smith. Her cruel examination inevitably results in her psychological breakdown, which substantially contributes to her final willingness to confess anything her torturers want to hear. She provides all 'information' about their planned kirkyard meeting in North Berwick, thus a raid is possible to launch in order to capture the conspirators, but Bothwell – who has been indeed present at the meeting seconds before the officers attacked – miraculously escapes the royal army. Effie – among many others (Doctor Fian) – is led away before his very eyes in chains.

Act 2 opens with a clear proclamation about the necessity of executing all women who chose to have served the Devil indicating the recent parliament's attitude towards suspicious members of society. After that, James VI learns the tragic news on the impotent kirkyard attack and begins to hope for further evidence on Bothwell's participation and guilt. Meanwhile the royal herald (another collaborator) appears in Bothwell's house and does his utmost to encourage his fellow to seek shelter in the Highlands. Bothwell remains seemingly selfish and negligent concerning the capture of Effie, but he rejects the idea of fleeing from his house. Parallel to this, the long and humiliating interrogation of Effie McCalyan leads to a disastrous verdict: she is found guilty of witchcraft and political conspiracy and is sentenced to be burned alive on the

stake the following day. At this point the audience waits with bated breath for Bothwell's courageous intervention, who has apparently disappeared without a trace. When the eventual execution has taken place, the audience is once again presented with the royal bedchamber of Holyrood where the sleeping James VI is suddenly surprised by Bothwell. Against all expectations the rebellious Earl has no intentions of killing the King, but 'only' wishes to regain his titles and offices in the royal court. The action of the last scene shines a different light on the tragic death of Effie McCalyan which is further seen as nothing more than an unnecessary blood sacrifice. The play comes to an inconclusive end: Bothwell slips out of the hands of the royal guards, thanks mostly to his own wits and the naïve bravery of his adherents. Also James survives the vicious assault on his monarchy, which seems rather an interplay of lucky coincidences than the merit of his intelligence and quality in leadership.

3. The Theoretical Foundations of the Play

3.1. Witchcraft

An attempt to touch upon all theoretical approaches of witchcraft is a task that can never be completed. The reason for this is quite simple: the number of feasible explanations and theories concerning the practices of witches and (diabolical) sorcerers has been – since the beginning of humankind – constantly growing and diversifying. Therefore, providing a generally 'acceptable' definition for the term 'witchcraft' is difficult and in most of the cases misleading rather than helpful. This particular difficulty of finding a suitable explanation for what is understood under the generic term 'witchcraft' is pointed out by *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* as well, which offers the following, rather inconclusive answer: the “belief in witchcraft is universal⁷, but there is no universal definition of 'witchcraft'” (Guiley 366). The belief in witches has always been an essential part of spirituality, albeit its meaning has changed considerably throughout history. Thus in witchcraft we face with an exceptionally rich and volatile set of activities that cannot bear any simplistic label. Similarly, its theory is also far from exclusive, all approaches may carry some truth, but they are all incomplete alone, for “complex problems of this type [witches and witchcraft]” as Robin Briggs had said “never have simple, or precisely identifiable causes.” (53)

The ongoing intellectual debates concerning the core matter of (western) witchcraft and its very existence seems to have no end even today. Witchcraft has always been real for those who believe deeply in its efficacy and remains superstitious for those who reject it on rational grounds. Mircea Eliade⁸ argues that the liberal rational understanding of witchcraft denies it because of the numerous magical elements it was believed to contain, while at the same time,

⁷ According to Lara Apps and Andrew Gow, post-modern scholarship found the idea of a 'universal witchcraft belief' too consistent and authoritative, therefore it looked rather at the social, economic, biological and meteorological factors of individual cases in order to gain new and more valuable insights. (14).

⁸ Mircea Eliade. *Okkultizmus, boszorkányság és kulturális divatok*. Budapest: Osiris könyvtár, 2005. 87-117. The Hungarian translation was based on the book entitled *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*. Chicago: UP of Chicago. 1976. Neither the English nor the German volume was available at the time of writing this thesis.

the ultra-conservative interpretation accepted the witchcraft accusations of the Inquisition, simply on the grounds of the existence of evil. This means that while on the one hand, witches were thought to go beyond the borders of human logic, since nobody could carry out feasible empirical 'tests' to verify their realness, the existence of the malicious practitioners of witchcraft remained only perceptible for those who believed in the harmful power of evil⁹. To complicate things further, the meaning of witchcraft has also been much more blurred than it seems from today's perspective, because

there was at least as much disagreement among Elizabethan and Jacobean writers on the subject as there is today. Scholars happily drew fine distinctions between witches and wise women, magicians and necromancers, but unfortunately their definitions rarely coincided and, moreover, what relevance their academic hair-splitting had for the general populace, including both witches and bewitched, is highly doubtful. (Harris 1)

Starting out from the fact that the question whether witchcraft a crime, a religious heresy or just plain nonsense is has been asked innumerable times in the previous centuries, it is rather unsurprising that its theoretical study has also grown into a vast subject of numerous disciplines and research fields over the same time. This however also means that, any serious scientific analysis inevitably will result in a fragmented selection. Anthony Harris pointed out in 1980 that “there are almost as many theories as to the nature and origins of witchcraft as there are works – scholarly and otherwise – on the subject.” (1) Oddly enough, the numerous attempt to explain the phenomenon did not result into a final conclusive insight; our understanding of the supernatural is – though volatile – still limited, and the 'secret' of witchcraft has not yet been sufficiently explored. The chief reason why witchcraft still resists categorization, and eludes any specific definition is the fact that its cultural background is too diverse. It is such a phenomenon, which on the one hand is still very much alive (as a crime) especially in some African countries and South-Caribbean cultures, whereas on the other hand (in Western cultures) it is – after it lost its religious dimension –

⁹ An interesting, albeit controversial point is made by Robin Briggs, who suggested that humans – just like rabbits which have a “hawk detector” – have a natural 'device' (a “witch-detector”) 'built genetically' into their bodies (Gaskill 5), in order to feel the chosen ones of the Devil.

only is accepted as a neo-pagan religion focusing on nature and fertility¹⁰. Being labeled a 'witch' today (in Europe) is considered improper rather than deeply offensive or dangerous. We are no longer afraid of the 'ugly old hag' – the witch – living on the edge of the village. There are however cultures and people who tend to believe in the destructive nature of bewitchment and the power of magic, and thus a sudden, fierce attack by supposed witches is for them possible any time.

This study deals with witchcraft from a historical point of view and focuses exclusively on the North Berwick accusations of 1590-1, which are also known as the first hunts in Scotland that served chiefly political purposes. In view of this, it would perhaps go too far to include a wide range of information on witchcraft from other fields of studies, such as psychology, anthropology or theology. Each of these disciplines has its own approaches and methodological foundations – a short summary of all of these could not be anything but misleading, besides, it would do little justice to the recent research in witchcraft. The aim of this chapter is rather to highlight and define key terms, outline beliefs and arguments which are either central to the general historical idea of witchcraft or focus on its political importance. Furthermore, it also attempts to introduce the basic terminology and to place witchcraft into a coherent theoretical context.

3.1.1. What is Witchcraft? – A Short Historical Overview

The belief in magic, sorcery and witchcraft has had an enormous influence on humankind and became a powerful and inevitable element of its spiritual evolution throughout history.

Although the Western world saw times (like the seventeenth-century) when this

¹⁰ This fertility religion has its roots in the early nineteenth-century, was based on the findings of the British Egyptologist Margaret Murray, and became by the mid twentieth-century one of the most influential esoteric movements of the western world.

primeval belief was doubted and harshly rejected by skeptics and by those who proclaimed the superiority of the rational mind, the intuitive belief in the paranormal powers of sorcerers and witches together with their secret activities has never completely disappeared from the human mind.

As it was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the subject of witchcraft provokes many questions and there is no single argument or explanation that answers all of these. Approaches which suggest that witchcraft and sorcery are to be attributed exclusively to primitive cultures must be treated critically. Witchcraft was originally founded on the spiritual notion that the cosmos was a complete whole, a unity of perceivable and hidden forces treated as a “part of an accepted and vibrant reality, integral to everyone's culture and mentality.” (Gaskill 10)

In view of this, the innate belief in witchcraft can never be an indicator of a primitive and uneducated mind, but rather an inevitable symptom of times torn in sociological turmoil and religious fear. Witchcraft denotes one of the oldest traditions of humankind, in which inborn or learned skills are supposed to evoke and control ubiquitous (yet for the eye of the layman hidden) 'supernatural'¹¹ forces, providing the population with the essential missing 'grip' upon the mysterious and unknown. The following definition – which was provided by Christina Lerner at the beginning of the 1980s – captures exactly this psychological dimension of the phenomenon:

witchcraft [in general] is supernatural evil. Individual witches are evil persons, and individual acts of witchcraft are specific evil acts which are performed through supernatural powers. The characteristic ingredients of an act of witchcraft are that the witch should feel malice towards an individual who has offended her, and that through cursing, incantation, sorcery, or the sheer force of her will, should cause illness or death to the livestock, family, or person of the individual concerned.
(1981, 7)

Another strong supporting evidence for the psychological importance of

¹¹ Jeffrey B. Russell makes an interesting point when he argues against such strict divisions as 'natural' and 'supernatural'. He points out that the boundary between these terms is continually being adjusted, and therefore what we see today as something 'supernatural' might (as soon as science is able to provide a feasible answer for it) turn to something 'natural' tomorrow. (12-13).

witchcraft is the existence of such countries (in Africa and the South-Caribbean), where some women and men officially claim (even today) to possess special abilities to heal the sick or punish the guilty. The function of 'low sorcery' (witchcraft) in these place today is often to complement religious rites or to fight against malicious magical spells. These activities – similarly to the Medieval European folk traditions – is supposed to give a certain sense of general security and ease to all members of the community¹².

During the Age of Enlightenment witchcraft was readily labeled as a 'metaphysically impossible' phenomenon, partly because contemporary scholarship could keep appropriate distance from the events and beliefs of the Early Modern Age, and partly because the era of rationalism raised humans beside the Christian God, celebrated their characteristics such as willpower, supreme physical condition and intelligence as exclusive and godlike¹³. This new insight – followed by international industrialization – consequently denoted the advent of an enormous change in the scientific approaches of the intellectuals, for it contributed to a seemingly fresh insight into witchcraft and led eventually to its final disappearance from the legal court cases by the middle of the eighteenth-century .

Rationalists also claimed that people who feel more in control of their lives believe less in harmful diabolical sorcery. Could this possibly mean that witchcraft accusations only decreased when international industrialization brought better living conditions and higher living standards for local communities? Or is it rather unlikely that the better social circumstances alone could bring about such a significant change? Guiley provides the following explanation for these central questions: at historical times when religion found its essential balance with the state, practitioners of magic were only seldom persecuted, while at other times, when countries found themselves in social and religious turmoil (as during the period of Reformation) witches turned quickly into suspicious, maleficent figures ('the secret enemy within') in league with the

¹² This link between sorcery and religion became in some cases so tight in some societies that religious rites were considered generally less valuable (or even useless) without the help of diverse magical practices." (Russell 18-19).

¹³ "Men would no longer feel any admiration or veneration for God, if he no longer surpassed them, and if they could boast that they were as clever as he." (Gassendi quoted in Febvre 190).

Devil. It is more likely that the essential change – which was brought by the industrial revolution and the Age of Science – was massively reinforced by the possibility of more and better education. (370) The anthropological approach (developed in the early twentieth-century) complemented this traditionalist (rationalist) notion of witchcraft and presented it as a functional and essential part of every society. It also has provided the academic world with a plausible explanation for the perennial presence of magical practices and sorcery in virtually every society. By divining the future, it was argued, magical practitioners offered answers (and possibly remedies) for unexplainable misfortunes, provided a rapid output for anger and rage, and above all, strengthened the psychological bond between the population. Yet the assumption that basic functionalism was the only aim of witchcraft seems to be pure scientific speculation, a rather far-fetched notion, because nobody can be completely certain about the spiritual life of long deceased cultures. Besides, the anthropological approach to witchcraft tends to discredit certain sets of fantastical elements, given the fact that most of the detailed Early Modern descriptions about Sabbaths, magical flights and shape-shifts were gained under (the threat of) physical torture. Witchcraft, at this stage of scientific research was unfortunately far too often interpreted according to the strict realist epistemology, which resulted on subjective and biased assumptions even in modern times. (Apps 10)

The first wave of widespread (pseudo-historical) interest in witchcraft, together with the notion of magic and sorcery (both on a scholarly and lay level) was the byproduct of the Romantic era. People began to show substantial interest towards witches and their activities because the period in question seemed mysteriously dark and (temptingly) passionate. Behringer however, has argued convincingly when he claimed that the history of European witchcraft was consciously constructed by leading intellectuals of the age, and what later was proudly presented as an ancient cultural heritage was nothing, but a result of scholarly misconceptions and misunderstandings. His constructive dismissal of earlier scientific approaches to European witchcraft revealed a constant state of invention and tradition making. (6)

Let us take a brief look at three examples of dated approaches (Michelet,

Murray and Summers) before considering their modern counterparts.

The idea that people who lived hundreds of years ago had more to be afraid of¹⁴ and that their life was more chaotic or complicated proved to be just as false as the assumption that assigned witchcraft to the 'Dark Middle Ages'. Early modern Europeans might have understood far less about such factors as their physical environment, psychological situation, or climatic changes, but they never had to face the threat of nuclear weapons, terror attacks or high-tech warfare. Fear is present in virtually every age and society, it is only the degree of it that varies. Today we know that there are more important factors, which have all played important roles in the dynamics of witchcraft.

These are for example, the individual religious views, the geographical location, the climatic situation, the vital matrix of one's social relationships and the cultural context.

One of the first women who devoted herself enthusiastically to the study of witchcraft was the prominent British Egyptologist and anthropologist Margaret Murray. She provided a highly sentimental (and popular) explanation for the extensive witch-hunts of the early Renaissance and firmly believed that witchcraft was the romantic revival of a pagan fertility cult. According to Gaskill Murray received some constructive criticism, but most scholars simply ignored her. (25) Her lasting heritage nonetheless seems to prevail in contemporary neo-pagan movements and religions.

Another self-appointed intellectual who (according to Briggs) believed strongly in his expertise in the field of witchcraft (but failed to maintain it) was Montague Summers. Summers was a peculiar English author and clergyman, who explained witchcraft on terms of a direct side-effect of the ongoing change considering religious paradigms in the middle ages. He saw witches as 'devil worshipers' (Briggs 51) and insisted upon the existence of such devastating

¹⁴ The idea that people lived in an 'Age of Dispair' during the early modern period originates from the French historian Jules Michelet. Michelet claimed in the middle of the nineteenth-century that people lived in constant fear from witches and sorcerers and they generally saw their environment as hostile and dangerous. Eventually, this persistent distress or anxiety led to the persecution of masses of guiltless people. For further details see Michelet, Jules. *La Sorcière*. Paris: 1862.

creatures who collaborate with powers of the underworld and acknowledge the Devil as their primary master and commander.

Given that “much of what we [being part of the Western European tradition] think about witches comes from [...] [the] tradition of Enlightenment and Romantic scholarship¹⁵,” it is undeniable that our ideas about the supernatural are also radically influenced by the arguments of these past ages, even if they classified witchcraft as mere superstition, as our ancient pagan heritage or as a social and legal construction.

Today, the ongoing arguments are much less about whether witchcraft is a potential threat, the wrath of a malicious, evil person or simply a byproduct of some people's wicked fantasy – but about the hidden social dynamics and cultural implications it carries. Witchcraft is never seen as an end in itself, but an indicator that refers to “something else, something hidden or intangible.” (Gaskill 13) Robin Briggs calls witchcraft a special sort of historical 'illuminator' that “can help us to reconstruct the distinctive social and intellectual character of a past age.” (50)¹⁶ Nowadays, scholars also know that human evolution is not characterized by a linear development. The Middle Ages were by no means 'dark' and people were not gradually turning into rational, enlightened intellectuals. There is no doubt that this supposition was more than appealing in the eighteenth-century, but in reality nothing could be further from the truth. Witchcraft was neither an organized pagan cult as Murray suggested, nor a fierce attack on God's kingdom organized by Satan as Summers argued. It has been rather the major political conspiracies and socio-religious factors that played an important role in eliciting the harsh witch-hunts. Moreover as Guiley puts it, “bad crop years, plagues and infectious illnesses that spread throughout villages also contributed to searches of scapegoats.” (368)

15 Apps, Lara and Andrew Gow. *Male witches in early modern Europe*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003. 15.

16 Malcolm Gaskill shares the same opinion and understands witchcraft as “a glimpse into the intimate spaces and intricate mechanisms of past lives.” (3) Although, one needs to be cautious when it comes to establishing 'facts' and reconstructing dated belief-systems. According to Keith Jenkins facts become generally accepted as 'valid' and 'true' because of an “external theory of significance” is imposed on them (Apps 7).

The second part of the previous century saw two significant developments which influenced the study of witchcraft. Anthropologists and historians, such as Hugh Trevor-Roper, Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas argued that people have always had close relations to witchcraft (a relevant and natural part of their everyday life¹⁷), and recognized that western sorcery is neither time- nor culture-bound, which means that there are certain patterns that recur in all witchcraft cases. This new scholarship also acknowledged the relevance and importance of regional folk beliefs, fears and superstitions in gaining a better insight into the dynamics of witchcraft. (Levack 1992 Vol.1, ix). The radical change which followed opened up formerly accepted horizons and the findings of other fields of research, psychology, geography, medicine and gender studies were for the first time taken into consideration.

3.1.2. Stereotypical Witches and Their Deeds

“When the enemy has no face, society will invent one.¹⁸”

Magical services were, according to Maxwell-Stuart, already part of the Antique world, but they “did not actually constitute anything like a pseudo- or unofficial religious cult”, or provided “a coherent theology of its own.” (2000, 22) Consequently, the ancient Greco-Romans differentiated between six different types of witches, which were categorized into either *strix*, *lamia*, *saga*, or into *sortilega*, *venefica* and *Thessalia*¹⁹ (Maxwell-Stuart 2000, 29). Given the fact

17 See Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 1997., Macfarlane, Alan. *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1970. Trevor-Roper, Hugh R.. *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A masterly study of Early Modern Europe in the grip of a collective psychosis*. London: Penguin, 1990.

18 Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown, 1991. 68.

19 A *strix* was considered to be an old woman who was able to change her shape by magic. The *lamia* was a mythological figure whose main power laid in her ability to devour people (especially children). The word *saga* gradually became equal with the 'diviner', who was able to influence the upcoming events, whereas the powers of the *sortilega* only enabled her to interpret but not to shape the future. *Veneficia* meant in Latin 'the maker of herbal potions', while *Thessalia* denoted a woman from Thessaly who was supposed to have an extraordinary command over nature.

that Early Modern English language applied the word 'witch' to all kinds of malefice, – carried out both by males and females – the theory which assumed that witch-hunts were targeted exclusively against women seems to be rather far-fetched. One of the best counter-examples of such theories blaming misogynist clerics for the witch-craze is the case of North Berwick (1590-7), which produced more than one prominent male defendants. At first the notorious witch-doctor John Fian was accused (1590), then three years later Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell found himself among those who were suspected of using the illicit ways of diabolical witchcraft. The Earl's thorough interest in sorcery was eventually identified as an involvement in a magical political conspiracy against the life of his cousin, King James VI of Scotland.

The crime for which the alleged witches were tried during the Early Modern Age involved both the practice of secretive, harmful magic (*maleficium*) and a voluntary pact with the Devil (Levack 1992, ix). According to *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, “accusations of witchcraft usually started with simple sorceries: [...] the accused usually had had an argument with a neighbor or had been overheard muttering complaints or curses. They were often tortured, sometimes in the most cruel and barbaric manner, until they died or confessed to black witchcraft and worshipping the Devil.” (Guiley 368)

The list of (supposed) malefice constituted two major categories during the Early Modern Period. In the first category we find practices widely sought after by the general public. Under this broader public scholars usually understood mostly uneducated, illiterate laymen who were eager “to manipulate love, cure intractable diseases, uncover the future, and harm those one perceives as enemies.” (Maxwell-Stuart 2000, 27) Among them the need for sorcerers and their magical chants, potions and charms has always been beyond question. In the second category are such concepts which were popularized by the learned demonologists of the early Middle Ages onwards, possibly starting with the first Christian explanations and descriptions of evil forces by Augustine. These included the capability of witches to fly during the night to large summons called the Witches' Sabbath, entering a treacherous pact with the Devil while feeding their familiars from a certain point of the body called the Devil's mark, shape-

shifting, copulation with the Satan or storm raising. Noticeably, the characteristics mentioned in the second category were often admitted under torture and physical mutilation, or under the threat of them. Witchcraft was considered to be a special crime which needed 'special' means of inspection, a supernatural crime, which served as a hotbed for abuse and misuse of the existing legal laws. These latter traits mentioned above might sound superstitious or even silly today, but for people who pledged (eternal) subservience to God and feared the evil forces which they firmly believed were constantly endangering the heavenly kingdom, the threat of witchcraft with all its peculiar features was seriously real and tangible. Moreover, Guiley has aptly pointed out that in some cases when the interests or political future of nobles or royals were believed to be divined and thus endangered (as in the case of North Berwick), “the crime had the potential of becoming a charge of treason.” (368)

Although there are some regional differences between cultures, for the western European tradition the most familiar stereotype was first and foremost an old, single (widowed) woman, who (out of various reasons) became burdensome for their communities. She was often known as a wise-woman or cunning-person, was believed to possess the talent to heal with the help of herbs, charms or chants. Most of the alleged witches originated from the poor class with serious financial problems, their nature was exceptionally trouble- and quarrelsome – a result of lacking patriarchal regulation²⁰. The difference between those who practiced beneficent sorcery and those who caused harm was vague and uncertain. The suspicion of such secret practices as witchcraft often left people defenceless against the mistrust and rage of their communities, which labeled them the “disguised enemy within.” (Gaskill 1)

As long as people in Antiquity had a clear understanding of what 'white' and 'black' magic means and distinguished between six different kinds of magical practices, intellectuals of the Early Modern Period turned against all magical activities and tried to extirpate even those who considered themselves healers

²⁰ Cf. J.A. Sharpe. *Instruments of Darkness – Witchcraft in England 1500-1750*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996. 63.

or members of the cunning-folk. Witchcraft was at that time traditionally considered as a severely harmful part of mechanical sorcery, which involved “invisibility, shape shifting, [...] flying, the ability to kill at a distance, clairvoyancy and astral projection.” (Guiley 366) The character of the witch was ambiguous as well: (s)he could be treated as a healer or a hag, a demonic amazon or a cunning medicine man, a 'black' magician or a 'white' magician, a feared intellectual or a local lunatic. By all means the figure with a pointed black hat riding in the middle of the night through the graveyard on a single broomstick together with a dark animal (in most cases a cat or a raven) cannot be further away from the one that took the breath of Early Modern Europeans away. There is another myth featuring the appearance of the witch that was disseminated by learned demonologists of the Early Modern Period: the image of the lustful, passionate, young seductress (hysterical and unreasonable) – an easy victim of the Devil – was more than a commonplace. Classical examples of such notorious witches are Circe and Medea, both women, and both beautiful and ruthlessly wicked beyond expectation. As it has been pointed out by Lara Apps “women were by pre-modern lights more prone to weak-mindedness, but men were by no means immune; and like women, foolish men, represented threats to the (patriarchal) social order.” (13). The assumption that male witches indeed existed and have always been part of the whole picture of witchcraft historiography proved to be hard to justify. Such a misunderstanding might have been possible because of “the use of feminine in the title of *Malleus maleficarum* [which] suggests that all witches are female.” (Apps 4) Statistically, male witches were prosecuted and executed in virtually every age and society – though not in as many as female witches. During the European Witch-craze (1500-1700) out of ten executed witches only two were men.

In sum, our highly romanticized notions of a witch, who is the antagonist of all fairy tales, the evil-minded, silly old hag who receives her deserved punishment at the end of the book, has nothing common with the witch of the Early Modern people (as it has been mentioned before), who fitted “into a coherent view of the world” (Russell 12), which alone made her (him) scarcely a mere superstition, but rather a tangible threat. This modern image – which is neither folkloric nor historically credible and valuable – are part of a tradition that is “reinforced at

Halloween” and “hard-wired into us all” (Gaskill 3-5). The rather 'intoxicating fantasy' that surrounds witches today is responsible for calling inevitably timeless, but at the same time false myths into life.

3.1.3. Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland

As mentioned earlier, understanding witchcraft in the Early Modern Era is impossible without understanding the specific contextual circumstances and belief systems of Early Modern Europeans. In other words, understanding witchcraft is impossible without understanding the relative nature of our historical context. Lucien Febvre made an important point when he argued that “the mentality of the most enlightened men at the end of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the seventeenth century must have differed radically from the mentality of the most enlightened men of our age.” (Burke 191) The crime of witchcraft would never have cost the lives of a hundred thousand people in Europe alone if local communities had not believed in the physical existence of witches²¹. Moreover, as Behringer has argued “the assumption of primitivism also fails to fit the experience of early modern Europe, where score of educated people firmly believed in the existence of witches and urged their prosecution, for instance the famous French lawyer and economist Jean Bodin (1530-96), or James VI/I, king of Scotland (1566-1625, r. 1567-1625) and England (r. 1603-25).” (6)

Although it was the Bible that established primarily the close connection between witches and rebels²², the idea enjoyed a major revival during the Early Modern Period. (Levack 2008, 98) The development of most of the nation-states together with the religious Reformation brought enormous social changes to Continental Europe, most of which could later be perceived in Scotland as well. The secret deeds of witches were compared to those committed by the Devil against God, thus the crime of witchcraft was soon subjected to intense intellectual research. (Levack 2008, 98)

²¹ Cf. Trevor-Roper, Hugh R.. *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A masterly study of Early Modern Europe in the grip of a collective psychosis*. London: Penguin, 1990. 47.

²² Cf. “Witchcraft is as the sin of rebellion” (1 Samuel 15:23).

Darren Oldridge has pointed out that in Scotland, one of the first actions of the Reformed Church was the forbidding of the Catholic Mass, which weakened significantly the central papal control. Moreover, the invention of printing made internal communication between central authorities and their local jurisdictions better and more effective, which prompted a daily circulation of official papers, and improved “the development of administrative systems” (Oldridge 201) fundamentally. Finally, there were also significant changes in legal conventions, which aimed to place the government into the central position, instead of offering too much power to alternative jurisdictions such as church courts. (Oldridge 201)

It has been argued that in such countries, where all of these factors were present at the same time, the birth of the 'modern nation-state' was soon to be expected.

But how are these revolutionary changes related to witches and witchcraft?

It has been suggested that the combination of the above mentioned factors resulted in a so-called 'confessional state' that was characterized by such “political entities [that] identified with one religious denomination, and [...] [since they possessed] the means to impose standards of belief and behaviour on their populations”, they were soon turning into despotic unities. (Oldridge 201) Given the fact that witchcraft and sorcery have always been furtive and partly unexplainable, which symbolized the reversion of all traditional values (in Christian countries at least), with the reformation of the Scottish legal system, the crime became more than just a moral felony. Christina Lerner argued that “the advantage of witchcraft over other crimes in this context is that it sums up all forms of non-conformity” (2002, 202), and thus it provides an excellent collective name for all sorts of grievances, from personal complaints to high treason.

Although there are serious limitations to the theory of Oldridge and Levack²³

²³ For further details see Levack, Brian. “State-Building and Witch Hunting in Early Modern

considering the relationship between state-building and witch-hunting²⁴, Scotland seems to be a prime example for finding the evil more often, when the legal circumstances allowed it.

Levack named four major elements²⁵ that signal the birth of the 'nation state', but he also warned against the false assumption which blames exclusively the secularization of legislature for the major witch persecutions. (2002, 213) He argued that Scotland showed a clear tendency towards an absolutist monarchy as early as the fifteenth-century, and the centralization of legal and administrative powers thus did not lead immediately to a stronger hold of the state. The central legislature had neither enough money, nor workforce to control constantly the peripheries. Consequently, "what we are witnessing, [...] is much more the local elite's use of the judicial authority of the state for its own ends than the central government's imposition of its will on the subordinate authorities in the localities." (Levack 2002, 217) In other words, the most brutal witch-hunts in Scotland are results of the political impotence of the secularized government, and of the hunger of the local jurisdictions to dominate and impress.

3.1.3.1. The Legal Aspects of Witchcraft

Until the beginning of the Reformation the crime of witchcraft was handled as a sin-crime (such as adultery, incest or sodomy) in Scotland, and therefore it belonged entirely to the matters of the ecclesiastical court. Astonishingly enough, witches who were interrogated by the church could expect a far more lenient and moderate punishment, than those who were judged later by secular

Europe." *The Witchcraft Reader*. Ed. Darren Oldridge. London: Routledge, 2002. 213-225.

²⁴ In the case of Scotland for example, it was not the state that triggered the events of the major witch-hunts, and according to Levack during the beginning of the North Berwick trials it behaved rather skeptical than encouraging. (2002, 215).

²⁵ The four elements are the following: the process of a *judicial and administrative centralization* (my italics) intensified the *efforts of the state to transform the community into an obedient and godly society* (my italics). This attempt, however inevitably involved the application of *judicial torture* (my italics) in order to extirpate all intruders who were suspected to endanger the reformed church and state. Such a *collective fight of church and state* (my italics) was only then possible when both parties were convinced of sharing the same arch enemies. (2002, 215).

courts. (Normand & Roberts 87-89) There is no evidence whether locals at that time saw witchcraft as a special crime, it is much more likely that it was a regular crime among the many other problems countryside life brought along with itself. (Normand & Roberts 90)

The judgement of witchcraft and sorcery changed drastically when the Scottish Protestant Parliament passed a legal statute (Witchcraft Law) in 1563. This resolution, on the one hand, granted complete freedom to local legal courts to investigate their witchcraft accusations, and on the other hand, it began to label witchcraft as a *crimen exceptum*, a special crime. The new legal document discriminated and demanded the severest punishment for anybody who claimed to possess, consult or know anyone who had supernatural powers or paranormal abilities. It is interesting to note however, that the government had to cope with immense religious pressure while passing the law, and the Scottish Witchcraft Act was indeed no secular initiative, but a vivid demonstration of “a campaign of moral reform and [...] godly discipline.” (Levack 2002, 215)

From that year on, the crime of witchcraft was experienced on two different but complementary levels. It was understood partly as treason against God and the true faith, but more importantly, it was also seen as an open rebellion against God's worldly personification, the King. Moreover, those who suspected witchcraft were repeatedly confronting with the new secular orders, which encouraged accusers to seek help at the local legal legislatures instead of at the church. Keith Thomas has argued aptly, when he stated that

before the Reformation the great bulk of the English [and the Scottish] populace had been content to protect themselves from the powers of witchcraft through a combination of Church and folk magic. With the undermining of ecclesiastical authority – and in particular the assaults on the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church – the security of this immunity was removed. Thus, from the 1560s onwards, the people turned increasingly to the courts, ecclesiastical and secular, for defence against the powers of the occult. (qtd. in Harris 5)

The supernatural, this “difficult terrain” that was “always in the process of being described, conjured, made, and made up, without ascertainable outside referents,” (Warner qtd. in Gaskill 2) became the theme of regular legal processes, where witnesses, who did not see the actual crime could testify, and children who barely talked could be condemned.

3.1.3.2. The Devil and North Berwick in the 1590s

What makes the case of North Berwick remarkable and exceptional, is the passionate interest and involvement of King James VI in it. The reason why he was so unusually eager to reveal all the details and misconducts during the process was probably the fact that he gradually “became convinced that he, a divine right monarch who was a chief enemy of Satan, was the target of the witches' activities.” (Levack 2002, 216) This first-hand experience of corruption and immorality had such a great impact on him that he published his ideas on the subject seven years later in 1597. As the date of publication shows, this treatise (*Daemonologie*) was rather a result of the practical investigation of the North Berwick case, than a theoretical contemplation beforehand.

Since some of the ideas in the *Daemonologie* (such as the Sabbath and the pact with the Devil) show similarities with Continental beliefs of witches and witchcraft, it has been argued that James VI of Scotland accessed (and later propagated) these approaches through the famous Danish theologian Niels Hemmingsen while he stayed in Denmark during the winter of 1589-90. This assumption of Hemmingsen's influence was later rejected, partly because there is no historical evidence of such an intellectual discussion between the monarch and the theologian, and partly because there are substantial conceptual differences between the work of King James VI and Hemmingsen. (Normand & Roberts 34) Besides, “it is unlikely that even the king could have persuaded them [the Scottish nobles] to accept those [Continental] ideas if there was not already some knowledge of them, and if they did not fit into existing beliefs about witchcraft, however vague or undefined.” (Normand & Roberts 35) James

VI emphasized the heretic nature of the witches much more in his treatise than their immoral sexual behaviour during Sabbaths. He described these secret gatherings as a mockery of the Protestant service, where the Devil preaches from the pulpit (imitating the Protestant minister) and encourages his adherents in their malicious deeds. (Levack 2008, 44) It is interesting to note that the idea of the Devil disguised as a pious minister corresponds fully to the narrative which was confessed by the North Berwick witches in 1590-91. It is highly likely however that these confessions were gained under (the threat of) torture, which was (in special cases) legally allowed in Scotland²⁶. Inspectors of such a special crime, it was argued, were in need of special tools to reveal the hideous details of the misdeed. The North Berwick case was originally about weather-magic, since it aimed to murder the King and his Queen while sailing first separately, then together to Scotland. Any other detail might be the result of the witches' colourful fantasy.

The aim of James VI was in all probability to strengthen the belief in Protestant faith and to reinforce the protection against all evil for its adherents. At the end of his theoretical treatise (*Daemonologie*) King James VI concluded that “the manifest causes of the great increase in witchcraft was that ‘the consummation of the worlde, and our deliverance drawing neare, makes Sathan to rage the more in his instruments, knowing his kingdome to be so neare an ende’.” (King James VI and I qtd. in Clark 1997, 326) He also pointed out that it was his divine being that saved his life and hindered the desired effects of all spells of the North Berwick witches^{27,28}.

King James VI of Scotland had been long presented by historians as a blood-thirsty, witchcraft maniac paralysed by many irrational fears and neurotic nightmares. Today, we know that nothing could be further from the truth. He was keen on revealing the secret machinations of witches, but he was not

26 According to Normand & Roberts, “torture was only legal in Scotland if authorised by the privy council or parliament, [...] Officially, torture rarely entered the Scottish criminal procedure. Even in witchcraft cases only two privy council warrants for torture were issued: one was the commission of October 1591, and the other was in 1610. (99).

27 According to Stuart Clark, the witches “asked the devil why ‘all there devellerie culd do na harm to the King, as it did till others dyvers.’ The reply they received is epigraphic: ‘Il est un home de Dieu’.” The king is a God. (552).

28 Cf. Clark 1992, 198.

obsessively interested in shedding innocent blood. He tried to find the guilty, which was never equated with 'cleansing' the country. Later, when he was crowned English King, he repealed most of his ideas on witches and witchcraft, and became much more skeptical and careful in the investigation of such cases.

3.2. Absolutism

In addition to the notion of witchcraft – which forms the socio-legal background of Stewart Conn's play – the concept of absolutism in general, and the idea of divine right in particular, play a central role in *The Burning*. The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a brief general introduction to the ideology of the absolutist monarchy – along with its support philosophy of the divine right – and to discuss the manifestation of these assumptions under the reign of King James VI of Scotland. As regards of the comparative analysis this thesis aspires to give, a critical reading of James VI's apprehension of the nature of sovereignty and kingship is doubtlessly invaluable. His own key political notions – which have been taken from two of his most prominent political writings²⁹ – however, are discussed and analysed, along with Stewart Conn's theatrical adaptations, in more detail in chapter 4³⁰.

Given that the fundamental principles and assumptions of witchcraft have already been discussed in the previous chapters, let us now concentrate on the political context of the play.

3.2.1. What is Absolutism?

The OED distinguishes three different academic disciplines in which the term 'absolutism' occurs. In theology, it means “the dogma of God's acting absolutely in the affair of salvation, and not being guided in his willing, or nilling, by any reason³¹”. In politics, it represents “the practice of [the] absolute government; despotism, an absolute state”, and in philosophy it refers to the idea of “positiveness”. (OED 50) In a discourse on Scottish politics, absolutism is

29 King James VI and I. “Basilicon Doron.” Ed. Johann P. Sommerville. *King James VI and I: Political Writings*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006. 1-61.

King James VI and I. “The Trew Law of Free Monarchies.” Ed. Johann P. Sommerville. *King James VI and I: Political Writings*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006. 62-84.

30 Cf. 4.3.5.”King James VI – The 'Divine'” and 4.3.5.1. “The Doctrine of Divine Right in *The Burning*”.

31 For further details see the 'Doctrine of Predestination'.

frequently defined as a historiographical term that refers to a form of unrestrained political power, founded (primarily) on the godly origin of kings.

The idea of absolutism is based on both theory and practice, focusing on the consolidation of royal authority with the help of both secular and religious means. According to Levack, in theory, absolutism grants exclusive power to the ruler over all institutions of the state (including the right to make law) and thus it liberates him from his formal subordination to the Parliament and the national legal system. (2008, 99) As a consequence, it aims to reduce (and block) the political power the nobility practically, all the while concentrating on the systematical destabilization (and final sabotage) of the government. (Levack 2008, 99) In an absolutist state, the ruler aspires to become the sole head of the country, at the cost of everyone else. From an absolutist point of view, in an ideal world all demands of such monarchs would be met by (complete) subordination of the national political bodies – including the Church. In reality however, most absolutist rulers enjoyed only 'limited' power; given their constant need of military assistance and their instinctive ease to enhance their countries' commercial and economic development. And yet, as Burgess pointed out clearly, even if “kings had a duty to obey fundamental (and even common) law, [...] God remained the only person capable of judging whether or not they fulfilled that duty.” (26) This profound lack of official governmental supervision raised critical and unavoidable questions concerning the honesty and ardor of any given (absolutist) ruler, not just in Scotland. In view of this, it must be acknowledged that although

'absolutists', of whom James was one, did *not* believe the king to be unlimited [...], [...] in the end, because there were no mechanisms to enforce this limitation (or any other), kings were sole law-givers, true sovereigns; and, in consequence, 'absolutist theory provided no safeguard against [tyranny]'. (Burgess 27)

This is probably one of the main reasons for the serious differences behind the (negative) definitions of 'absolutism' offered by standard dictionaries and those accepted by historians. In sum, though the idea of absolutism brought dramatic

economical and financial growth in several countries, it is still the aggressive, tyrannical overtone most people think of when discussing the nature of an 'absolutist state'. According to John Miller “the terms 'absolutism' and 'absolute monarchy' are all too often used uncritically and pejoratively, so they may indicate only 'that the historian who uses them is thinking of a regime where the king has more power than twentieth-century scholars think a seventeenth-century king ought to have had'.” (1) It will be pointed out in the following that the philosophy of absolutism provided Scotland with the best possible political direction at the second half of the sixteenth-century, and while apparently keeping all formal requirements, the reign of King James VI indeed developed in a very unique and cooperative way.

Historically, the political ideal of absolutism had been already present at the beginning of the sixteenth-century, during the early days of the Reformation in central Europe, yet it came into practice only gradually during the formation of the modern (European) nation-states – in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries onwards. The chief aim of the absolutist rulers in Europe was above all the establishment of a strong and centralized monarchy. As stated above, the survival of such a realm was largely dependent on the support of the judicial system and the armed forces, which complemented the royal power. While the governmental branch was required to maintain order by law, the military had to keep eventual rebellions physically under control. (Levack 2008, 100) One can say that provided that kings 'obeyed' the following types of laws; the law of God (or that of the Scriptures), the law of the government and the law of nature (Knafla 237) they were generally seen as pious, righteous and legitimate monarchs:

[A]n absolute monarch would not be a tyrant so long he (or, more rarely, she) respected the moral guidelines for the employment of absolute authority contained in natural or divine law. The tyrant, [...] was distinguished [in the sixteenth-century] from the king primarily in moral rather than constitutional terms. (Burgess 98)

Additionally, since “absolute monarchies helped to bring a sense of nationhood

to disparate territories, to establish a measure of public order and to promote prosperity,” (Miller 19) arguing against it must have seemed superfluous and unnecessary.

3.2.2. Absolutism in King James VI's Scotland

“The king's [James VI's] political philosophy was a nuanced, moderated absolutism.”³²

King James VI was not the first ruler who attempted to govern Scotland as an absolutist monarch. In spite of his repeated (immensely laborious) strives to form a centralized state and an effective legislature system, he was “doing something very original indeed. [...] [H]e gave to Scottish monarchy an ideological base wholly different from anything in the past; and have gave it not just a theorist, but as a man who had to translate theory into practice.” (Wormald 1991, 43) As a gifted writer and a scholar, he devoted considerable time to deep and intimate contemplation of pressing issues from the field of theology as well as politics. James VI's unique power lay in his strong arguments and convincing writing style. Much of his denial of the democratic state was rooted in the contemporary theological and political ideas that intended to bestow veto right upon the subjects in the case of an insufficient ruler. One of the principal agents of these ideas was James VI's childhood tutor George Buchanan, who at the time was famous for spearheading an explicit political crusade against Queen Mary and her young son, the future King James VI.

By the time James VI was able to regulate most of the vital political bodies of the state with appropriate concern and heed, he was already well into his thirties. An established absolutist ruler was in his time distinguished by the loyal support of his Parliament, the Church and the notable aristocratic families – none of which James VI could declare a true ally before the turn of the

³² King James VI and I. *Political Writings*. Texts in the History of Political Thought. Ed. Johann P. Sommerville. Cambridge: CUP. 2006. xv.

seventeenth-century. Albeit

[t]here is no reason to doubt that this [to become a universal king] was indeed James's aim, [...] he was not as yet placed well [during the last two decades of the sixteenth-century] to achieve it. Bitter divisions among the leading nobles were fact of life, and his escape from one group left him, inevitably, dependent on another. (Lockyer 15)

The precise and detailed summary – provided by Brian Levack – of the major setbacks King James VI had to face while attempting to consolidate his power is as follows:

In the late sixteenth century, when the process of witch-hunting had begun in earnest, Scotland possessed the formal structure of a unitary state, in which all local powers were subordinated to the king, the privy council, and parliament, but in reality the Scottish state was a fragile creation, and the process of state-building confronted a series of obstacles. First, the state exercised effective power only in the Lowlands; in the Highlands leaders of the clans performed many of the functions of the state, and the king's writ often did not run in those locales. Even in the Lowlands, the effective exercise of central state power was problematic. The church, while technically subordinate to the state in jurisdictional matters, often commanded greater and more fervent allegiance than the state and sometimes found itself in disagreement or open conflict with the officers of the state. The bureaucracy of the Scottish state was pitifully small, even smaller than of its southern English neighbour, whose central administration was in turn a pale reflection of that of France. (2008, 102)

More than anything James VI needed skilled advisers and grim determination in order to withstand (and survive) the dangerously acute situation; the next of the many fights for the crown. We can see by now that even if James VI demanded unlimited power in theory, in practice he was far from having it, since those, who were bound to provide their sovereign with the necessary military support could challenge their ruler's power any time.³³ As Miller indicated, “[t]he crown [in Scotland] was wretchedly poor [...] and its powers of coercion were correspondingly feeble: in effect, it had to employ the military power of one magnate against another. Government was thus a matter of balancing magnate interests” (217). As a consequence, James VI could “never [...] [translate] his most extreme theoretic claims into practice. [...] [and eventually] the political

33 Cf. “French Absolutism” <<http://www2.sunysuffolk.edu/westn/absolutism.html>>. April 3, 2011.

issue which concerned him most [...] was not divine right monarchy at all, but union.” (Wormald 53) Such a drastic legislative change would have required tremendous assets and thus, “was outside the scope of practical politics” under the early Stuarts. (Miller 205)

Since the formal establishment of a state governed by absolute (royal) power depended on various – albeit equally important – religious and economical factors in the sixteenth century, it could not develop with the same speed and to the same extent in every country. The main reason for its relative delay in Scotland has been mentioned before; until the consolidation of King James VI's political domination, the country was in many aspects, torn apart. Monarchical power was historically located in the south, while the north was still massively directed by a handful of fierce clan-leaders, who neither obeyed nor accepted the central royal law. Things have taken a turn for the worse, after the political troubles of Queen Mary (1560-67), and in spite her forceful removal continued to thrive. As it has been argued, the fact that neither the Low- nor Highlands was able to voice similar concerns left James VI with little space to negotiate solely on his own behalf. As soon as he had his chance to rule without his former 'guardians', James VI was forced to pay attention to the results of the Reformation and soon engaged in a fierce fight with the Scottish Kirk that grew more and more irritating by the end of the sixteenth-century. (Fortier 274) One of the most important arguments of the religious extremists was the establishment of two separate kingdoms; one governed by God and one ruled by the King. James VI's political demands were set against those of the Kirk and the King's only saving grace was (quite ironically) the sudden and tragic loss of the Pope's institutional control and influence, for the Catholic Church might have lost its authority over Scotland, the population which gained a direct and unlimited access to God still needed a mediator, someone, who could play the role of God's substitute on Earth³⁴. James VI was more than ready to be that person. By the time the North Berwick witch-hunt came to its final end (1597) he has fitted well into his lifetime role as 'emperor' of Scotland.

34 Cf. Champion, Justin, Tom Healy and Clare Jackson. Interviewed by Melvyn Bragg. “*Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the divine right of kings*”. BBC Channel 4. London: 11 October 2007. Radio. 18 January 2011.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/b0080xph/In_Our_Time_The_Divine_Right_Of_Kings>.

Eventually, the fact that God's grace in Scotland was bestowed upon the monarch was anything but unexpected, for “the idea that there was something particularly divine about kingship was one that went back at least to the earliest phases of medieval history.” (Burgess 96) Thus the divine right theory of kings was implicitly and strongly reinforced by the religious Reformation and it was eventually the Protestant culture that promoted and strengthened it³⁵.

3.2.3. The Doctrine of Divine Right

As pointed out earlier in this thesis, “[o]ne reason of the wide acceptance of absolutism [...] was the appeal of the ideal of a just impartial king, who put the interests of the whole kingdom before those of particular interest groups – nobles, town corporations, the church.” (Miller 196) The solemn sense of duty such a ruler (theoretically) had to carry was however accompanied by a wide range of rights, which were most succinctly summarized by James VI in his essay, *Trew Law*: first and foremost, the monarchy is always divinely ordained, the kings are accountable to God alone, a strict hereditary succession governs the monarchy and finally, no subject has the right to resistance³⁶. These four strands constitute the basis of the political ideal called the 'divine right of kings'. In Early Modern Scotland these standards were established for the first time in a written form by King James VI.

³⁵ It cannot however, be emphasized sufficiently enough that “the divine right of kings and the theory of royal absolutism were not the same thing. [...] both were given the new lease of life by the Reformation, [and] most theories of royal absolutism may have incorporated a divine-right element, but the reverse was not necessarily true.” (Burgess 96).

³⁶ Cf. Champion, Justin, Tom Healy and Clare Jackson. Interviewed by Melvyn Bragg. “*Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the divine right of kings*”. BBC Channel 4. London: 11 October 2007. Radio. 18 January 2011.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/b0080xph/In_Our_Time_The_Divine_Right_Of_Kings>.

4. Representation of the Setting, Timeline, Background and the Witchcraft Conspiracy

4.1. Setting

The Burning by Stewart Conn is set in 1590-91, at the time of the first large-scale Scottish political witch-hunt and officially conducted witchcraft trials, in which a ruler actively took part.

There are various geographical locations that come into focus and bear considerable significance throughout the play. These are in chronological order as follows: the Scottish village Tranent near Edinburgh, the royal chamber of Holyrood palace, the house of Effie McCalyan, a local smithy, the house of Francis Stewart (Bothwell), the kirkyard of North Berwick, Falkland Palace, the legal administrative centre of Edinburgh (Tolbooth), and finally the royal bedchamber of King James VI. These settings are consciously arranged in a functional order that serves the dramatic purpose of the author, and as the affair gradually turns from a local matter into a national one, so do the locations also transform from mere provincialist places to royal vicinities.

The story begins in the village of Tranent with a highly speculative case of sorcery, which in the hands of local authorities continues to grow and proliferate, until it finally shines a light on a much larger political mischief, a covert plot against the life of James VI, King of Scotland. Each location in the play represents a further stage in the witchcraft hysteria of the King and contributes to the unfolding of the tragedy rooted in the religious and political fanaticism. The geographical settings in *The Burning* include stereotypical places of witchcraft. The acts are first treated as a local legal crime, then as a national political conspiracy, and finally as an irreversible moral malefice that deserves capital punishment. The gradual change in the above mentioned places of action provides the audience with a unique insight into the close connection between witchcraft and political power. Through the contrasting settings Conn emphasizes the difference between popular witch beliefs and the ideas on witchcraft by learned demonologists. The detailed episodes of the

witch's final interrogation provide an accurate picture of these differences and call attention to the dangers of religious and political fanaticism.

The visual presentation of the setting bears striking similarities to the modernist tradition: according to Stewart Conn “in visual terms too, any presentation of the play must resist sentimentality or over-elaborateness. Costumes should be functional, not merely decorative.” In the “Author's Note” he pointed out that he “envisage[s] the stage being as bare as possible – where practicable, completely bare.”

4.2. The Timeline

4.2.1. The Timeline of the Actual Historical Events

When Mary, Queen of Scots was executed as a treacherous conspirator in 1587, Elizabeth I was already an aging, unmarried and childless monarch. Chances seemed to be open for more than half a dozen noblemen – all indirectly from the bloodline of the English Queen – to follow her on the throne of England. One of the most promising relations was the son of the deceased Mary Stuart, James VI. He was then twenty-one years of age, a highly educated, bright and sensitive boy, who on the one hand, remained loyal to his life-long absent mother (held in capture in England), but who, on the other, always knew where his interests were. There were however, some obstacles that exhausted James VI's patience; first, the dilatory answer for the marriage proposal, his councillors made to Elizabeth (and later to Anna), both daughters of Frederick II, King of Denmark, then later the fact that, Anna, who married James VI by proxy in August 1589, did not arrive on the day she was supposed to. Heavy thunderstorms and gigantic waves were hindering the royal transfer and after two aborted endeavors the future queen was forced to spend the winter in Norway, waiting for a better weather to cross the North Sea. James VI, who was eager to give the impression of being a loyal and devoted husband, left Scotland on October 22, 1589 and spent the following six months together

with his new wife first in Oslo and later in Denmark (Normand & Roberts 20). On April 26, 1590 they set sail for Scotland, but their voyage turned out to be similarly stormy and hostile as the previous ones were. The couple eventually arrived to Leith on May 1, but their young marriage resembled more a torturous odyssey than a successful royal union. The weather was in fact so exceptionally harsh during that winter and spring that some people began to suspect (first in Denmark and later in Scotland) witchcraft being the chief factor of the severe and unexpected setbacks. As the idea of witchcraft was taken up in Scotland as well, both witnesses and conspirators were soon found to confess their crime.

Among those accused who received capital punishment, there are three (Doctor Fian, Effie McCalyan and Gilles Duncan) who are presented in *The Burning*: Effie McCalyan – who by her own (and her husband's) birthright belonged to the Scottish nobility – was a long suspected sorceress, but she had never been before publicly accused of being a witch. Her attendance of the assembly on October 31, 1590 in the kirkyard of North Berwick (where a wax image of the king was allegedly roasted on fire) provided the authorities with enough evidence about her guilt (Normand & Roberts 22). This led ultimately to her trial and brutal execution on June 15, 1591. The name of Gilles Duncan appeared before the legal court in late November in her hometown in Tranent, when she was accused of being a witch for the first time. By then Doctor Fian had long been captured. His trial and execution followed in December, 1590.

Another important member of those who were incriminated is Francis Stewart (Bothwell), whose actual relationship to the accused witches remained rather vague up to this very day. Seemingly it was Agnes Sampson, who swore under oath at the royal court that she made a wax figure “at Bothwell's request” (Normand & Roberts 21) in order to murder King James VI, though the same idea was already mentioned (at an earlier point of the trials) by Gilles Duncan as well. In spite of his impeachment, Bothwell – at this time – was deeply trusted by the royal court and his alleged involvement surprised the King greatly. Bothwell was a highly ranked administrator, an “appointed lord lieutenant of the borders” (Normand & Roberts 21), who about half a year before his condemnation still served as a royal officer. When his name finally

appeared in the legal lawsuit concerning the magical plot, he was sentenced to jail immediately, but in the end spent only two months imprisoned. He escaped during the night of June 21, 1591 but continued to plot and ally himself against the royal court. Consequentially, the Parliament ordered the confiscation of all his lands and possessions the following June, only to open a competition between him and James VI. Their personal feuding and misery continued for four more years and finally came to an end, in 1595, when Bothwell was sent “into excile”, became “excommunicated by the presbytery of Edinburgh” and was “publicly denounced as traitor and rebel” (Normand & Roberts 24-5).

4.2.2. The Timeline of the Play

Stewart Conn's play is a mix of fact and fiction, sanctioned by “poetic licence”. Neither the characters nor the actions are portrayed accurately enough in *The Burning* to correspond with the original events. The context Conn provides for his play is full of bias, fictitious incidents and other changes, which guide the audience rather towards the conventional interpretation, than towards some new and illuminating insights. Thus except for a few historical events, the timeline of the play differs considerably from the actual events. As he pointed out in the Author's Note, although “much of the play's incident is drawn from historical sources, [...], liberties have *naturally* [my italics] been taken with the attitudes of the characters - and with chronology.” Conn's central focus lies on a set of one-dimensional stock characters (except for Bothwell), thus the timeline of the play had to be adapted in order to obtain the desired dramatic effect. Besides, since there is no indication of any specific date or year in the play, the only guidance that is offered to the audience is the historical persons, the historical incidents and the alternating set of locations. In short, it can be stated that although most of the incidents are based on historical facts, there are some radical alterations between the historical documentation and their representation in *The Burning*.

The royal marriage of King James VI of Scotland and the Danish princess, Anna³⁷ was one of the most important events that triggered the first national Scottish witchcraft crisis, yet it is not referred to in *The Burning*. Omitting the particular fact that King James VI was first hostile towards the North Berwick witches when he became the prime victim of their magical conspiracy, throws also a different light on the actions. In reality, the witches were caught first, and four months of legal interrogations passed by until the Earl of Bothwell first became suspicious. Apart from the confession of Agnes Sampson and Gilles Duncan – that Bothwell was involved in the magical conspiracy – there was no further evidence found against him. What is more, there is also no historical evidence on the adulterous relationship of the Black Earl.

Let us now concentrate on the most deliberate modifications of historical fact.

The personal involvement of King James VI in a sequence of bitter and fierce quarrels (at the beginning of the play) about statecraft and leadership with the Earl of Bothwell is portrayed fairly accurately, though the Earl is presented rather as a courageous and strongly patriotic hero than an irrational dare-devil. His career at the royal court was in reality remarkably successful, even during the long absence of the King (during the winter of 1589-90). He originated from a highly-ranked Protestant noble family, and was himself outstandingly educated³⁸.

The account of his fictional relationship to Effie McCalyan³⁹ is equally interesting: it portrays the lady as a passionate, self-sacrificing woman, who throws away her own life for her loved one, whereas in reality she was known as a notorious sorcerer, accused of causing physical injuries, poisoning and consulting other witches⁴⁰.

37 According to Barroll, "Queen Anne never called herself 'Anne'", not even after her official coronation in Scotland, but kept her Danish name Anna. (1991, 191).

38 According to Donaldson, "Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, had a command of Latin, French and Italian, which was [highly] admired", given that it is was a linguistic variety distinct in its nature. (Donaldson 1965, 256).

39 In contrast to these highly descriptive parts of the fictitious intimate life of Bothwell, the details of the barbarous torture and ill-fated end of Doctor Fian is completely missed out.

40 According to the court dittays however, she was not guilty of adultery.

Conn placed the illegal witches' gathering in the kirkyard of North Berwick (October 31, 1590) into the centre of his play chiefly for its theatrical importance: the audience gains this way an intimate insight in the actual spells and chants that could have possibly been used in the late sixteenth-century as well. In reality, neither the kirkyard events, nor Gilles Duncan played such a significant role as the playwright indicated. In Conn's play, Gilles Duncan is captured right before the North Berwick witch summon and provides all information about it for the authorities. In reality however, she was captured and interrogated after the witch convention took place in North Berwick, and she actually named the Edinburgh house of Barbara Napier (and not the kirkyard) as the meeting place of the illegal gathering. (Normand & Roberts 22) Consequently, there was no raid carried out in order to capture the suspected witches, it was the confession of Agnes Sampson that served as chief evidence of witchcraft and ill-will against the life of the monarch. If there was any royal raid during the All Hollow evening of 1590, the royal army was certainly not looking for the Earl of Bothwell in the kirkyard, and it was not Gilles Duncan who informed them.

Finally, according to Conn, the deep fear and trepidation of James VI about the magical powers of witches filled him with real terror during the last decade of the sixteenth-century, already before the North Berwick witch-hunts. The reactions of the King to the alleged conspiracy were however typical of his age, and his fright and panic was neither ridiculous, nor intimidating. The final attack on James in his bedchamber, which forced the king to his knee and re-established the name and assets of Bothwell came to a much less glorious end in 1593. Although Bothwell was able to rule the castle for a couple of weeks, he was eventually chased away from the royal court and went into life-long exile two years later.

4.3. Historical Background

As mentioned earlier, *The Burning* is set in the Eastern Lothian region of Scotland, and it follows up the historical events before, during and after the witchcraft plight in 1590-1. Scholars who have dealt with these particular witch-trials concluded that “it was a complex social event in which popular and elite culture interacted, and that it was also a social crisis that evolved rapidly over the number of months from an outbreak of rural witchcraft, to a crisis of state, to a national witch hunt.” (Normand & Roberts 1) Due to the King's personal involvement (and interest) in these series of trials (also called the North Berwick or Edinburgh trials), historians today have an exceptionally rich set of textual evidence to look through. This evidence however, is best understood in its own original historical context. As J. P. Sommerville has argued, “to grasp what a political event meant for those who participated in it, it is necessary to know something about their ideas⁴¹.” (55) These ideas however, are best examined by scanning the actual historical facts – political, social and religious events – of the age, thus providing a better and deeper insight into *The Burning*.

But just what are these historical facts one needs to be aware of?

It seems necessary to start with the history of the Scottish Reformation and its later impact on the young King James VI. The chief aim of John Knox – who was the leader of the Reformed Presbyterian Church from the 1560s on – was to break the power of the Catholic monarchy completely by establishing a dominant and influential Kirk. In 1567, when Mary, Queen of Scots was forced to abdicate, and her infant son James VI was crowned king (19 July 1567) in the parish kirk of Stirling, his utterly radical idea seemed easily attainable. (Croft 14)

41 Cf. with the argument of Charles McIlwain, who claimed that “[f]or [...] a student the thing most necessary – particularly if the ideas are of an age far removed from his own – is not the bare outline, the mere anatomy of the political thought of that age. He needs above all somehow to gain an appreciation of the whole political mind of the period, the very breath and movement that once galvanized these elements into a thing of life capable of inspiring the thoughts and guiding the actions of generations of men.” (Preface, vii).

Knox's radical idea was fueled by the fact that during his turbulent childhood James VI was constantly surrounded by witty adversaries and false friends. His first tutor, the widely celebrated scholar George Buchanan used his position skilfully to persuade the young King of his immense political and personal responsibility towards his subjects, but James VI had other preconceptions about his royal duties. Sharing his authority with the population was under no circumstances part of James VI's plans⁴². As he later recalled, at the end of the 1560s and the beginning of the 1570s the country was divided religiously and politically into three key fractions: the lawless Catholic earls of the Highlands were battling with the fanatic Melvillian⁴³ Reformists, while a few noble families still remained loyal to James VI and the Crown. Even if he was ready to govern at the age of twelve, it took a considerable time until he could rule his country as individually and responsibly as he wished.

Jenny Wormald's description of the hardships King James VI had to endure as a child reveals the country the Scottish King described in his accounts:

He [James VI] succeeded a ruler [his mother, Queen Mary] who was politically discredited and personally scandalous, but who was still alive, and wanted her throne back. In particular, he was vulnerable to aspersions on his legitimacy because of Mary's supposed affair with David Riccio. [...] He was educated – savagely – by the man who was Mary's most outspoken and vicious critic, and whose personal attack on her had been subsumed into a political theory which made James's power ultimately dependent on the will of the community; [...]. At his coronation, [...] it was promised on his behalf that he would uphold the Protestant faith, and this, to the Protestant reformers, undoubtedly meant acting as the godly magistrate under their direction. Between them, his mother, his tutor, and the leading Protestants had reduced his position, at least in theory, to one of subservience which would have been unacceptable to any of his predecessors, and was certainly unacceptable to him. (42-3)

⁴² James VI's ideas concerning the Divine Right of Monarchs are introduced in chapter 4.3.5. "King James VI – 'The Divine'".

⁴³ Andrew Melville was Scotland's second greatest religious reformer (after John Knox). He returned to his homeland from Geneva in 1574, and immediately set himself to carry out his idea of "two mutually exclusive 'kingdoms', one spiritual and ruled by Christ, the other secular and ruled by the king." (Croft 14).

After James VI finally consolidated his power – after a hard phase that is described in more details in chapter 4.3.2. “James VI’s Battle for Survival” – and began to rule Scotland independently at the age of twenty, he turned his attention to England and began to secure his claim to the throne of Elizabeth I after her death⁴⁴. Naturally, in order to increase his chances at the English court James VI needed to marry and give Scotland first an official heir⁴⁵. Deciding upon a union with the Danish royal court seemed a wise choice, for

This Danish kingship was, politically, no mean position in Europe. [...] as one of the largest political entities on the early modern European continent, wielded, as Lockhart⁴⁶ has put it, “tremendous international influence,” possessing formidable prestige. By the end of the sixteenth century, owing to the moneys exacted from foreign ships as toll for passing through the Denmark Sound into the Baltic, and from the duties exacted for the export of timber from Norway, the Danish monarchy was among the wealthiest in all Europe and could boast the largest and most efficient naval force in northern Europe. (Baroll, 2001, 6-7)

Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts insisted in their comprehensive study⁴⁷ that these “personal, political and dynastic” questions mentioned above were the ones which formed the background of the North Berwick witch-hunts, and not (as so many scholars have suggested before them) the King’s paranoid interest in the supernatural and the power of the Devil. (29) They concluded that the preparation of the royal alliance with Denmark became step by step so important and burdensome to the court that arising difficulties and setbacks were quickly interpreted as malicious (magical) interruptions⁴⁸. After the failure of the Danish royal fleet (which should have carried Queen Anna to Scotland) James VI decided – as mentioned earlier – to set sail personally to Norway, where his Queen found temporary shelter. During this time the Earl of Bothwell

44 The ambivalent nature of Scotland’s relationship to its Southern neighbour is explained in chapter 4.3.3. “English Connections”.

45 The history of James VI’s marriage will be discussed in chapter 4.3.4. “The Royal Marriage”.

46 Lockhart, Paul Douglas. *Denmark in the Thrity Years’ War, 1618-1648*. Selingsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna UP, 1996. 27-31.

47 Normand, Lawrence and Gareth Roberts. *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI’s Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*. Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2000.

48 James VI did not hesitate to turn to his nation before his journey to Norway in October 1589, and gave a long description of his growing enthusiasm. In a letter – addressed to “the People of Scotland” – he explained in detail why “I doubt not it is manifestly known to all how far I was generally found fault with by all men for the delaying so long of my marriage.” (qtd. in Akrigg 98).

served as Lord Admiral of the naval forces. Such a position “made it easy to connect him with stories of witches trying to sink the ships, and bring his loyalty into question,” since his militant behaviour and political partisanship (targeted especially against the King's Chancellor, Lord Maitland of Thirlestane) were known at the royal court years before the North Berwick trials. (Normand & Roberts 36)

When comparing the historical events of North Berwick to those portrayed by Conn in *The Burning*, one has to remember that although at the time of the witch-trials the political position of the young king was stronger than ever before, it was still uncertain. James VI had been ruling for almost a quarter of a century by 1590, but until then he had experienced neither the loyalty of all his subjects, nor the acceptance of the Reformed Church. He considered himself as an absolutist monarch, responsible only to God, and as a ruler whose main interests lay southwards of the Scottish borders. Coming to an early agreement with Elizabeth I about her official successor (after his mother was executed in 1587), would have been crucial for James VI's future political success, yet it never happened. Until the beginning of the 1590s the King's future political possibilities were seriously unpredictable, his profound belief in divine royal power was constantly undermined, and his relationship to the Catholic earls just began to improve. The last decade of the sixteenth-century for King James VI of Scotland was probably the most important one in his life. He had to present himself as an able, intelligent and rightful ruler, who was ready to take over the power over Scotland, England and the newly gained provinces (on the American continent) of the latter.

The following chapters intend to provide the reader with a brief outline of the most important themes that shaped Scottish royal politics before the North Berwick trials, along with their fictional alternatives presented in *The Burning*.

4.3.1. The Scottish Reformation

According to Rab Houston, the late medieval Church of Scotland was an especially vital and independent part of Christendom, thus nothing seemed to suggest the upcoming religious reformation in the middle of the sixteenth-century. (43) Some elements of the old pagan belief systems were not only tolerated, but even supported by the early missionaries, and this tradition continued remarkably until the Reformation. One of the best examples of this unusual coalition between the Church and the native traditions is the continuous worship of numerous wells, which served as sacred places before, but became 'blessed' and existed as 'holy' locations after the arrival of the missionaries. (Houston 43) The Scottish Church (before the Reformation) was "pious and popular", and people believed that whatever imbalances the institution might suffer, their religion will be strong enough to find back to its essential stability by itself. (Houston 43) Changes, accordingly, were not equally disseminated in the country, and the first deliberate attempts to uproot the 'old' Catholic faith also marked the dissolution of the High- and Lowlands.

The immense political and religious changes that shaped the Scottish Reformation from the middle of the the sixteenth-century onwards, were set in motion when Mary, Queen of Scots was born in 1542, and came to a decisive point under her short reign between 1560 and 1567. Mary was crowned when she was eight months old (her father suddenly deceased a week after she was born), and the fact that she became Queen, corresponded perfectly with the long-term interest of England. King Henry VIII, who was head of the Protestant English Church, was eager to engage the infant Queen with his son, Prince Edward. His wish was to conquer and rule Scotland effortlessly by marriage, a scheme, some Scottish nobles (loyal to the English court) immediately supported, while others found it insolent. Eventually, the pro-French royal court made a prompt counteraction by sending Mary to France⁴⁹, where she was educated and brought up together with the Dauphin, Francis II, whom she later – in 1558 – married. Their liaison (and so the hopes of the Scottish court for a

⁴⁹ During her absence, it was her mother, Mary of Guise, who governed Scotland as the Royal Regent.

Catholic alliance) was unfortunately rather short-lived, Francis II was king only for a year when he passed away, leaving young Mary widowed. Gordon Donaldson summarized the events correctly when he argued that the crisis in Scotland strengthened substantially, because it was “divided internally between the friends of England and of the Reformation on the one side and the friends of France and the papacy on the other, [...] [it was] subjected to pressures from outside as France and England each sought, sometimes by war and sometimes by diplomacy, to turn Scotland a satellite.” (1967, 170)

Things have taken a turn for the worse after the return of the young Queen, who began to reside over a seriously weakened monarchy. By that time, both England and France made repeated attempts to take possession of the country. Lasting success however did not crown the efforts of any of them and the fierce fights were eventually ended by the Treaty of Edinburgh (July 1560). In this agreement, the two nations gave their mutual consent on “leaving the Scots free to settle their own affairs.” (Donaldson 1967, 181) By the beginning of the 1560s a complete Catholic turnover seemed rather too late, although the supporters of the homecoming Queen were repeatedly engaged in fierce political battles with the Reformers for the next couple of years. Mary's biggest opponent, the Protestant John Knox – who after his return to Scotland from Geneva, quickly became the leader of the Scottish Reformation – continued his “fiery preaching” and thus “triggered a rebellion against Queen Mary, based on a potent mix of Protestantism and patriotism.” (Houston 45) Thus it is beyond doubt that the Reformation in Scotland was politically initiated by the “revolutionary, anti-French Protestant nobles” and “an anglophile Calvinist ministry”, who worked hard to establish a strong, politically potent, but independent Kirk. What is more, they seemed to succeed by the end of the 1560s, as soon as the foundations of Protestantism were laid down by drafting a new Confession of Faith, by abolishing the Mass and by eliminating the legitimate ruler (Queen Mary). (Houston 44)

The Reformation brought another important (albeit dangerous) intellectual innovation to Scotland: it bonded 'The Devil, the Mass and the witches' so tightly together that notorious conspirators of the time, such as George Gordon,

4th Earl of Huntly and his wife Elizabeth Keith, Countess of Huntly were effectively (and fatally) disgraced both as rebels and demonic witches. (Trevor-Roper 118) It was, indeed, the Protestant clergy that established the tradition of finding Devils where there was none, and eliminating political opponents and sharp-minded critics under the charges of witchcraft. Therefore, as Trevor-Roper has argued, “the responsibility of the Protestant clergy for the revival of the witch-craze in the mid-sixteenth century is undeniable”. (65) Given that “Scots often pride themselves on the bloodlessness of the Scottish Reformation, on the relative absence of martyrs on either side; these thousands [the witchcraft victims] were perhaps the true martyrs of the reformation era.” (Cowan 126)

In sum, as the Witchcraft Law came into full force in 1563, political enemies, suspicious neighbours or other disturbing elements of the society could have been much more easily labeled and tried as 'witches'. According to Calvinist theory, their secret activities include cursing, harming or murdering their fellows, but most importantly, also ridiculing and denying the Protestant sermon and entering a pact with the Devil. When looking at the case of North Berwick (1590), it has to be mentioned that the whole national hysteria derived partly from these Calvinist preconceptions of the Devil and his wrongdoings.

4.3.1.1. The Scottish Reformation in *The Burning*

Stewart Conn, instead of providing a detailed explanation about the importance of the Reformation at the beginning of his play, summarizes the fundamental legal changes it brought concerning the crime of sorcery and witchcraft, in the Prologue of Act One. Assuming that the audience is reasonably familiar with the causes and consequences of the Scottish Witchcraft Law (1563)⁵⁰, Conn begins

⁵⁰ The introduction of the Witchcraft Law brought fundamental changes, but most importantly “under clerical pressure it abandoned the old and humane distinction between the 'good' and the 'bad' witch. [...] [it] prescribed death for all witches, good or bad, and for those who consulted them.” (Trevor-Roper 68) What is more, it provided a legal way to declare Catholics heretics: “the Scottish witches who set to sea to inconvenience King James were declared to be 'Papists'; 'The Scotch ministers in their pulpits' in the Berwickshire convinced their hearers that popish priests were 'all witches'” (Trevor-Roper 118).

his play with the official, public announcement of this new state regulation. The exact wording of the Witchcraft Law in *The Burning* is as follows:

The Royal Majestie and Three Estates in Parliament being informit of the dire and abominable superstitioun of Witchcraft, Sorcery and Necromancy in times bygone against the law of God, and for the avoidance and away-putting of all such vain superstitioun in the time to come, it is hereby statute and ordainit by the Royal Majestie and Three Estates aforesaid that no manner of person of whatsoever degree is to take upon hand in any times hereafter any manner of Witchcraft, Sorcery or Necromancy, nor give themselves furth to have any such craft nor knowledge thereof, nor that no person seek help, response nor any consultatioun at the hands of such aforesaid users, under pain of death:- and this to be put into execution by the Justice Sheriffs, Stewards, Bailiffs, Lords of Regality and Royalty, their Deputes, and other Judges competent within this Realm with all rigour having power to execute the same. An this by Act of Parliament. (Conn 13)

Similarly to the first legal announcement at the end of the Prologue in Act 1, Act 2 begins as well with a royal proclamation. This second legal statement serves as a practical summary of the Witchcraft Law's possible consequences for women found guilty, and as a further reminder about the importance of general civil obedience:

HERALD. When the SATAN taks a woman for wife,
 She comes to sorrow and meikle strife,
 For that her bodie be burnt whole
 For good of her immortal soule.
 What woman taks SATAN for husbände
 Be helde for scorne throughout the land,
 And she must drink frae a bitter cup
 For fear her soule be rendered up.
 Thus hath this present PARLIAMENT
 A ledger to the DEVIL sent,
 Fully empowred to the treat about
 Finding revolting WICHES out.
 (Conn 55)

In addition, Conn presents several key dialogues, which throw light on the corrupt political interests of the Reformed Protestant clergy in finding witches mainly among the Catholics.

Two conversations – both taken directly from the play –, will be analyzed here: one targeting the local cunning folk, the other attacking the suspicious Catholic nobles.

As it has been argued in a previous chapter⁵¹, there were several rituals – accepted by the Catholic Church – providing protection and a form of counter-magic against the secret machinations of the Devil, which were annulled and criminalized by the Reformation.

The first conversation – between David Seaton, deputy bailiff of Tranent and the local minister – reflects this new vision of those practicing as 'healers'. Seaton is utterly skeptical about seeing the local cunning folk as the Devil's servants, whereas the minister seems rather maliciously joyful about the final banishment of these popular healing methods.

SEATON. [...] Yourself minister?

MINISTER. Putting up prayers for the miller's son, that is sick.

SEATON. Not the pestilence?

[...]

MINISTER. He is on God's hands. Already the Papists have attemptit to treat him, with their herbs and simples. (Smugly) That were soon put a stop to. [...] Where there is potency to heal, there is also potency to hurt. (Conn 14-5)

The progress of the Kirk was, though steady and significant, rather slow and unimpressive, “partly because it had to make accommodations with popular attitudes and partly because it depended for its existence on politics.” (Houston 47) Since Scotland was geographically divided, Catholicism continued to prevail in some areas even after the formal Reformation was complete. The Highlands and the Borders were traditionally beyond central religious and legislative control, and the perseverance of the clan leaders gained them power over both political and religious change. To make matters worse, the Kirk had significant financial troubles as well, during the second half of the sixteenth-century, because John Knox – against all hope – was unable to seize the assets of the

51 Cf. 3.1.3.1. “The Legal Aspects of Witchcraft”.

Catholic Church. According to Houston, the victory of the Scottish Reformation was largely supported by the Anglophile nobles, thus it was obvious that ecclesiastical wealth will go straight into their pockets. (47) Both the young King James VI and the Kirk were permanently impoverished and depended on English financial support. In order to gain that support however, they were obliged (by a treaty)⁵² to develop law and order within the Scottish realm that included most importantly, the quick reduction of the Northern Catholic dominance.

The conversation between Effie McCalyan and Chancellor Maitland is a dialogue between accused and accuser. But it also presents the fact clearly that being a witch and a Catholic at the same time resulted in exceptionally harsh verdicts. Brutal executions were unavoidable, because on the one hand, they satisfied the political interest and need of the government to prove its ability to England, while on the other, they reassured the Kirk in its war on heretics.

EFFIE. [...] You dream up devils, so that you can put them down. What purpose does such cruelty serve? Or is it because we are Catholics, that we are treatit so?

MAITLAND. Not because you are Catholics. But to show our Kirk is as vigilant as yours, in its zeal against the power of Darkness. (Conn 88)

Practicing the Catholic faith after the Reformation in Scotland was soon equated with serving the Devil. In addition, King James VI understood his position as ruler as his birthright, which was imposed upon him directly by God, thus an eventual pact with the Devil was interpreted without exception as high treason. In Stewart Conn's play, the North Berwick witches are presented as a well-organized, underground group of rebels, whereas in reality, the interrogations seemed much less clear-cut and straightforward. Some of the accused witches were known as sorceresses before the trials have started, and to date, there is no historical evidence demonstrating that their religious beliefs played a significant role in their interrogations and executions.

52 Cf. Croft, Pauline. *King James*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003. 22.

4.3.2. James VI's Battle for Survival

King James VI of Scotland grew up without ever seeing any of his ancestors in person, and as shocking as it might sound today – considering the sixteenth-century royal conventions – it was nothing unusual. In a sad twist of fate, his father, Lord Darnley fell victim to a petty complot, along with his mother, Queen Mary, who was forced to abdicate and to leave Scotland forever before her son turned two. With these trying circumstances in mind, it seems reasonable that James VI accepted blood feuds and political machinations as facts of life and regarded them – as a response to his aggressive environment – as key features of Scottish domestic politics. As Croft suggested “[t]he violence with which Scottish politics was customarily conducted was even more fearful than the discipline of the [royal] schoolroom and the throne was repeatedly threatened.” (13) Yet James VI had always turned down open violence with his opponents, for the sight of naked weapons, such as a drawn sword filled him with deep fear and trepidation. He grasped already as a young boy that in order to meet his (secret) aspirations, he must become a sly strategist and a vicious enemy.

James VI's personal engagement in the political crusade against the Scottish nobles started with the arrival of his (Catholic) French cousin Esmé Stewart, seigneur of d'Aubigny in 1579. The exceptional welcome and concern Stewart enjoyed at the royal court soon aroused envy and resentment among the Anglophile nobles, who found the newcomer irritating and suspicious. Fraternal love and devotion were apparently not the sole grounds of Stewart's appearance in Scotland, and his actions slowly shed light on his growing interests in “the purely personal ends of safeguarding his reversionary rights in Scottish property of the Lennox Stewarts and in the place of royal succession which that family had both as being heirs to Darnley and as standing after the Hamiltons in the succession to Mary.” (Donaldson 1967, 201) He was expeditiously removed from court and returned to France, where he died soon. This diplomatic manoeuvre was followed by the brutal abduction of the young King, for “in August 1582 James was seized by the ultra-Protestant and pro-English fraction in a *coup d'état* known as the Ruthven Raid.” (Donaldson 1967, 201) In the long run however, this dark and furtive deed was the first that

opened a decisive new era both in James VI's life in Scottish domestic politics. While this critical period was doubtlessly marked by long rounds of blood-feuds and intrigues⁵³, it also helped James VI define his own political position more clearly than he could do ever before. The vicious Earl of Gowrie, leader of the Ruthven Raiders was charged and found guilty of high treason, thus after his execution all of his followers were banished to England. James VI – who was still a minor at that time – fell under the control of the Earl of Arran.

Although, Scotland was notorious for its history of political upheavals in the Middle Ages, the troubles James VI and his supporters had to face with during the 1580s were exceptionally massive and violent. Maurice Lee Jr. described the historical context from the perspective of the young monarch as the following:

In 1585 the powers of the crown were theoretically considerable, but its resources were not. Scotland was a poor country with a predominantly agrarian economy. [...] The king's ordinary revenues were small, taxation was rare, and the tax-collection machinery was antiquated. He had no standing army and no trained bureaucracy, and many important offices had become hereditary in the families of the aristocracy. Great nobles, virtually petty kings on their own lands and secure in the loyalty (unforced or coerced) of their tenants and kinsmen, paid heed to royal orders only if they saw it fit to do so, and frequently caballed together to seize the person of the king and thus control the government. Between the formal end of the regency of the earl of Morton in March 1578 and the overturn of the regime of the earl of Arran in September 1585 there were at least six such aristocratic coups which were more or less successful and one which failed. (4)

In 1585, James VI was finally able to announce comprehensive legal and legislative reforms and secured a key position for Lord Maitland of Thirlestane as Secretary in his innermost adviser circle. The aim of James VI with these invaluable administrative steps were “to teach the nobles that they must obey the law, [...] [and] to train the gentry to appeal to the Crown and not to the great lords.” (Willson 96-7) In order to achieve these ambitious goals however, the administration planned to exhaust the political skills and competence of Lord Maitland, along with the physical absence of foreigner armies. According to Lee

⁵³ Cf. Willson, David Harris. *King James VI and I*. London: Alden, 1956. 96.

Jr., “[t]o achieve this [large-scale reform], the first necessity was peace and the absence of outside – i.e. English – interference in Scotland's internal affairs; [and it was rather] the Anglo-Scottish Treaty of 1586 [on which more in the next sub-chapter⁵⁴, that] substantially accomplished both these aims.” (203) Maitland's growing influence on James VI – similarly to the ill-famed Esmé Stewart – brought to surface all the envy, frustration and hatred the Protestant Lords were keeping at bay. The Chancellor's other major political agenda – a good relationship to England – on the other hand, displeased and provoked the Catholic Earls. As Maurice Lee Jr. has pointed out, by the time Lord Maitland began to assert his full power as Chancellor (1587), “[i]t was clear enough to the king and everyone else that the principal obstacle to the increase of the crown's authority lay in the great power and lawless behavior of the Scottish aristocracy.” (4) The nobles, as expected, were less than eager to give up their traditional political roles and denied the kind of subordination James VI demanded from them:

The nobles did not think of the King as a sovereign lord, commanding universal obedience, but rather as a feudal suzerain, against whom rebellion was no great crime. They were themselves small kings in their own districts, combining the authority of feudal chieftains, landlords, magistrates and heads of clans, and hence they could force the lower classes into their service and summon the whole countryside into arms. (Willson 96)

As a consequence, those parts of the Highlands where neither the Kirk nor the state could exercise their authority, were beyond the reach of the royal legislative system as well. Therefore, as Behringer claimed, it is hard to understand how eventual legal disputes and problems were solved, “nobody really knows what happened up there.” (124) The Catholic Earls of the north, the Earl of Errol, Angus and Huntly were constantly slipping out of the hands of the authorities.

The case of Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell was largely different from that of the Catholic Earls. As mentioned before, he held an important position and served as Lord Admiral in the court during James VI's stay in Norway and

⁵⁴ Cf. 4.3.3. “English Connections”.

Denmark (1590-1). The fact that royal blood was undeniably running in his veins as well – Stewart was grandson of James V and nephew of James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell – provided him with the sense of dignity and grace James VI was only aspiring to. The other (darker) side of the coin was a “fierce, profligate⁵⁵ and lawless [individual], spending his time in carousals, feuds and rebellions.” (Willson 100) It is highly likely that during the 1580s the young King still admired his cousin's aptitude, and since “there was little reason or logic in his [Bothwell's] actions” (Willson 100), it is improbable that his collaborations were taken too seriously⁵⁶.

James's antipathy towards Bothwell and his imprudent actions began to increase after two of the suspected witches (Agnes Sampson and Richard “Ritchie” Graham) involved him in their plea in 1590. According to Willson, the King “suddenly [...] made the terrifying discovery that it was against himself and his life that the witches had been employing their devilish arts, and that they had done so at Bothwell's instigation.” (104) While there is no substantial evidence on the existence of an actual relationship between Graham, Sampson and Bothwell, the fierce nature of these accusations fueled James VI's certainty of Bothwell's engagement in his murder considerably. Eventually Bothwell abused the royal initiatives as far that in 1595 he had to go to exile. Chasing the 'Devil' out of Scotland gave little ease to the monarch, and as it has been recently argued “[t]he conviction that Bothwell was his greatest enemy blinded James to the dangers posed by the charming but unreliable [Catholic nobleman, Earl of] Huntly.” (Croft 34)

A weighty argument was raised against Huntly, when he was caught (for the second time) to plot against Elizabeth I behind the back of the Scottish court with the defeated Spanish King. The aggravating evidence that made their crime severe and inexcusable was the fact that they pledged political allegiance

⁵⁵ Bothwell was a married man, although the date of his marriage is unknown. He was the husband of Margaret Douglas, daughter of David, 7th Earl of Angus, and father of two boys and three girls: Francis, John, Elizabeth, Helen and Margaret.

⁵⁶ A further evidence for Bothwell's political irrelevance might be the fact that King James VI remained long skeptical and doubtful about his involvement in the magical conspiracy during the North Berwick trials. James VI began to have misgivings about Bothwell's role only half a year later in the spring of 1591.

to Philip II after the disastrous debacle of the Great Armada. (Willson 98) Their treason surfaced at the end of 1589, but since the Earl of Huntly was both second cousin of the King by marriage and one of his personal favourites, his imprisonment was short and nominal. James VI's mildness was interpreted as a sign of diplomatic inability in England, but the Scottish King understood better the power and potential of his nobles. On the longer run, his careful step to show undue leniency became James VI's key to success. In the decisive battle of the Bridge of Dee, James VI managed to defeat the Catholic Earls as well without any bloodshed.

By the end of the first and the second major waves of witch-hunting⁵⁷ in North Berwick, James VI destroyed his disturbing opponents successfully. The once formidable obstacles were largely overcome. By this time he also developed a relatively harmonious relationship with the Reformed Church – after the death of Lord Maitland (1595) negotiations with the religious leaders became easier and faster – that became as an institution more supportive and reassuring. “The Scotland which James left behind him in 1603 was an orderly and moderately prosperous country, far different from the quasi-medieval kingdom which he began personally to govern in 1585.” (Lee Jr., 3-4)

4.3.2.1. James VI and his Political Enemies in *The Burning*

As regards the political climate of the age, Conn focuses in *The Burning* primarily on the turbulent relationship between King James VI and the Earl of Bothwell. Their heated argument in the beginning of the play throws light on the despotic nature of James VI's statecraft; the King, who seemingly keeps his faith in a system based on (fair) meritocracy, considers himself the single (true) son to be entitled to God's divine right. In addition, the two further factors that seriously weaken the royal initiative – in Bothwell's opinion – are James VI's utter shortsightedness concerning his choice of favourites and the oversized

⁵⁷ The first major wave was in 1590-91 in the Eastern Lothian region, while the second one was in many aspects the continuation of the first persecutions around the region of Edinburgh in 1597.

financial compensations he provides them with. This Anglophile political faction – most of them members of the landowning gentry – angered the noble families of both the Catholic and the Protestant side. At the time of the conversation with Bothwell James VI is already so despised among the nobles that he has little hope for future political advancement. Bothwell, who immediately recognizes the signs of strain on his monarch, imposes (deliberately) even more stress on James VI by declaring open war on his self-esteem:

JAMES. There are other ways to govern, than by violence. We shall rule Scotland by a Clerk of the Council, which others have not been able to do with the sword [...] You [Bothwell] are an evil man. And you will be put down. Who are neither true Protestant nor Catholic...and have nothing...but secret and unholy ambition.

BOTHWELL. I have one thing you lack, cousin...popularity.

MAITLAND. Easy bought.

BOTHWELL. Less easy kept. For all the fripperies you dole out. The sweetmeats and strips of land. (To JAMES) Where you curry favour, I command it. Through the lealty of my people. That is my strength.
(Conn 25-6)

In fact, the cruel irony of the reformist royal diplomacy was that while

James VI wished to secure the wisest of councils, to purify the Court of Session, to strengthen royal finance, as well as to improve relations with the Kirk, provide for the defence of the kingdom and pacify the Borders, Highlands, and Western Isles [...], the reforms he advocated were regarded by the nobles as a direct challenge to aristocratic rule.
(Willson 98)

When James VI left the nobles elegantly out of his calculations, he also forgot that running such a long-term engagement profitably, is hardly possible without extreme financial sacrifices. The following scene in *The Burning* reflects accurately these demanding circumstances, calling for an able monarch, who knows how to cover his material expenditures. Fortunately, James VI as portrayed by Stewart Conn, knows all the answers. He forfeits the entire material wealth (and titles) of the ultra-protestant Bothwell, thus feeding his poverty-ridden state machinery and guaranteeing its ability to continue the holy crusade over absolute authority:

BOTHWELL. How is my silver to be usit?

JAMES. Towards furtherance of peace throughout the Realm. Our intent is to put down all warring factions, and dominate the northern nobles utterly. To banish from our house all Jesuits and Papists, and command full obedience to our Acts of Parliament. Through Maitland here at our right hand, we treat with Elizabeth, that our enemies be deliverit into our hands. On behalf of that course we shall share common foes unto death – in despite of the Pope, and the King of Spain, and all Leaguers – and the Devil their Master. (Pause)

BOTHWELL. (quietly) A costly house to put in order. (Conn 23)

As opposed to reality, *The Burning* introduces a King, who has only one “desire [,] to destroy Bothwell politically and personally.” (Maxwell-Stuart 1997, 215) Due to sheer luck, however, the Earl – whose sudden release from the prison of Tantallon is expected to lead him into the court's treacherous trap – is able to avoid the royal guards searching for him in the kirkyard of North Berwick. James VI's plan disastrously backfires (Bothwell slips out of hands), and this unexpected nuisance inevitably provokes a rather violent response; by missing his prey (scapegoat?) for the second time James VI makes the last frenzied effort to save himself. He declares Bothwell an outlaw and hence deciding the political future of Scotland (seemingly) for good⁵⁸:

JAMES. ...Prepare a writ, to have Bothwell declarit outlaw. Have it proclaimit thrice at the Mercat Cross, and throughout the land. To this effect: it is for every law-abiding citizen to apprehend him and bring him to justice, giving respect neither to him nor his property. [...] Thereafter we depart for the palace of Holyroodhouse, and from thence to the Toolbooth. There to stamp the bloody seal upon this affair. (Conn 65-6)

⁵⁸ The further details and the outcome of Bothwell's alleged crime of high treason in *The Burning* will be discussed in chapter 7.2. “Bothwell the Conqueror”.

4.3.3. English Connections

“This is the son [James VI] whom I hope shall first unite the two kingdoms of Scotland and England.”⁵⁹

As so many times before in its history, Scotland's fate took an unusual turn in the year 1565. It could have been Queen Mary's turn to step actively back into the political spotlight; but her decision to marry her own cousin Henry Stewart (Lord Darnley), provoked bitter resentment among the Scottish nobles and the English Queen instead of wholehearted approval. Her chief aim to provide Scotland (and England) with a suitable heir, seemed to justify all her means, and a year later she bore her first (and only) son, James VI. This joyful event – which was, according to some historians, the sole successful political achievement of the young Scottish Queen – however, caused immense changes in the diplomatic relations between her country and its southern neighbour. Mary's union with her cousin had already filled Elizabeth I with anger and suspicion, for “Darnley, like Mary, was a descendant of Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII,” (Willson 1956, 15). With the liaison made official, the royal couple secured a stable place as heir apparent to the English throne⁶⁰. In view of this, the birth of their offspring threw light upon Elizabeth's uncertain position as Queen of England, for she showed neither willingness to marry nor any desire to bear children. As Willson has concluded, “the young mother [Queen Mary] must have felt her triumph, for she was lighter of a fair son and had provided Scotland with an heir while Elizabeth in England was but a barren stock.” (13)

The tables had turned by 1567, Lord Darnley was brutally murdered, the Queen ran away with her savage lover James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell (only to seek shelter in English custody for the rest of her life), and her son James VI was crowned King of Scotland. James VI, while being literally an orphan

⁵⁹ Mary, Queen of Scots qtd. in Willson 13.

⁶⁰ According to the Scottish Royal Court, Elizabeth I was an illegitimate ruler (given that she was the fruit of Henry VIII's second marriage), and “the English Succession Act of 1543 that barred [...] Mary from the English throne was unconstitutional [as well] because the law that governed succession was the law of God, not the Parliament.” (Knafla 239-40).

already as a toddler, never ceased to believe in his divine right as king, and although he “had luck as well as judgment on his side, but [in reality, it was] by a combination of duplicity and pertinacity” – mannerisms, he learned to master during his childhood – “[that] he had achieved a remarkable success.” (Lockyer 26)

First, the arrival of Esmè Stuart, Seigneur d'Aubigny (first cousin of Lord Darnley) in 1579 poisoned Scotland's international political situation with England, for he was an ardent French Catholic and an arch enemy of the Earl of Morton, Elizabeth I's trustee for the young King. Within a couple of years, the Duke (Esmè Stewart was created one by King James VI) “masterminded a coup which led to Morton's arrest and trial, on the charge of involvement in Darnley's murder. The verdict was a foregone conclusion, and in June 1581 Morton was publicly beheaded.” (Lockyer 12-3) Elizabeth I was enraged and deeply offended.

Later, it was James VI's mother, Mary, Queen of Scots (who had been in English custody for almost two decades), who caused serious diplomatic drawbacks with England. She was still alive and remained, against all odds, politically active behind the back of Elizabeth I. A successful plot against her English cousin would have been enough to secure her and her Catholic supporters the crowns of both England and Scotland. The ambitious plan of action failed, Elizabeth I showed zero tolerance towards her traitor and Mary lost her head. As Lockyer has pointed out, “it took a great deal of craft on James's part, as well as stubbornness, to ward off English intervention on behalf of Morton and against Lennox⁶¹,” (13) but to save and punish his own mother at the same time five years later, proved an almost insurmountable obstacle. With his own succession at stake, King James VI was, quite understandably, less eager to save Queen Mary from the guillotine, thus after her impotent attempt to assassinate Elizabeth I surfaced, she (Mary) was relentlessly left alone.

Finally, bringing the Reformed Scottish church under firm control was in James

⁶¹ Esmè Stuart became in Scotland the Duke of Lennox.

VI's best interest (considering his relations to England) because, although both Scotland and its southern neighbour were Protestant, the latter was following the Lutheran conventions, while the former reformed its church along the lines of Calvinist doctrine. The two theological directions differed fundamentally from each other, Scottish Calvinists were rather similar to the fanatic Puritan minority in England, therefore getting to grips with the leaders of the new Reformed Church was crucial for the young King on his personal crusade to seize the English crown.⁶²

The firm foundation of the two neighbouring countries' union rested on the Anglo-Scottish Treaty of 1586 (Queen Mary was still alive), in which James VI promised Elizabeth I “a defensive alliance and [...] mutual assistance in the event of an invasion.” (Croft 22) And while he agreed to turn his country into a non-aggressive associate with whom he hoped the English will negotiate, Elizabeth promised financial support and an initial (yet secret) approval of her Scottish cousin as her official heir.

As Croft has pointed out,

[t]he treaty was reinforced by a letter from Elizabeth agreeing that while James continued friendly to England, she would support him with an annual pension, later around £3000 sterling. She also promised not to undercut any right or title that might be due to James, then or in the future. The pension was valuable in view of the king's chronic financial difficulties, and he constantly strove to get the queen to increase it. Her letter, with its oblique comments about James's rights and titles, became more important as the years wore on since it discreetly alluded to his claim to her throne. Significantly, James had the letter formally registered by the Scottish Privy Council in 1596. (22)

Astonishingly enough, it was not always the Scottish royal court that started the internecine diplomatic feuds with England, for at the end of 1592, after repeated (and failed) attempts to seize and capture King James VI, Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell sought and found shelter in England. What is more, “Queen

⁶² Cf. Champion, Justin, Tom Healy and Clare Jackson. Interviewed by Melvyn Bragg. “*Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the divine right of kings*”. BBC Channel 4. London: 11 October 2007. Radio. 18 January 2011.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/b0080xph/In_Our_Time_The_Divine_Right_Of_Kings>.

Elizabeth continued to support Bothwell and in July 1593, the earl forced his way to the privy chamber of the palace of Holyrood and dramatically proffered his sword in token of submission [to James VI].” (Croft 34) James VI had every reason to be upset and outraged, for it seemed that Elizabeth did not feel irrevocably and equally bound by the Treaty of 1586.

By the beginning of the 1580s the English court gradually gave up hope of Elizabeth I ever marrying and began to turn its attention to those who were regarded as her possible ancestors. One could say that England's worst was bringing out Scotland's best; while the ageing Queen was more than anguished at her own adequate successor, her Scottish cousin, King James VI was on his way to achieve his majority, and step by step began to rule as an adult, independent king.⁶³ He was consciously planning his takeover of the English throne, and although he wrote numerous – rather impassioned, but polite – letters to Queen Elizabeth, he had never received explicit word of encouragement from her for his political ambitions. In 1603, the Queen eventually died childless, and James VI followed her on the throne without one strike of his sword.

4.3.3.1. Queen Elizabeth I in *The Burning*

There is only one brief reference in *The Burning* to Queen Elizabeth I, in Act 1, scene two. Assuming that the audience is reasonably familiar with the sixteenth-century diplomatic relations⁶⁴ between Scotland and England, Conn introduces the English Queen through her connection to the Earl of Bothwell:

MAITLAND [to BOTHWELL]. I recall your promise to feed this Court at the rate of two hundred thousand crowns per annum, without expense to his Grace of one farthing.

⁶³ Cf. Champion, Justin, Tom Healy and Clare Jackson. Interviewed by Melvyn Bragg. “*Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the divine right of kings*”. BBC Channel 4. London: 11 October 2007. Radio. 18 January 2011.

⁶⁴ For more details see the previous chapter, 4.3.3. “English Connections”.

BOTHWELL. By bleeding Elizabeth, not turning out my own pocket.
 MAITLAND. Elizabeth will relish that, when next you play lapdog to her.
 [...]
 JAMES. Our position is God-given, and a divine duty.
 MAITLAND. While you [Bothwell] are but England's errand-boy.
 BOTHWELL. An errand-boy who holds the key to the Border.
 MAITLAND. Errand-boys should learn to to serve one master. (22-3)

There is no convincing historical evidence on whether the Earl of Bothwell was trusted with the supervision of the annual pension Elizabeth I promised James VI in 1586. Theoretically he could have fulfilled the position of a royal agent as well. What seems to be certain however, is the fact that while “Bothwell had been well received at court in the 1580s, [...] James conceived an obsessive hatred of him in 1591 when he was accused in the North Berwick affair of using witchcraft to conjure up storms to drown the king.” (Croft 34) Naming him “England's errand-boy” recalls the Earl's desperate flight to England in the summer of 1592, where after receiving both financial and moral support, he proved to be of little avail to Elizabeth I. The watchful and anxious attitude on the Scottish side towards England – which is so well indicated at the beginning of the play – might have been an automatic reaction to the suspicious co-operation of Bothwell and Queen Elizabeth I, but it definitely originated from the growing power of Northern Catholic Earls. King James VI dreaded the idea of a political conspiracy more than anything else, thus catching Bothwell as he pacts down both with England and with the North Berwick witches was essential for the future success of the Scottish court. By the time Bothwell was captured and accused of providing Elizabeth I with confidential information, most of the accused witches were (unlike in *The Burning*) already executed.

4.3.4. The Royal Marriage

During the formative years of the early 1580s, the Scottish court began to pursue the question of James VI's marriage prospects, especially as “[a] suitable marriage alliance would [have] also reinforce[d] the king's international standing.” (Croft 23) Finding a suitable partner for James VI thus became a political decision which affected, beside Scotland, France and Denmark. As the idea of a French union was quietly abandoned and the court put forward a proposal first for King Frederick II's elder daughter, Elizabeth, and later for the younger, Anna, so grew the young King's enthusiasm and passion. According to historical accounts, besides the obvious financial reasons, it was the age and beauty of the adolescent Danish princess that secured the deal. Princess Anna was barely fifteen years old when the official diplomatic negotiations between Scotland and Denmark started, a treasure, full of life and vitality. Sadly however, due to the fact that Chancellor Maitland (James VI's 'fidus Achates' and leading politician) devoted all his personal influence to the promotion of the French union, Queen Anna was not as universally welcomed at the royal court as she might have previously anticipated. As a result, Maitland gained another worthy opponent with whom his relationship was turbulent and unstable at its best, and maliciously poignant at its worst for the rest of his life⁶⁵.

In opposition to Anna, the French princess, Catherine de Bourbon was ten years James VI's senior, and albeit a political union with France would have increased the prestige and importance of the Scottish Court, it seriously lacked “[t]he foundation of material advantage”. (Willson 86) The promise of becoming the next French King left James VI cold, chiefly because “that eminence was unobtainable without hard fighting in which the King of Scots had no wish to take part.” (Willson 86)

⁶⁵ The fact that Queen Anna was a highly educated and shrewd negotiator turned her “in effect, a kind of super peer with excellent access to the monarch, holding the unofficial position analogous to that of a favourite, and in this sense – in the matter of privileged access – she was a favourite's natural enemy.” (Barroll, 2001, 5-6). In view of this, quite understandably, the profound political impact Lord Maitland of Thirlestane had upon James VI greatly angered the new Queen as well.

The dowry Frederick II promised James VI carried perhaps the greatest weight with the court, though there were some other, similarly vital socio-economic factors which contributed to the Danish union. As Willson has claimed, Denmark was

[a] prosperous, and well established kingdom, [...] [it] was Protestant but aloof from the religious wars of Europe, a bridge for Scottish alliance with the Protestant Princes of north Germany. The Scottish towns, especially Edinburgh, strongly favoured the Danish match 'having their most necessary trade with the Easternlings'. (Willson 86)

The initial enthusiasm that surrounded the wedding preparations however, soon turned into paralyzing fear and anxiety, because Princess Anna was unable – even after repeated attempts – to reach the Scottish shores in the fall of 1589. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the extreme weather conditions on the North Sea forced the Danish fleet to return first home and later to Norway. They lost a ship, but the princess remained uninjured.

The unfortunate incident however, conveyed a clear symbolic meaning to the Scottish side; the failure of the future bride jeopardized both the political and the sexual potency of James VI. (Normand & Roberts 33) Hence the King's decision, to take matters into his own hands – to sail directly to Norway – was rather a diplomatic arrangement than the demonstration of his ardent affection to Anna. It is notable that “[t]he man to oversee the preparations for the return of the royal couple was the lord high admiral, the earl of Bothwell, [...] [who] was nominally responsible for the ships conveying James and Anne safely home from Denmark.” (Normand & Roberts 35)

The sudden apprehension that witches were responsible for the faulty navigation and the harsh winds however, emerged first in Denmark (and not in Scotland) the following spring (1590). Normand & Roberts provide the following – apparently persuasive – explanation for these wild accusations: “the [Danish] [w]ithcraft charges emerged from a series of actions which began with Admiral Peter Munk, the commander of the Danish ships, attempting to clear himself of the charge of negligence for the mishaps that had befallen the squadron during

September 1589⁶⁶.” (38) As far as the notion of a magical conspiracy is concerned, James VI's suspicion and alarm might have grown under the influence of the Danish events, but at this time, it did not affect him seriously. Another year had to pass until “[t]he [Scottish] investigators [...] [managed] to form a plausible story from the fragmentary evidence which they gathered” (Normand & Roberts 127), and could finally link the 'malicious sorcerers' of North Berwick to King James VI.

4.3.4.1. The King and His Queen in *The Burning*

Except for two small passages, the King's marriage to Anna, Princess of Denmark gains almost no attention in *The Burning*. Without a sufficient background knowledge about the laborious weeks, James VI and his entourage had to endure in the fall of 1589 however, it is hard to give a critical analysis of the monarch's reaction and response to the (alleged) magical conspiracy stemming from North Berwick. Let us concentrate now on the relationship of James VI and Anna, as it is portrayed by Stewart Conn.

When the audience first encounters the Scottish monarch, he seems a rather absentminded valentine, who is having his lady constantly on his mind. His misplaced preoccupation with his codpiece, not domestic matters, is equally telling of James VI's lack of good manners and discretion. Calling his Queen 'affectionate bedfellow' indicates a passionate relationship between the two of them:

JAMES. And that of our affectionate bedfellow the Queen... (He [James VI] toys with the feathers of his codpiece...) (Conn 18)

As mentioned earlier, as *The Burning* concentrates on King James VI's intense rivalry over authority and the fatal consequences of his personal and political

⁶⁶ Cf. Maxwell-Stuart, P. G.. “The fear of the King is death: James VI and the witches of East Lothian.” *Fear in early modern society*. Ed. William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997. 209-210.

clashes, the symbolic meaning of the dubious witchcraft conspiracy is ostensibly more important than the course of action. Had the witches succeeded and the royal couple been sunk to the bottom of the North Sea, the country would have been in chaos. James VI and Anna got their first child, Henry, Prince of Wales only four years after the notorious North Berwick events, in 1594. In the following excerpt the King voices his sheer perseverance to race with time against the solo Earl of Bothwell, whose prospects for the Scottish throne would improve anon if James VI died childless:

JAMES. Put him [FIAN] to the test. He appears the major instrument.
The
 powers of darkness are fell, that make the royal hand shake. Yet we
 must defy him. Till our marriage with Anne bear issue. To maintain
the
 line. Bothwell is a black stag. (Conn 63)

4.3.5. King James VI – The 'Divine'

God gives not Kings the style of Gods in vain,
For on his throne his Sceptre do they sway.
(King James VI qtd. in Burns 31)

The state of MONARCHIE is the supremest thing upon earth: For Kings are not onely GODS Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon GODS throne, but even by GOD himselfe they are called GODS.
(King James VI qtd. in McIlwain 307)

Buchanan was James VI's first political opponent, whose final defeat contributed to the consolidation of the divine monarchy he was aspiring for. The young Scottish King openly despised the teachings of John Mair (whom Buchanan devotedly followed), who saw political protests and civil disobedience as natural, inalienable civil rights. (Wormald 40) James VI also assured his followers that the foundations of the so-called 'conciliarist theory' – which focuses on a 'contract' between the ruler and his subjects and argues that all citizens have the right to overthrow their monarch in case of dissatisfaction – will never really be able to set foot in his country. (Wormald 40) Buchanan's scholarly points were made clear in both of his late works – *De Jure Regni apud Scotos* (published in 1579) and *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (published in 1582)⁶⁷. The fact that he argued for such political principles which justified the forceful removal of James VI's mother, Mary, Queen of Scots and imposed strict conditions on behalf of the population restraining the royal authority of the ruler in power angered James VI greatly. In sum, while Buchanan spared no expense as he busied himself with fostering a meek, obedient and governable pupil, he forgot about the human factor in realizing the political potentials of his novice. The young King – against all expectations – refused to give up his God-given birthrights and insisted that his authority was granted by the Christian Lord alone. Thus as Willson has stated, “James, as soon as freedom was within his grasp, hastened to escape from the dour tyranny of his tutor and repudiated

⁶⁷ A key indicator of James VI's political strength was the fact that he “obtained from Parliament in 1584 a condemnation of Buchanan's writings; and years later counselled his son to read history, but not such infamous invectives as Buchanan's and Knox's chronicles. (Willson 39).

many of the lessons that Buchanan had sought to instil. This was the natural reaction of a self-willed though timid lad against an early despotism.”⁶⁸ (21)

The spiritual retreat James VI needed was (in future) obtained from writing and contemplating⁶⁹. His philosophical, theological and political thoughts provided him a release from the numerous personal and public tensions that peaked at the end of the sixteenth-century. Most of these writings – composed during the years as King of Scotland – reflect exactly this supreme transcendence and as such were of great importance in the quest of defining the absolutist political thought in Scotland. In other words, given that James VI gradually developed into an outstanding scholar and sharp intellect, who was “unashamedly absolutist by inclination, and a stout defender of the royal prerogative” (Lockyer 208), his audience was to receive (for the first time in Scottish history) a unique insight into the royal prerogative. In an official letter to Queen Elizabeth I, James VI argued convincingly against the execution of his mother by referring to the divine right of monarchs:

What law can permit that justice shall strike upon them whom he has appointed supreme dispensators of the same under him, whom he hath called gods and therefore subjected to the censure of none in earth, whose anointing by God cannot be defiled by man unrevengeed by the author thereof, who, being supreme and immediate lieutenants of God in heaven, cannot therefore be judged by their equals on earth? What monstrous thing is it that sovereign princes themselves should be the example-givers of their own sacred diadems' profaning! (Akrigg 82)

As regards James VI's literary treatises, he appears a thoughtful and intelligent man, concerned deeply for his country's economical and spiritual growth. Given that James VI lacked most of the attributes that characterized the cavalier kings of the Renaissance, he became “one of the most influential British political writers of the early modern period,” (Sommerville 2006, Introduction xv) whose theoretical works were more than mere personal observations. Although writing

⁶⁸ Another telling example of the effects of how weary the constant fight against his childhood tutor in reality must have made the young pupil, is the fact that “many years later, as King of England, he [James VI and I] was shaken by a nightmare in which Buchanan, long dead, appeared and severely rebuked him.” (Akrigg 42).

⁶⁹ Cf. Wootton, David. (Ed.) *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England*. London: Penguin, 1986.

(at that time) was assumed an inappropriate and foolish activity for a king so powerful as James VI, his analytical skills and balanced arguments silenced even the most fierce critics. His personal notions concerning a king's appropriate attitude towards his subjects filled the air around him with unshakeable self-confidence and self-knowledge, yet at times, this sense of invincibility (on this see below) was little more than an art of self-defence.

Let us now continue with a brief examination of these political ideas.

When *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* was published in 1598 (under a pseudonym by the royal printer), James VI offered a short glimpse for the first time into his interpretation of the theory and practice of kingship. The long years of Buchanan's extensive tuition – where he was indeed 'hammering' the idea of the so called 'resistance doctrine'⁷⁰ into his pupil – showed no visible effects at all, James VI felt connected to the people like fathers are to their children⁷¹, or as heads belong to the body. He was a son of God and not a civil servant appointed by his subjects⁷². James VI's confidence about his divine right against all odds was rising, a fact, he did not hesitate to remind his readers on in his writings. According to the royal prerogative, kings love their people just as God watches over and protects his adherents until the end of time: “for all other well-ruled commonwealths, the style of the *pater patriae* was ever, and is, commonly used to kings.” (James VI qtd. in Wootton 99) James's notions and preconceptions about the true nature of kingship were clearly results of years of silent protest and resistance: his “strenuous advocacy of divine right was a response to the threats to his authority posed by presbyterianism (in the figures of John Knox and Andrew Melville) and resistance and contract theory⁷³ (in the

70 Cf. Wormald, Jenny. “James VI and I, Basilikon Doron and The Trew Law of Free Monarchies: the Scottish Context and the English Translation.” *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*. Ed. Linda Levy Peck. Cambridge: CUP, 1991. 36-54. and Wootton, David. (Ed.) *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England*. London: Penguin, 1986. 99.

71 James VI argued (albeit somewhat naively) that there is a moral binding between him and his subjects based on natural necessity and love, thus he took for granted that every citizen of Scotland is so intensely overwhelmed with gratitude towards him that they do not feel the need for an uprising. (qtd. in Wootton 99).

72 Cf. Levack, Brian P.. *Witch-hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 99-100.

73 Resistance theorists argued that “in certain circumstances subjects may have the right to depose their king”, while contract theorists held “the belief that a contract is made between the king and his subjects at his coronation that places certain obligations upon him.” (Rhodes,

figure of George Buchanan, his former tutor).⁷⁴ When paying a closer attention to these early writings of James VI, one would rather discover a fearful child who is eager to overcome his own vulnerability and insecurity than an absolutist ruler sitting securely upon his throne⁷⁵.

James VI's first book of political content was a clear-cut defense of the doctrine of divine right⁷⁶, which was followed by a fascinating handbook on the guidelines of the absolute monarchy⁷⁷. Generally speaking, as long as *Trew Law* conveyed deep personal convictions and beliefs, *Basilikon Doron* devotedly concentrated on a selection of political hardships (in Scotland) and offered solutions in a form of 'golden rules'⁷⁸:

The *Trew Law* tells us about the awesome control imposed on the king who was controlled only by God. *Basilikon Doron* is very different. It is a manual of kingship, firmly set in the *speculum principis* genre. [...] it is a practical handbook and emphatically not a statement of highly developed political theory. [...] He also had reasons to know of both the dangers and the advantages of aristocratic power, and advised his son to harness the one and use the other, as indeed he had done with considerable success. (Wormald 47)

By taking a closer look at these works, it is striking how easily readable and understandable their major theses are that can be explained in two different ways. It has been argued that they might have been “written for refreshment and for pleasure, for the sheer delight in temporarily shutting the door on a world which, in his early years, had posed so many problems, but which were now being overcome, and could now be analysed by the pen.” (Wormald 49)

Richards and Marshall, Introduction 14).

74 *King James VI and I: Selected Writings*. Eds. Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards and Joseph Marshall. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. Introduction 12.

75 King James VI and I. *King James VI and I: Selected Writings*. Eds. Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards and Joseph Marshall. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. Introduction 13.

76 King James VI and I. “The Trew Law of Free Monarchies: Or The Reciproock and mutuall duetie btwixt a free King, and his naturall Subjects.” Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards and Joseph Marshall. (Eds.) *King James VI and I: Selected Writings*. Aldershot Hants: Ashgate, 2003. 259-278.

77 King James VI and I. “Basilikon Doron” reference missing The book was intended as practical political advice for his son Prince Henry.

78 One of the most interesting examples of the *Basilikon Doron* is, in fact, Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell (whom James VI feared and accused of witchcraft during the first wave of panics in North Berwick in 1590-91), mentioned “as an example of what evil consequences result when kings have illegitimate children”, since his father was thought to be a sub-marital child of King James V. (Sommerville 2006, xiii).

Another possible reason for such clarity could be James VI's personal position that allowed him to speak and write "as a man of God, and as a theologian" (Knafla 237). As a man of God, he was used to proclamations and announcements, to speech forms, free from public negotiation.

In sum, the core argument of James VI political thought embraced the assumption that kings are naturally in the position to demand civil obedience and (full) support for their actions without the slightest inclination to justify them. Kings were, in James VI's understanding, neither prone to legal displacement nor targets of rebellions. As a consequence, his subjects were led to believe that unjust and tyrannical monarchs are also sent by God, though in that case to punish them for their sins. (Wootton 102) This idea was supported by the Calvinist theology that feared the divine provost who put people repeatedly into severe hardships, simply to uphold and restore their religious faith. Additionally, by proclaiming the divine right theory James VI could ward off anyone who dared to criticize his (poor) political style and diplomatic skills.

One further aspect that enriches the idea of James VI's divine position is the religious context Scotland provided the young King with. As Knafla pointed out in his argument

one cannot emphasize sufficiently the importance of religion and the Scriptures in the world of the early modern Protestants. Scripture became the ultimate source of authority, [...] the worship of God led to the worship of king, governors, officials and parents. [...] Father of the King James Bible, James saw his moral imperative as acting on earth as God directed him from heaven. (237-8)

This moral authority was also tightly bound to the ideological convictions about the Devil's potential to destroy James VI. As Stuart Clark claimed in his essay, "King James's Daemonologie: Witchcraft and Kingship",

...demonology was in fact intrinsically related to the presuppositions of godly rule. The recurring theme of both the dittays of 1590-1 and *Newes*

from Scotland was that the king's Christian rectitude made him the Devil's principal target, and yet at the same time protected him from all his machinations. [...] This fundamental principle of the politics of demonism is of crucial significance. It transformed the very impotence of the North Berwick witches into an affirmation of the truly divine nature [...] [thus] James could not have provided himself with a better statement of legitimacy, nor, in the circumstances, from a more impeccable authority. (1992, 198)

4.3.5.1. The Doctrine of Divine Right in *The Burning*

JAMES. Our position is God-given, and a divine duty. (Conn 23)

As mentioned earlier, King James VI was an outstanding diplomat and a fascinating scholar, who bounded the theoretical side with the practical aspects of kingship in such a subtle way that few of those opposing him dared eventually to disagree. This intense passion for political dispute and writing however, astounded both his contemporaries and his more recent critics as “it [was] highly unusual for a king [in Early Modern Europe] to write books. [What is more,] [i]t was remarkable in the extreme for a Scottish king to do so, [...] because before the sixteenth century there had been, in sharp distinction to England, virtually no tradition of political theorizing” in Scotland. (Wormald 38) While in his habit of solitary meditation, James VI followed the tradition of such famous classical writers as Marcus Aurelius or Augustine, his treatises were – instead of appreciation – prime targets of (open) criticism for centuries. Although James VI was undoubtedly far from being a devoted democrat, the traditionalist scholarly approach – that displaced James VI naturally as 'the wisest fool in Christendom' – did more harm than good to the historical assessment of his reign. Sadly, these lazy and simplistic (conventional) evaluations achieved continuing popularity up until the 1970s. Sir Walter Scott – Scotland's legendary polymath – was no exception either, when it came to passing poor opinions of James VI's philosophy and character:

He [James VI] was deeply learned, without possessing useful knowledge; sagacious in many individual cases, without having real

wisdom; fond of his power and desirous to maintain and augment it, yet willing to resign the direction of that and of himself, to the most unworthy favourites; a big and bold assertor of his rights in words, yet one who tamely saw them trampled in deeds; a lover of negotiations, in which he was always outwitted; and a fearer of war, where conquest might have been easy. He was fond of his dignity, which he was perpetually degrading by undue familiarity; capable of much public labour, yet often neglecting it for the meanest amusement; a wit, though a pedant, and a scholar, though fond of the conversation of the ignorant and uneducated. [...] He was laborious in trifles, and a trifler where serious labour was required... (66-7)

Conn's central focus is on political authority and personal credibility in *The Burning*. His thematization of these vast and complex subjects however, differs radically from those of the findings of today's scholars. Conn's understanding of the legitimacy of James VI's divine principles matches well with the traditional academic attitude concerning the political ideology of the era. By deriding James VI's strategic mastery and shrewd wit in his play, Conn established an ambience that – instead of showing a more objective picture of the Scottish King – exaggerated his aberrant self-obsession and insatiable hunger for power. Conn's fictional king fulfills his role as a petty tyrant in *The Burning*, whose divine “powers [...] threaten the subjects rights” (Miller 197), and as such, first he is mercilessly disdained and later condemned to the dustbin of history. Thus from the very first moment James VI voices his 'holy credo', the audience cannot help but follow Conn's mockery of the sense of royal infallibility that is unknown to us:

JAMES. The weapon may be weak. In hands that wear fetters. In ours, it is investit with puissance beyond itself. The Right is on our side. In any battle we engage. [...] Behind it lie our birthright, and the traditions of the Court. Through God's heavenly guidance, we command obeisance. This is a mighty weapon, manifest through God, and Christ our Saviour. (Conn 25)

Portraying an Early Modern Scottish King as “an evil idiot, a man without dignity but prey to his own irrationality” (Bold 303), whose rapacious personality denies him to “take [any] opposition calmly or even reasonably” (Notestein 21) has provided Conn with the best means to throw light on the dangers of selfish

entitlement as opposed to experience:

JAMES. It is right you should serve us, who rule this land by policy.

BOTHWELL. Policy demands wisdom.

JAMES. There are our councillors. Besides, the King is the true child and servant of God. Wisdom is investit in him, through heavenly grace. He has the key to the nation's safety. (Conn 23-4)

Conn's decision to reject James VI's diplomatic courage and to ridicule him for his contemptuous nature might have been a conscious artistic move, though this option seems – at least from today's perspective – rather improbable. We should not forget that four decades ago, when *The Burning* was staged, most scholars agreed that the reign of King James VI weakened Scotland and was a cause for shame not pride. Today we know that even though James VI struggled hard to defend his divine doctrines both Scotland and later in the Union, his endeavor to become a universal king – similarly to the attempts of his predecessors – was never fully successful. Given that the obstacles he had to face with were mostly financial and not ideological, his idea of having absolute authority was repeatedly cut by the lack of sufficient resources at his command. As Notestein has pointed out, even if “James was an egoist by nature and inheritance, and his self-importance fitted in nicely with his notions of government [i.e. absolutist monarchy]” (20), he was never in the position to live his ideological dream. The following excerpt taken from the end of *The Burning* reveals this furious fight for power and survival between Bothwell and King James VI:

BOTHWELL. You see yourself as the one and only true power. Absolute. And any force opposing you, not power but violation of power. Mere violence. In time to come you will realise you are but an infringer of power. Already there are movements afoot. To make rulers act in accord with the will of their people, not their own whim.

JAMES. That would be chaos. Men must be governed.

BOTHWELL. So must monarchs. That men may be free in themselves.

JAMES. Who are you, to think yourself superior?

BOTHWELL. Your dark shadow, whom you cannot go without. (Conn 99)

4.4. The Witchcraft Conspiracy

4.4.1. From Weather Magic to Political Propaganda

Although the idea – as mentioned earlier⁷⁹ in this thesis – that James VI and his young bride fell victim to a group of malicious witches did not originate from Scotland, due partly to the rigid Protestant dogmas (that saw witches as treacherous rebels in league with the Devil) and partly to James VI's unshakable belief in his own divine right, the idea quickly took wing in Scotland as well. Besides, it is also important to keep in mind that “Denmark [where the first charges were made] was a country already familiar with [political] witchhunts, since Lutheran reformers all too often adopted the expedient of labeling their conservative opponents as witches.” (Croft 26)

Let us now take a closer look at how the initial talk of weather magic transformed into such heavy charges as conspiracy and high treason during the winter of 1590-1.

As stated, witchcraft was first promoted in Copenhagen, shortly after the newly wedded couple arrived there on December 22, 1589. According to historical sources, Peter Munk, Denmark's panic stricken royal admiral was so afraid of a naval interrogation concerning his skills and experience⁸⁰ – for the journeys through the Northern Sea were unusually stormy and rough – that after having taken advantage of his rank, he began to accuse a local witch of manipulating the weather. (Normand & Roberts 21) By the time King James VI and Queen Anna returned to Scotland (May 1590), the number of the accused rose from one to half a dozen⁸¹, “for allegedly causing storms to stop Anne's fleet reaching Scotland in autumn 1589.” (Normand & Roberts 21) The fact however that, Danish officers found a group of suspicious collaborators in their capital was – at this point – of no real significance to convince James VI of being a victim. As Maxwell-Stuart concluded, besides the contentment of his new bride, James VI must have had a number of other burning issues to deal with: “Papists, Jesuits,

79 Cf. 2.1.3.2. “The Devil and North Berwick in the 1590s” and 4.3.4. “The Royal Marriage”.

80 Sadly, though Munk's egocentric testimony was merely intended to clear his name, the spiteful spark it unleashed, led to disastrous consequences in both countries.

81 The execution of all these women followed shortly after. (Normand & Roberts 21).

pirates, and quarrelsome Scottish lords⁸², took up much of his attention on his return as, [...] they did that of the kirk. (1997, 214) What is more, those who took part in the naval voyages agreed that “the problems they had encountered were entirely natural” (Maxwell-Stuart 1997, 210), thus giving a second thought to the Danish witchcraft accusations seemed less than necessary. As a direct consequence, Scotland was completely spared from the impending crisis until late summer 1590.

Things began to change for the worse by late autumn and brought a rapid shift in attitude towards the alleged witchcraft charges. Several people were singled out in the Edinburgh countryside – for chanting forbidden rhymes and for healing the sick – and their forced confessions provided the authorities with enough grounds for further interrogations. Thus what started as a local affair at the end of the year (1590), turned soon into a national hysteria that involved all kinds of people ranging from housemaids to prominent nobles. By the end of April 1591, the royal authorities at Edinburgh Tolbooth had eventually succeeded to forge the conflicting 'evidence' into one major conspiracy chronicle:

From the particularities of the evidence from individuals over a period of weeks and months a narrative was formed which concerned conspiracy and treason. The process, driven by the state and church authorities, and enforced by the use of torture, compelled the accused to confirm and indeed contribute to the story. That fantastic story is recounted in the *News from Scotland*. (Normand & Roberts 3)

Besides the remarkably effective state propaganda, there were two crucial moments during the trial process that radically changed the course of events: Agnes Sampson's repetition of the exact words (late January 1591) of the young King addressed to his bride on their wedding night (in Norway), and Gilles Duncan's association of Francis Stewart (Bothwell) with the witch convention (December 1590). Quite surprisingly, these two confessions –

⁸² James VI had growing problems with his cousin, the Earl of Bothwell as well, but “none of this is serious enough [at that time] to engender in the King a desire to destroy Bothwell politically or personally.” (Maxwell-Stuart 1997, 215).

though equally disturbing – had completely different effects on James VI at the time when they were made. As long as the deposition of Sampson fitted in with the King's theoretical preconception of being the Devil's greatest enemy (and thus the prime target of witches), Duncan's abrupt impeachment of Bothwell did not strike a chord with him. “The fact of the matter is”, as Maxwell-Stuart claimed, “James at this stage seems to have been in two minds about the whole affair” (1997, 219), he was clearly affected by the possibility of the magical conspiracy, yet felt certain that “the evidence against Bothwell for conspiring his death was so weak [...] [that] the assize of the nobility would hardly be satisfied to declare him guilty⁸³.” (1997, 219) Even if Bothwell deserved to be seen – due to his previous misdeeds – as “a suspicious irritant⁸⁴” at the royal court, his former malpractices were nothing comparable to the horrors conducted by the (alleged) witches.

Given the fact that, the Earl's involvement was interpreted as hearsay rather than evidence, James VI was – initially – much more affected by the demonic dimension of the affair. How Bothwell de facto became the prime suspect of the North Berwick conspiracy in less than three months is unclear – even today. If one starts out from the idea that the Earl's lawless behaviour and chaotic insurgencies annoyed many at the royal court, it is not beyond imagination that his accusation served abstruse interests. His direct participation would have been by all means more advantageous, for

[i]f Bothwell were actually guilty of consorting with witches, he would fall (technically) under the provisions of the Act of 1563, although he had done no more than consult witches, or practice witchcraft himself, it would have been difficult to cause a man of his standing more than some temporary embarrassment. He was, when all was said and done, the King's cousin. But if his consultation and practice involved the King and Queen, that would be treason and the case would be transformed. (Maxwell-Stuart 1997, 221)

83 According to the historical documents, it was rather Chancellor Maitland who insisted impatiently upon the trial and imprisonment of Francis Stewart.

84 Maxwell-Stuart, P. G. “The fear of the King is death: James VI and the witches of East Lothian.” *Fear in early modern society*. Ed. William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997. 217.

Whoever involved Bothwell in the indictment knew very well that, – when repeated often enough – even the wildest speculation will intensify⁸⁵. The more seriously James VI actually took the charges, the more malignant his cousin began to look. Even if it is not clear whose interest lay in provoking the King, as Maxwell-Stuart concluded, “one can be in no doubt that both the King and Bothwell were being manipulated.” (1997, 221) And as soon as James VI was fully convinced of being the prime victim, trivial or irrelevant details⁸⁶ – that were neglected earlier – began to carry profound significance.

4.4.2. Conn's Portrayal of the Conspiracy

The crime of mechanical sorcery, witchcraft and high treason are presented at different times and in different ways in *The Burning*. In short, it is important to remember that there is no one symbolic act of treason in Conn's fictional world, but rather a set of deadly schemata that leads to disastrous consequences. Accordingly, it would be also useless to bestow full responsibility to one single person – Bothwell – for the series of mishaps that are portrayed in the play. One needs rather to recognize that in Conn's fiction, each social layer – including the common local folk, the nobles and the King – has a distinctive, active role in developing multiple conspiracies and complots. The real innovation of *The Burning* lays in its steadfast refusal of both the traditional interpretations (that saw the hunt as a cruel obsession of a paranoid king) and the pragmatism arguments (that acquitted James VI and viewed his actions as a result of constant fear).

Let us now concentrate on three passages – all taken from the play – that partly refute the classical cause and effect analogy by suggesting a substantial

85 Cf. Cowan, Edward J.. “The Darker Vision of the Scottish Renaissance: the Devil and Francis Stewart.” Ed. Brian P. Levack. *Witchcraft in Scotland*. A Garland Series. Vol. 7. New York: Garland, 1992. 125-140. and Maxwell-Stuart, P.G.. “The fear of the King is death: James VI and the witches of East Lothian.” *Fear in early modern society*. Ed. William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997. 209-225.

86 Cf. Clark, Stuart. “King James's Daemonologie: Witchcraft and Kingship.” Ed. Brian P. Levack. *The Literature of Witchcraft*. A Garland Series. Vol. 4. New York: Garland, 1992. 189. Clark eventually argued that “[i]t was James's personal diligence in the affair of North Berwick that dramatically changed the situation” literally from one day to another.

level of (conscious) royal involvement in the witch-hunt, and partly provide the reader with a startling insight into the tactics of James VI's adversaries, who apparently thrived upon the King's growing sense of insecurity⁸⁷.

The first conversation develops between the local minister and the deputy bailiff, David Seaton, in which the pastor skillfully manipulates the situation by conveying a tense atmosphere. Quite surprisingly, he ascribes the heavy storms that plague the region to witchcraft, and does not hesitate to link the crime to Bothwell either. His mischievous words echo James VI's profound belief in the existence of witches and their (destructive) supernatural power:

MINISTER. ... (Thunder) Does that mean nothing? Do you [SEATON] not know to what King James credits these storms?

SEATON. The King!

MINSITER. He says they are causit by witches in his kingdom. (As SEATON laughs) Hear me out! When James set sail for Denmark to collect his royal bride, tempests tore the canvas from his vessels, split their masts and drove them from their moorings. Crushing the hulks like tinder. Another loadit with princely jewels, was sent to the bottom, off Leith. The ancient Greek blamit Neptune. James accuses Satan.

SEATON. Behind the storm, witchcraft?

MINSTER. And behind that, the Black Ear!

SEATON. Bothwell! (Conn 15)

As it soon turns out however, the King's open hostility towards his cousin, Francis Stewart, has more to do with harboring an old grudge than with mere superstition. James VI has a clear and profound understanding about what constitutes treachery and including Bothwell in such a crime has – in his understanding – rather logical than mystic explanations. The Earl is apparently well known (in the play) for his (former) political atrocities against the royal court, thus his participation in illegal witchcraft activities seems not at all far-fetched. The following extract trows light upon James VI's deep-seated distrust in his cousin:

JAMES. Tranent is near North Berwick. [...] (To HOME) Here is the chink in Bothwell's armour, through which he will be deliverit up. Release him now, he will take advantage of the new full moon. To manipulate

⁸⁷ For a detailed description of the 'ritual chants' the witches (could have) used for killing the King, see chapter 6.2.4.1. "Representation of Doctor Fian in the play".

our overthrow. But we shall have him. [...] It only grieves us to think how many must perish, through him. (Conn 19)

Much to the audience's astonishment, while James VI is certain that there is more in the cocky behaviour of his cousin than it meets the eye, Bothwell seems to count on the King's superstitious shortsightedness:

EFFIE. [...] To cast a dead cat into the sea! To drown a King! Fian is a schoolmaster, yet deludit like the rest.

BOTHWELL. James is deludit also. Why should not Fian claim he can, by his devices, harm the King – when James himself credits it? Who dare say we are mistaken, when James attributes storms to black cats, the scarts on his skin to the scratching of witches' pins?

EFFIE. Their acts can never be proven.

BOTHWELL. Neither can they be disproven. This is a strong string to our bow.

EFFIE. If Fian accomplishes what we have set him to do?

BOTHWELL. A triumph. Yet leave us in clear. No proof possible. Even if he does not, he still creates an unease throughout the shires. A confusion, in the land. Only thus may we change the larger climate of the times. (Conn 45-6)

The credo Conn was following in his play as he shaped the 'magical crime' could be captured as follows: given that “[t]he complex tangle of interests involved makes it difficult to see what reality, if any, lay behind these alleged crimes or to apportion exact responsibilities for the confessions extorted from the defendants” (Clark 1992, 191), it is probably best to display all possibilities – and leave the final decision of naming the guilty to the audience.

5. The Witchcraft Trials

5.1. The Historical Interrogations

Just as God had his angels, so the Devil had his agents at work in the world, seeking to destroy those rulers whom God had appointed.⁸⁸

The tragic fate of the North Berwick witches comes as no surprise after having taken a closer look⁸⁹ at the interrogation and torture system of the Scottish royal inspection. One cannot help but feel deep compassion and empathy for the victims, who had to go through – in many cases – excruciating physical (and psychological) agonies if they refused to plead guilty already at the beginning of their trials. Given the fact that, the North Berwick case was one of those two Scottish witch-hunts where torture was officially warranted, it has long been identified as a merciless butchery, a manslaughter that clearly indicated the barbaric nature of the first Stuart monarchy. As we have seen earlier⁹⁰, so long as witchcraft was treated as a sin crime⁹¹, the punishments administered by the ecclesiastical courts were much more lenient than those imposed by the Reformed Kirk. While most of the accused during the Middle Ages could hope for a penalty of indefinite imprisonment or ransom, those arrested during the second half of the sixteenth-century were – more often than not – suffering through countless torments in the torture chamber before they died on the gallows. It is important to keep in mind that after the Reformation, “[t]here were virtually no limits to what constituted admissible evidence at a witchcraft trial. Rumour and reputation were included alongside things allegedly said and done.” (Normand & Roberts 127) As a result, investigations were closed hastily without much verbal battle or open negotiation. In the case of North Berwick (1590-1), “[t]he legal test was the same as the storytelling test” (Normand & Roberts 127), i.e. whoever came up with the most comprehensible story was assumed to tell the truth.

⁸⁸ King James VI qtd. in Lockyer 21.

⁸⁹ Cf. chapter 3.1.3. “Witchcraft in Scotland”, chapter 5.2.1. “The Torture of Gilles Duncan” and chapter 5.2.2. “The Official Hearing of Gilles Duncan”.

⁹⁰ Cf. chapter 3.1.3.1. “The Legal Aspects of Witchcraft”.

⁹¹ Until the adoption of the Scottish Witchcraft Law in 1563.

What is more, after the Reformation, witches ceased to be simple sorcerers and the need to distinguish between mechanical sorcery and malicious witchcraft was reaffirmed by the kirk. While sorcery was “the art whereby the devil was summoned by charms or the drawing of magic circles, [...] witchcraft entailed the gaining of occult powers through a formal pact of the devil⁹².” (Harris 3) In other words, as long as the sorcerer was believed to have control over the demons he or she conjured up, the witch was completely exploited (and directed) by the Devil (Harris 3)⁹³. The Protestant witch was thus (systematically) transformed into a pathetic slave of the Devil, a fallen heretic, who sold her (or less often his) soul to the ultimate evil in order to help him boycott both God and his earthly son, the King. Quite interestingly however, none of the suspected witches of North Berwick mentioned any deals or pacts with the Devil in their first confessions, but as their trials proceeded, they began to admit such charges more and more often.

Given that a detailed confession, based on the convicts' very own words was the most valuable evidence a criminal court could ever gather, “it is easy to see that torture lay, directly or indirectly, behind most of the witch-trials of Europe, creating witches where none were and multiplying both victims and evidence.” (Trevor-Roper 46) And if “we consider the fully developed procedure at continental or Scottish witch-trials we can hardly be surprised that confessions were almost always secured.” (Trevor-Roper 45) Investigators applied various – extremely painful and dangerous – ordeals to detect whether the accused witches were truly guilty of the crime of witchcraft or whether they were innocent. The following technique – which was probably also applied on the witches of North Berwick – found one of its most ardent supporters in King James VI, who specifically mentioned it in his treatise, *Daemonologie*:

One of the new practices was the 'cold-water test', the throwing of the suspected witch into the pond or river to see whether she would float or not. If she did, diabolical aid was proved and she was burnt as a witch. If she sank, innocence could be presumed, although, perhaps, by that time, she had drowned. (Trevor-Roper 68)

92 Cf. Cowan 1992, 126.

93 This malicious relation to the Devil was often imagined – as in the case of the North Berwick trials – as a mockery of the Protestant service.

According to the Protestant theology – on which James VI's spiritual world view was based – the main task of witches consisted of serving blindly their master (the Devil) by entering into a voluntary pact with him and by taking action into their own hands during their secret Sabbaths. This ideological transformation that distinguished witchcraft from simple mechanical sorcery was – as mentioned earlier – put forward by the Reformation and became later immensely relevant, when the witches of North Berwick were tried and tortured in Edinburgh during the winter of 1590-1.

5.2. The Fictional Interrogations

5.2.1. The Torture of Gilles Duncan

As mentioned earlier⁹⁴, the Protestant Witchcraft Law (1563) brought drastic changes to the categorisation of witchcraft, for what was seen earlier as a punishable offence, converted soon into a heinous crime, deserving special attention and particularly effective search methods. As Trevor-Roper argued,

[f]or such a crime [as witchcraft], the ordinary rules of evidence, like the ordinary limits of torture, were suspended. [...] So, in the absence of a 'grave *indicium*⁹⁵', such as a pot full of human limbs, sacred objects, toads etc., or a written pact with the Devil (which must have been a rare collector's piece), circumstantial evidence need not to be very cogent: it was sufficient to discover a wart, by which the familiar spirit was suckled; an insensitive spot which did not bleed when pricked; a capacity to float when thrown into water; or an incapacity to shed tears. (45)

The case of Gilles Duncan, as portrayed by Stewart Conn, reinforces the stereotypical picture of provincial witch-finding and -testing. Her first interrogation is conducted – under the critical eyes of the local Protestant minister – by her master, David Seaton, whose growing empathy and appreciation of the difficulties Gilles is facing, becomes one of the central themes in the play. Seaton's gentle, pleading voice however, in the chaotic

94 Cf. chapter 3.1.3.1. "The Legal Aspects of Witchcraft".

95 Identifying marking or sign, indication.

torture situation, is no real source of comfort, for Gilles is doomed to endure endless verbal and physical torments – caused partly by the obscene words and partly by the tightening rope of Strachan, the local smith:

GILLES. I have nothing...to tell...
 (Again they [the local smith and Seaton] take her. Slowly, rhythmically, the rope eats in)
 SEATON. Please, Gilles...please...please...
 GILLES. Slacken the rope...my head...my skull...is is being split...in two...
 STRACHAN. Fian? Sampson? Napier? No? (He gives a final twist. She shrieks) [...]
 GILLES. I will tell you...please...my brain...you bite into...my brain...I will tell you...if...please... (Conn 40)

Given that Gilles is desperately afraid of any kind of physical pain or distress, it does not take long to extract her 'detailed confession' of the terrible magical conspiracy. As she is made familiar with the dire consequences of her prolonged silence, her tongue is irreversibly loosened:

SEATON. Where, lass? Where do they meet? Tell us, for your soul's sake...
 STRACHAN. (aside) For her white body's sake...
 GILLES. Then no more harm will come to me? No more pain? [...] None, at all? (But she suddenly shakes her head) No...it is no use...
 SEATON. Tranent?
 GILLES. Not Tranent...
 [...]
 SEATON. Where, lass...? If not Tranent?
 GILLES. The kirkyard...of North Berwick... (Conn 42)

5.2.2. The Official Hearing of Gilles Duncan

When Gilles is finally brought in front of the royal court (Act 2, scene five), she is required to identify both her accomplices and to tell further details on the magical conspiracy, she allegedly was part of. Her public humiliation reaches its peak as she enters the stage shaved, bound and completely shattered. As her questioners failed to deliver the most damning evidence against her – there have been no Devil's mark found on her shaved body –, they clearly have

concluded to force a confession out of her by threatening (and torturing) her mentally and physically. Gilles looks deeply perplexed and confused as she is questioned further by Chancellor Maitland:

(GILLES is dragged into Court, shorn and bound. She falls to the ground.
HOME sniggers)
MAITLAND. Gilles, tell us once more...of that night at Berwick-Brigge.
When you were with the others...His Grace would be glad to –
GILLES. Grace...I beg for Grace...my lord... (Conn 77)

Given the fact that, as Trevor-Roper claimed, “in the long run perhaps nothing was so effective as the *tormentum insomniae*, the torture of artificial sleeplessness which has been revived in our day. Even those who were stout enough to resist the *estrapade* would yield to a resolute application of this slower but more certain form of torture” (46), it is not hard to understand why Gilles agrees eventually to testify and pleads guilty:

MAITLAND. Were you one of them [the witches], Gilles?
GILLES. No...never one...my lord...my good Master...never one...
EFFIE. There is your answer.
MAITLAND. But you were going to be, is that not right, Gilles? Soon?
GILLES. Soon, they were...going to receive me...into their arms...and let me lie there...please...only sleep...
MAITLAND. Who was going to receive you?
GILLES. Effie...with all her riches...the kindest...my lady...
JUDGE. To what end? Were they going to receive you?
MAITLAND. Tell us, and then you may sleep.
GILLES. That I may...sleep...sound...(She looks up suddenly) Why, they were going to make me a witch! (Conn 77-8)

5.2.3. The Official Hearing of Effie McCalyan

EFFIE. This is a trick...your subtle words...and images...have upset my senses...⁹⁶

The interrogation of Effie McCalyan differs – in many aspects – from that of Gilles Duncan. Given the fact that she is a lady of rank, reputation and social influence, she seems – at first sight – far from being help- or defenceless. Although her trial procedure is long and tiresome, she is portrayed as an astute, quick-witted defendant, who is – under no circumstances – afraid to stand up and fight for her legal rights. Under the official questioning (Act 2, scene five), her apt reactions and collected attitude affirm the audience that she has not come to any serious harm yet:

MAITLAND. Have you ever intendit the death of the King?

EFFIE. Never.

MAITLAND. You have had no illicit liaison, to put this into practice?

EFFIE. Never.

MAITLAND. You would renounce all such claims against you?

EFFIE. I would truly.

MAITLAND. What of Gilles Duncan, servant to David Seaton, Depute-Bailiff of Tranent, of this Kingdom?

EFFIE. I never met Seaton.

JAMES. Satan, more like.

MAITLAND. What of Agnes Sampson?

EFFIE. I have no business with her. (Conn 74-5)

As her interrogation proceeds however, Effie gradually loses her (initial) hold on the situation and slips into utter confusion about her own role as a malicious conspirator. As she is confronted with the fact that her heroism and self-sacrifice are naively romantic (and pointless) contributions to a long lost cause, she begins to see herself primarily as a victim forced into a corner. Not being worthy of either Bothwell's affection or intervention, breaks her spirited resistance in the end:

⁹⁶ Conn, Stewart. *The Burning*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1973. 91.

MAITLAND. It is treason to protect a traitor.
 EFFIE. Will this business soon be – ?
 MAITLAND. Bothwell is a traitor.
 EFFIE. Why 'Bothwell' me?
 MAITLAND. He is nothing to you?
 EFFIE. Nothing.
 MAITLAND. Nor you to him?
 EFFIE. Nor I to him.
 MAITLAND. That I accept. (Pause) Or he would be here, to protect you.
 (Conn 88-9)

An important aspect that adds to Effie's mental agony in the courtroom however, is the never-ending stream of obscenities, James VI bombards her with. Clearly shocked by the mere idea that the fine details about her extramarital relationship to Bothwell will soon be laid bare, Effie – in her most misguided moment – expresses her growing resentment over Bothwell's neglectful behaviour and thus falls into her own trap. The vehemence in her voice gives her ultimately away and she loses her battle:

JAMES. Can you imagine? Do you not envy them? [the witches who mate with Bothwell] Think of it! Your flesh, one with his. As he prises your body, and takes his fill...Bothwell on top, yourself working below...panting and huffing, his body making its mark...breath fiery, as he splits you...your breasts like petals, beneath his thrust...opening to him...love swelling and rising...limbs entwinit and threshing ...his seed spilling, your juices commingling...soft flesh worked to a frenzy, as he rides you and rides you...festooned to your lust! (She shrieks, tries to cover her ears) You! And Bothwell your Master!
 EFFIE. I have no master.
 JAMES. Every woman has a Master.
 EFFIE. Not Bothwell.
 JAMES. He has ridden you.
 EFFIE. No!
 MAITLAND. Not Bothwell?
 EFFIE. Not Bothwell.
 MAITLAND. Whom, then?
 EFFIE. Whomsoever you wish.
 MAITLAND. The Black Devil himself!
 EFFIE. The Black Devil himself...if you would have it so...(she is reeling)
 JAMES. "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live!" (Conn 91)

5.2.4. The Final Verdict⁹⁷

Conn gives two final verdicts in his play. The first is read out to Effie McCalyan, who is thereby condemned to be burnt (alive) on the stake for plotting against the life of King James VI and for practicing witchcraft. The following ballad sums up the graphic details of her execution:

They trailed her to the high Castel-Yett
 And hemmed her about,
 And they smeared her ower frae head tae heel
 To drive the witch-mark out.

They harled her to the Castel-Court,
 And smeared her ower wi tar,
 And they chained her to an iron bolt
 An eke an iron bar.

They biggit a pile aboot her bodie
 Twa Scots ells up and higher
 Then the hangman cam, wi a lowin torch,
 And kindelt the horrid pyre.

Flames met and broke, in seikly smoke,
 A red ball in the sky;
 And then it turned, and then it fell
 To ashed suddenly. (Conn 93-4)

Bothwell and James VI arrive at the 'second final verdict' in the last scene (Act 2, scene six) of the play. It is pronounced after the Earl has forced his way secretly to the royal bedchamber and ordered his King to surrender to his questionable demands. James VI keenly attributes (full) responsibility for the witchcraft fiasco to his cousin, but Bothwell disclaims such grave charges. Their cut-throat competition for power and authority ends in a tie; James VI is confronted with his innate tendency to find easy scapegoats out of pure convenience, while his fiery cousin is reminded on his supreme (and telling) indifference towards his former collaborators:

97 Cf. chapter 6.2.2.1. "Representation of Effie McCalyan in the play".

JAMES. You were guilty of their [the alleged witches'] deaths.

BOTHWELL. No more than you, who passed sentence on them, and had them executit.

JAMES. You are a force for evil. I for good.

BOTHWELL. You delude yourself. You call evil, what it suits you to call evil. There is no such thing as black and white, in these matters.

(Conn 95)

6. Characters

The historical tale Stewart Conn so skillfully had woven and presented to his audience in the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh on 18 November 1971 is not a documentary but a fictionalized account of true events. Accordingly, “[t]here are serious changes and distortions [in the play], above all in the attitudes of the characters and the chronology of the historical events.” (Conn Author's note) Given that Conn's fundamental aim was to define and highlight the social, political and religious circumstances which led to the first series of witch-hunts in North Berwick (1590-91), his characters fulfil rather the requirements of dramatic suspension than those of factual accuracy. *The Burning* contains twenty-three characters, a number that is considerably less than in reality.

Despite the fact that the majority of the individuals presented in the play bear a historical name⁹⁸ (a clear indicator of their participation either directly or indirectly in the aforementioned witch-hunt), their actions, personalities and behaviour resemble only vaguely those of their forefathers. One could argue that in his bold attempt to unite space, time and action Conn has deliberately ripped history into pieces and created an imaginary world, which bears striking similarities to reality, yet is not quite the same.

This paper divides the characters of *The Burning* into three main categories and presents them in the following order in the next chapter; the historical accusers, their victims and those individuals, whose actual life can not be (accurately) traced back in time, but whose theatrical significance is immense. In sum, the most important similarities and differences between the major characters and their historical counterparts will be pointed out, in order to arrive at a better understanding of both the real events of North Berwick and Conn's portrayal of it.

⁹⁸ As regards the historical names of the characters, this paper uses the modernized versions of them found in *The Burning*, with the exception of those in direct quotations.

6.1. The Accusers

6.1.1. King James VI of Scotland

King James VI and I became King of Scotland when he was a one-year old toddler (1567), inherited the English throne on the grounds of Queen Elizabeth I's death (1603), and stayed eventually in power – as the first sovereign who ever ruled Britain as one state – for more than two further decades. According to recent scholarship⁹⁹, James VI was a remarkably intelligent and insightful man, who managed to regulate his political opponents in Scotland and rule the Union later so effectively that he could avoid all the major military conflicts or economic disturbances which plagued Europe. Despite centuries of vile slanders, as it turned out, “James VI and I lived an extraordinary life. Described recently as 'a true novel', it exemplified many of the key developments in England and Scotland.” (Croft 10) Or as Lockyer has argued, “[t]here are no grounds for calling the first truly British sovereign 'James the Great', but he deserves to be remembered as 'James the Just' or 'James the Well-Intentioned'. Given the fact that the vast majority of rulers merit no such appellation, James's subjects were lucky to have him as their king.” (209)

Concerning his personality however, James VI fell short of the expectations of the traditionalist experts¹⁰⁰, who repeatedly criticized his lifelong inability to identify and overcome his striking character flaws and shortcomings. Given that this “traditional version of the reign of James I is now more than 150 years old, [...] [and] only in recent decades has it come under scrutiny” (Lockyer 4), the first Stuart was readily labeled as an inadequate, mediocre pedant and a pitiable fool – Britain could only be ashamed of. King James VI's undeservedly bad reputation was established upon the chronicles of three Englishmen¹⁰¹,

99 Cf. Lockyer, Roger. *James VI and I*. Harlow: Longman. 1998., Donaldson, Gordon. *Scotland: James V to James VII*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965., Wormald, Jenny. “James VI and I, *Basiliakon Doron* and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*: The Scottish Context and the English Translation”. *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*. Ed. Linda Levy Peck. Cambridge: CUP, 1991. 36-54., Lee Jr., Maurice. *Government by Pen: Scotland under James VI and I*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980.

100 Willson, David Harris. *King James VI and I*. London: Alden, 1956.

101 Weldon, Sir Anthony. *Court and Character of King James.*, Wilson, Arthur. *The Life and Reign of King James I.*, Osborne, Francis. *Traditional Memoirs of the Reign of King James the*

each tremendously crafted in spreading 'covertly composed satires' and 'demonstrably inaccurate gossips' throughout the country after the death of their ruler. The miserable historical profile, these 'bestselling' writers so vilely drew of James VI and I was apparently so appealing that (as mentioned earlier) it held a central position in academic circles until the early 1970s. In view of this, one can say that James VI was long thought of – even at the time Conn staged *The Burning* – as haphazard and irresolute by nature, “a comic opera monarch whose buffoonery makes excellent lecture material” (Schwarz 118) but has little to do with real diplomacy or statecraft.

As far as supernatural powers are concerned, James VI was fairly convinced – already at a young age – that as a son of God he has no greater enemy on Earth than the Devil, whose principal aim (by definition) is the complete and final destruction of him. Witches, in James VI's view backed this fiendish plan and thus deserved – without exception – capital punishment. This uncompromising and hostile attitude towards all his 'demonic opponents' was nothing surprising at the time, for “James' own beliefs about witchcraft reflected the popular views of the day, and while he permitted prosecutions of accused witches, he did not lead the charge against them.” (Guiley 177) James VI was neither overanxious, nor too uptight about such threats, for the devilish dangers were widely perceived as real and tangible. Shedding innocent blood out of pure fear and apprehension belonged however, neither to his daily routine nor to his favourite pastimes:

James was highly skeptical of the confessions made by accused witches in the North Berwick trials of 1590-92, even though the confessions involved an alleged plot by witches to murder him and his bride. [...] [he] called them [the witches] “extreme lyars,” until one of the accused convicted him of the supernormal powers by repeating to him the private conversation he had had with Anne on their wedding night. (Guiley 178)

Similarly, he also rejected the idea – from the beginning onwards – which tentatively suggested that his cousin, Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell stood

behind the diabolical scheme of displacing him. The fact that James VI grew more and more suspicious of Stewart had more to do with the lawless character and rapid political fluctuations of the Earl than with his involvement in magical activities. As pointed out earlier in this thesis, Bothwell was feared and loathed at the royal court by the early 1590s because he enjoyed (at the time) the support and protection of both the vicious Northern Catholic Earls and the English Queen, and not because he was the Satan in disguise.

In his famous treatise *Daemonologie* (1597), James VI summarized his thoughts and beliefs on witchcraft and sorcery. This work “has been blamed for adding to the public hysteria over witches,” (Guiley 178) though – as it has been argued – the Scottish King had merely repeated the existing arguments about the nature of diabolical magic and did not invent anything new in his work. One of James VI's fundamental assumptions, which was based upon the idea that “the execution of a witch [serves] as the therapeutic cure for the victim” (Guiley 178) provides a logical explanation for his strict insistence upon the capital punishment of the (alleged) conspirators and the permanent exile of Bothwell.

6.1.1.1. Representation of King James VI of Scotland in the play

BOTHWELL. I bow to one fool [James VI], the other bows back: on one hand, the King's Fool; on the other, the Fools' King! (Conn 22)

The actual appearance of the Scottish King on stage – in Act 1, scene two – is preceded by an amusing incident that aims to parodize James VI's traditionally poor reputation. As the scene opens, the audience encounters the court jester (disguised as James VI), who is in the midst of imitating the infamous manner – spits on the throne and begins to polish it – and loose tongue of his lord:

KING [JESTER disguised]. Thou art hereby, heretofore and hereinafter ordainit, dubbit and proclaimit: Freeman of the Grassmarket, Warden of the Lawnmarket, Grandmaster of the Fishmarket, the Fleshmarket and the Saltmarket, Great Stinker of the Fartmarket, Farter of the

Stinkmarket, Defender of the King's Faith, the King's Breastplate and the King's Codpiece (He scratches) and all that lie therein... [...] Arise Sir Silly Smiddy, Seigneur of Tospots, Champion of Pishpots... It is now or kingly wish that thou shouldst kiss ... our ring! (Conn 16-7)

Though some critics might say that such a coarse parody is too far-fetched to be harmful, it still serves as a vivid reminder of just how mentioning a few (small) personal issues can feed old and blatant prejudices. Due to Conn's poignant prelude, James VI suffers – already at the beginning of the play – such a serious loss of (political and personal) prestige that he never fully recovers. As expected, his entrance is far from noble or kingly, it is rather farcical and absurd: “JAMES himself enters: wearing a doublet with a white ruff. Well padded. Unshapely legs.” (Conn 17) Through his provocative and repressive remarks¹⁰² however, James VI manages to minimize his personal imperfections and continues to believe (quite falsely) that he is in complete command of the pressing situation. In the long run though, the rather maniloquent phrases regarding his divine right (of which there are many in the play) provide James VI with no real power but the illusion of it, with sheer fantasies which explode when it comes to a worthy opponent:

MAITLAND. Bothwell is here.

[...]

JAMES. He [Bothwell] was secure...

MAITLAND. He is secure...

JAMES. ... in Tantallon.

MAITLAND. ... no longer in Tantallon.

JAMES. Here? (MAITLAND nods) In...Holyrood? (MAITLAND bows) Well then... (JAMES has to clear his throat) Let us...have him in! (As the ATTENDANTS turn) Wait! (Then with a show of casualness) let us first...read the conditions... (And the parchment is handed to him:) Aaaah...aaaaaah...yes, excellent...He...aaaaah...is bound? (Conn 21)

Bothwell and his followers see James VI as an irresolute fool, whose character flaws, nasty habits and obsessive nature, make him worthy of neither his titles nor his position. While acknowledging that James VI had mastered a strong

¹⁰² The obscene words and sexually explicit language of the Scottish King will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5.2.3 “The Official Hearing of Effie McCalyan”.

sense of self-appreciation, Bothwell claims that as ruler he conveniently slipped into oblivion concerning his duty of being attentive and respectful towards the (divergent) views of his subjects. In Bothwell's opinion, James VI will be likely to lose his 'battle royal', if he decides to live in his fantasy world instead of finding new ways to improve his (unstable) political situation.

In sum, the central dilemma of the play is as follows: while the royal court equals James VI's bragging manner with real self-consciousness and a sense of intuitive awareness for the needs of the Scottish nation, Bothwell (James VI's biggest 'civil' enemy on earth) stays rather skeptical and dismissive of his cousin's suitability:

MAITLAND. King James has a position in this Realm. He approaches the prime of his years and vigour; is allied with a potent prince [Queen Anna's brother], heir to a mighty kingdom, dominant in Europe. It is not meet he be beardit in his Court by any jackanapes baron that feels himself outdone. (Conn 24)

BOTHWELL. ...He [James] has but the appearance of power. Its illusion. Not power itself. Or its basis. (He takes the JESTER's wooden sword) Here is your illusion, cousin. It has the trappings. But lacks the ring of metal. Instead, it is soft and pliable...Able to be manipulated, but boy's without a cutting edge. It remains a plaything...a Fool's bauble, a wee toy...or an appurtenance for ladies. Never for a grown man, far less a sovereign at the height of his vigour. You wield this Chancellor, as he wields you. You make gestures of kingship. Nothing more. You are all pageant and procession. Your monarchy is a monkey-like at will. masquerade. The whole base of your power, a pretence, the be snappit (Conn 24)

The Burning conveys two completely different images of King James VI to the audience. That of James VI's, who habitually presents himself as supreme (divine) authority and that of his opponents, whose disappointment with him leads to a rebellion. Whether James VI is a pretender living in complete oblivion, or a king of real genius is up to the audience to decide. While there is a great deal of (intended) hesitation and insecurity in the actions of James VI, he

is portrayed as the sole legitimate ruler of Scotland, whose authority is – though repeatedly battled – never denied. He apparently has the final word in pressing issues, such as the alleged magical witchcraft conspiracy that targeted his dynastic rights. In short, no matter how critically and aggressively some of his contemporaries attack James VI, the fact that he is the one sitting on the throne of Scotland remains no subject of discussion.

6.1.2. Lord Maitland

Although Lord Maitland is known today as one of Scotland's most prominent politicians, his early presence and progress at the royal court was marked by serious setbacks and obstacles. Once his central position as a counselor of Mary, Queen of Scots (at the age of 14) was acknowledged as the beginning of a great career, but his later involvement and support of Mary's divorce petition – which would have annulled the third marriage of the Scottish queen to James Hepburn (4th Earl of Bothwell) – brought soon about the temporary loss of both his political influence and personal importance. By the beginning of the early 1570s Maitland's life was in obvious danger, and in June 1573, “John [Maitland] was turned over to the Regent Morton, who kept him for a time in the grim fortress of Tantallon.” (ODNB Vol. 36, 215) The repeated attempts that focused on the destruction of his whole family were more than victorious – in the following months, half of the Maitland clan was taken into custody.

This rough beginning was by the end of the decade all in the past, for “In 1580 Lennox [Esmé Stuart] brought Maitland and other supporters of the fallen queen [back] to the court.” (ODNB Vol. 36, 215) Although there is no doubt that Maitland's administrative talent, along with his outstanding training in law played a major role in his political revival, he had some other, similarly compelling reasons in his favour as well: “James always valued such men [like Maitland] for their loyalty to his mother, provided they transferred their loyalty to himself, and he came to like and trust Maitland, who, like James, was a poet of modest talents.” (ODNB Vol. 36, 215)

Four years later, “On 18 May 1584, [when] King James appointed Sir John Maitland of Thirlestane as his Secretary of State” (Akrigg 52), Maitland's political career reached once again its zenith. He began his work by introducing far-reaching reforms in the privy council which meant a slow but steady removal of everyone whom Maitland did not know or trust. He understood well that to ensure the future success (and survival) of King James VI, it is absolutely necessary to blot out the authority of the ambiguous nobility:

Steadily, he built up an effective bureaucracy from the ranks of the lairds (his own class), the urban lawyers and the junior members of the great houses loyal to the Crown. The lairds and the townsmen tended to be strongly protestant, as was Maitland himself. Allying with them, he strove to bring increasing royal control and domestic peace to Scotland, and to end the violent gangsterism, private wars and organised raiding, particularly on the Borders, that still infested Scottish society. (Croft 20)

The direct consequence of his restraining orders was that Lord Maitland was neither popular nor widely appreciated by those whom he gradually excluded from decision-making. As the years went by however, most of his political opponents came to respect both the professionalism and knowledge he invested into his affairs, and his innate skill to attract and cultivate the King's support. In the summer of 1587, as Maitland was appointed Lord Chancellor, he was probably the wisest adviser and (after King James VI) the second most powerful person in Scotland. (ODNB Vol. 36, 216)

As mentioned before, not everyone found the proposals and arrangements of the new Chancellor worthy of note; his position “offended the most aristocratic of his administrative colleagues.” (ODNB Vol. 36, 217) He had continuing property disputes with Francis Stewart (5th Earl of Bothwell) and threatened his king to resign after James VI refused to punish the treacherous Catholic Earls¹⁰³ accordingly in 1589. According to some sources even Maitland's involvement in the marriage committee to Denmark was sheer necessity, surrounded by more foes than friends, James VI feared for the life of his Chancellor and wanted to ensure his safety. (ODNB Vol. 36, 217) By the beginning of the 1590s the situation became so intolerable that “Maitland [, who] was in power for nine constructive years [...] was driven from court [for his own safety] in 1592, [...] [although] his work in making royal rule effective was a major contribution to

103 Much to the astonishment of the Scottish court, some Northern Catholic nobles (spearheaded by the Earl of Huntly) did continue to communicate and plot with the Spanish king (Philip II) a year after “Grande Armada” was defeated at the shores of England. The conspirators were captured and revealed in time, yet James VI – given that Huntly was one of his personal favourites – hesitated and let the conspirators slip with – in the eyes of the Anglophile politicians – a much too lenient punishment. Although this emotionally loaded step was later acknowledged as a diplomatic bravoure, at the time of its discovery, it offended both Elizabeth I and Chancellor Maitland.

James's ultimate success¹⁰⁴,” (Croft 20-1) at this time the king was apparently better off without his help¹⁰⁵.

Similarly to Maitland's own days, there is a sharp division concerning his position as Chancellor between contemporary scholars¹⁰⁶ – who have been praising the achievements and exceptional diplomatic talents of Chancellor Maitland, – and D.H. Willson, a traditionalist historian – who argued that it was precisely the Chancellor who rendered James's position more difficult during the mid 1580s and early 1590s, for regardless of his extraordinary analytical skills, Maitland “was surrounded with a ring of foes” (98). In any case, while it is not impossible that John Maitland was closer to a repugnant and displeasing start-up, he excellently completed his most important task at the royal court; he “had not only created an administration but also trained his own successor, in the person of the king himself.” (ODNB Vol. 36, 218)

6.1.2.1. Representation of Lord Maitland in the play

Conn draws a realistic portrait of Lord Maitland in *The Burning*. He is presented in the beginning of Act 1, as a member of King James VI's inner Cabinet, having at the moment a heated dispute about the future of the royal court's ultra-Protestant opponent, Francis Stewart. The utter disgust Maitland shows towards Stewart – who is held pro tempore in the prison of Tantallon – is partly a result of the previous (dreadful) atrocities of the Earl, and partly the spiteful character of the Chancellor. There is only one thing that would please him most: getting Bothwell out of the way – at any price. Thus all his utterances strive towards one particular goal: setting up the best circumstances to eliminate the deeply feared and admired Black Earl:

104 Cf. “Maitland, the “Burghley of Scotland,” was to school James in politics and provide him with something approaching a properly functioning civil service.” (Akrigg 52).

105 Cf. “ The political pressure became so great the on 30 March 1592 James ordered Maitland to leave the court. His great days were over.” (ODNB Vol. 36, 218).

106 Cf. Donaldson, Gordon. *Scottish Kings*. London: Batsford, 1967., Donaldson, Gordon. *Scotland: James V to James VII*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965. and Lee Jr., Maurice. *Government by Pen: Scotland under James VI and I*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980.

HOME. Enough is known, to incriminate him [BOTHWELL].
 [...] But you plan to set him free!
 MAITLAND. So that we can ensnare him.
 HERALD. If he is the threat you say.
 MAITLAND. You defend him?
 [...]
 HERALD. You [MAITLAND] are hard on Hepburn [BOTHWELL].
 MAITLAND. Hepburn is what he is.
 HERALD. He has the blood royal. [...]
 MAITLAND. But no fit claim to the throne.
 (Conn 19)

The next time Maitland appears on stage, he catches a piece of the formal announcement concerning a group of conspirators who were caught and imprisoned after the raid in the kirkyard of North Berwick. As it happens, Bothwell is not among the arrested. The audience soon learns that due to a tragic mishap the Earl has slipped out of the guards' hands, and thus the only prominent captives the royal army is able to present are Effie McCalyan and the schoolmaster of Saltpans. Bearing witness to such an unfortunate report requires immediate intervention and brings out Maitland's shrewd sense of political machination. Given that the idea of conspiracy (against King James VI) is seriously weakened without Bothwell's active participation in it, Chancellor Maitland quickly finds another way to manipulate the indictment. His impatience and straightforwardness gives him away; the assumption that the accused have entered a secret pact with the devil to overthrow James VI saves the extensive process of future evidence gathering:

HERALD. The most base would appear to be one Cunninghame,
 schoolmaster of Saltpans, alias Dr. Fian. Whom the Officer mistook
 for Bothwell.
 MAITLAND. And?
 HERALD. Sundry women, of varied degree.
 MAITLAND. The highest?
 HERALD. One Eupham McCalyan.
 MAITLAND. Daughter of Lord Cliftonhall. Hence her pedigree. We shall
 see how she takes to interrogation.
 HERALD. The charge?
 MAITLAND. Witchcraft.
 [...]
 MAITLAND. Were devices taken?
 HERALD. A wax image.

[...]

MAITLAND. (impatiently) His Grace condemns all that are of counsel of such crafts. (Conn 62-4)

During the interrogation of Effie McCalyan Maitland appears hostile and dismissive, his attitude accordingly reflects a cold and calculating personality. It is not clear at this point however, whether Maitland seriously believes in the charges he accuses Effie with or if he merely plays the role of the naïve, but as his victim makes repeated attempts to outwit the authority Maitland represents (by reasoning rationally) he turns to a 'nerve-wracking game'. He puts his opponent to a test of mental stamina by confronting her with the crown witness of the royal court, Gilles Duncan:

MAITLAND. It is further statit you did dance in the kirkyard of North Berwick. The major aim being to harm your King.

EFFIE. Cannot friends meet, for simple pleasure?

MAITLAND. Simple pleasure? To destroy a King? By conspiracy?

EFFIE. Conspiracy travels on tiptoe, a finger to its mouth. Not openly with song and dance.

[...]

MAITLAND. You were their leader?

EFFIE. No.

MAITLAND. Intermediary then? Between them and the Unknown? You deny it?

EFFIE. How can I deny what is unknown?

MAITLAND. You confirm, then?

EFFIE. I did not say so.

MAITLAND. Gilles Duncan was of your company?

EFFIE. No, she...she is but a lass, and of no significance.

(MAITLAND looks up at the JUDGE)

JUDGE. Bring Duncan.

(Conn 76-7)

Lord Maitland solely represents the royal law and order in *The Burning*. He has extensive authority over the accused, which he uses persistently and relentlessly for punishing the guilty.

6.1.3. David Seaton

David Seaton held a position as deputy bailiff in Tranent (East Lothian) during the first wave of witch panic in 1590-91, and as such, was primarily responsible for maintaining discipline in the surrounding villages and exacting (complete) obedience to the orders of the state. The position he fulfilled required prominence and distinction, Seaton was however, neither a reputable nor an honest individual. His arduous administrative tasks provided him with the blank mask of a respectable and law-abiding person, but under the surface it took Seaton a great deal of effort to camouflage his deep philistinism and narrow-mindedness. In any case, there was more to the local depute bailiff of Tranent than it met the eye; Seaton had exploited his rank on the one hand, by launching the initial (official) witchcraft examinations, and on the other, by slaughtering his chief financial opponents. And as a consequence, as it has been rightly observed, the first two years of witchcraft mania in North Berwick helped David Seaton [...] [to rise] from obscure small-town magistrate to the hero of *Newes of Scotland*.” (Yeoman 120)

The following passages aim to reveal the real reasons of David Seaton's eager (personal) involvement in the North Berwick witch-hunts.

It is believed by some sources that Davis Seaton was one of those “quarrelsome, indebted men of status [in the county of East Lothian] who did not wish to take responsibility for their own misfortunes” (Yeoman 120) but always found someone else to put the blame on. Seaton's deepest rancour began in 1584, when his wife (Katherine) – as opposed to her brother Patrick – was left out of the family by not sharing properly in the inheritance. (Yeoman 107) The level of dissatisfaction was especially high at that time among the Seatons, for Patrick Moscrop (Katherine's brother) had already gained substantial wealth by marrying Effie McCalyan, daughter of an affluent Edinburgh advocate. Sickened by the good fortune and prosperity of his brother-in-law, Seaton began to identify his own poor position as inappropriate and undeserved. As a consequence, he ended up “obsessed with the idea that people were trying to 'wraik his goods and gear'. His financial losses, [...] were

being caused by demonic agency.” (Yeoman 115) His envious resentment allegedly made Seaton too blind to see that “[t]hrough witchcraft accusations, half-fantasised, half-based on real slights, [...] [he] could actually for a moment hold the centre stage which [...] [he] thought [...] [he] deserved and which [...] [his] ineptitude or anti-social behaviour ususally denied [...] [him.]” (Yeoman 120)

As far as his relationship to his maidservant (Gilles) is concerned, the key event that triggered Seaton's vengeance and spite was the discovery of Duncan's magical healing potency. According to Normand & Roberts, the public rejection of Duncan's secret nocturnal activities had (again) more to do with Seaton's wounded masculinity than with the social stress sorcery was thought to generate: “Seton's patriarchal household is disturbed by the maidservant who should be subordinated by gender and class; [...] Duncan's transgression and power seem to threaten wider patriarchal power, and the hostile questioning searches for the source of that power.” (Normand & Roberts 298)

David Seaton was apparently suffering from a strong minority complex during his entire life. Sadly however, as deputy bailiff, he had plenty of space to gratify his guilt-ridden passions on the expense of other, innocent victims.

6.1.3.1. Representation of David Seaton in the play

David Seaton's role in *The Burning* is twofold; he is hunter and hunted at the same time. While as an associate of the local secular court, he is compelled to torment the truth (about the alleged witchcraft conspiracy) out of his 'fallen' housemaid; but as a member of the community, he feels personally responsible for his own household. The prompt willingness and determination Seaton shows as he stands up to protect Duncan (and himself) in front of the royal court sheds a fairly positive light on his personality in the play.

As mentioned before, the audience has its first encounter with David Seaton as he is in the midst of a desperate search (near Tranent) for his maidservant, Gilles Duncan. Much to his astonishment however, all he finds, is the local (Protestant) minister, who senses the serious nature of the situation and resists Seaton's lame attempt to excuse Duncan for non-appearing. Although Conn's attempt to mirror the unequal power distribution between the secular and the ecclesiastical authorities at the beginning is evident; as the play progresses, it becomes more and more conspicuous that a (simple) deputy bailiff has little respect in the eyes of the Protestant Kirk. Thus, Seaton's commonsense explanation for Gilles's absence ("she trysts with some lad"), adds only further fuel to the anger and suspicion of the clergyman:

MINISTER. [...] If she is again absent, the Session must be alertit.
 [...] You are depute-bailiff. (As SEATON nods) And would your rise to bailiff? (Pause) See you make your report. (Conn 15)

During Seaton's next meeting with the minister it becomes apparent that the only way to avoid the potential career setback is to oblige blindly the demands of the Kirk. Consequently, the previous tempting offer – concerning Seaton's political future – turns into a tangible threat:

MINISTER. See she names names.
 SEATON. If she cannot?
 MINISTER. She must. To clear her own. There is Justice left in this world, Master. But first, lay bare the Truth. By whatever means you will. For your own good name as much as hers. Then will the Session take matters into its own scrupulous hands. It is the Lord's work, Master and brings glory!
 SEATON. If I fail?
 MINISTER. It were better you did not. (Conn 34)

Conn provides no concrete explanation for Seaton's striking reluctance to confront and interrogate his maid face to face; his hesitation can either be seen as a result of Seaton's sense of mercy or as a sign of his (secret) sexual affection. Seaton nevertheless gives the impression of a gentle and virtuous man throughout the whole play, who is neither afraid to abase himself in front of

the royal court, nor ashamed to beg for Duncan's life:

SEATON. Your Majesty. [...] I am her [Duncan's] Master, Sire. I must...protest at this treatment of her... [...] Spare some pity for her in her distress. [...] I beg she be sparit. Instead of what...you have in store. [...] She is the only one, my Lord. The only one I'd defend. [...] She is no witch. I swear it. [...] She has been a constant comfort to the sick. [...] Say...some folly came over her...for a spell... [...] I speak out of no disrespect to your Grace...or towards this assize...but because... (He is lost for words) Let her return to Tranent. I shall answer for her. And act as surety, however the Court command...keeping a careful eye...on her behaviour. [...] My Lord...we have walls to big, ditches to be dug...but there is also women's work...fruit to pick, cream to skim, water to be drawn from the well...These tasks she can fulfill...the stitching of garments... [...] My Lord... Please... (Conn 80-2)

The essence of this final plea sheds light on the devastating socio-economical consequences of witch-hunting; executing helpful farmhands leads only to unnecessary economical calamities and future financial losses. Seaton's approach to the crime of witchcraft is essentially pragmatic; the more involved an individual is in an offense, the bigger his punishment is supposed to be. In his opinion, Duncan showed sincere regret at her wrongful deeds (and secured her release) when she put the authorities on the right track.

6.1.4. Lord Home

George Home was one of those key courtiers who belonged to both King James VI's closest circles of advisers and his personal favourites. The fact that James VI's was (naturally) inclined to choose his leading statesman from those who were privately fancied the most should come as no surprise, but as stated in the ODNB, “[h]e [Home] became a favourite [...], but not of the usual kind. He was not a pretty young man. He did not share the king's passion for hunting. But he was good company, discreet, cautious, and, above all, loyal.” (ONDB Vol. 27, 876) Home's political career most likely started in the early 1580s, when a close relative (Alexander Home, 6th Earl of Dunbar) introduced him to the Scottish royal court¹⁰⁷. In any case, once he earned James VI's full support and appreciation, he virtually became so indispensable that even “Chancellor Maitland thought it worth while to have Home's support for requests he made of the king.” (ONDB Vol. 27, 876) In view of this, Home's involvement in the commission – that accompanied James VI on his journey to Norway in the fall of 1589 – was anything but unexpected.

After holding various significant positions in Scotland, Home followed his king to England in 1603 and began to supervise of the Scottish State Department from London. His sudden death (in 1611) put a quick end to his distinguished political and diplomatic career which gained him several honorary titles during his royal service; he was “Knighted in 1590, [...] was created a baron in 1604 and Earl of Dunbar in 1605.” (Akrigg 91) Although he left a cleverly structured and well-organized unit behind, his absence left such a deep void that filled James VI with intense longing for a person like Home for a long time: “Dunbar was first, last, and always the courtier. He had no discernible views on public issues; what James wanted, he wanted.” (ONDB Vol. 27, 877)

As far as Home's family feuds are concerned, his hatred towards Francis Stewart (5th Earl of Bothwell) was the most intense. According to a reliable historical source, Home could never overcome his strong aversion to Stewart, and he remained “Bothwell's enemy [forever], and had been ever since 1584,

107 Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Home,_1st_Earl_of_Dunbar, 11 April, 2011.

when Bothwell 'hewed Davy Hume [George's brother] all to pieces', because Bothwell claimed the priory of Coldingham, currently in the possession of George's eldest brother, Alexander." (ODNB Vol. 27, 876) Their undying hatred and deep loathing for each other only ceased when Bothwell left Scotland and went (in 1595) into exile.

6.1.4.1. Representation of Lord Home in the play

Home appears on stage together with King James VI in the second scene of Act 1. As a long-serving member of the royal court, he apparently has access to the king's throne chamber, where he is engaging himself energetically in the debate – about the future of Francis Stewart – which is gradually turning into a heated discussion. Stewart is detained for the king's safety and held prisoner at Tantallon Castle. Soon the audience learns that Bothwell is far from being innocent, he is a deliberate provocateur with the underlying aim to crush the royal power and authority. The earl is portrayed as the grim aggressor against whom James VI and his closest confidants unite:

MAITLAND. No castle can hold him [BOTHWELL] long.
 HOME. Dispose him.
 HERALD. There is no proof against him.
 HOME. His reputation is enough.
 HERALD. He paints himself larger than life, among the gullible.
 HOME. He has made attempts on the King's person.
 JAMES. [...] You cannot have a man put down, without proof having
 been found against him.
 HOME. Enough is known, to incriminate him [BOTHWELL]. (Conn 17-8)

Although it is unknown to the audience, Home's accusations are also driven by a desire for personal revenge. As mentioned before, Bothwell was held responsible for the bloody death of Home's brother, which act has been – at the time of the earl's imprisonment in Tantallon Castle – neither forgiven nor forgotten. As a loyal follower of James VI, Home rightly supposes to have established a position that will enable him to avenge himself on Bothwell:

HOME. His [BOTHWELL'S] time draws near.

HERALD. (turns on HOME) I smell pettiness. Against a better swordsman than yourself.

HOME. How dare you!

[...]

MAITLAND. Bothwell is here. (HOME's hand steals on his sword.

MAITLAND smiles). (Conn 19-21)

In sum, Conn presents Lord Home as a simple character with no other feature to distinguish him in *The Burning* than his ardent determination to probe and punish the traitors.

6.2. The Accused

There were approximately two-hundred people accused of witchcraft and sorcery during the first two years of the North Berwick witch-hunts (1590-1). Although this number might seem high at the first sight, it comes as no surprise as one learns that in the early stages of investigative engagement the judges were concerned with a local incident – the healing potency of Gilles Duncan – that naturally attached strong suspicion to a wide circle of people. As soon as the first hearings were held however, the charges were modified (from a simple act of mechanical sorcery to political conspiracy) causing immediate decrease in the number of defendants. The aim of the following sub-chapters is to introduce particularly those historical characters – both prominent and common – who are presented in *The Burning*.

6.2.1. Sir Francis Stewart – 5th Earl of Bothwell

Francis Stewart was an impressive nobleman with an even more impressive pedigree; he was the only legitimate son of John Stewart, the exclusive heir of James Hepburn (4th earl of Bothwell), one of King James V's grandchildren and godson of Mary, Queen of Scots. (ONDB Vol.52, 666) He received an excellent tuition – first at the royal court and later in the university of St. Andrews – at a very early age and maximized his chances to increase his theoretical knowledge by touring the European Continent several times. By the time he became fifteen years old (1577), he was already married to the daughter (Lady Margaret Douglas) of David Douglas (7th Earl of Angus) and called more than a dozen titles his own. More importantly however, at the end of the aforementioned year, he gained the most prominent of all his ranks, for on 27 November, “he was formally belted earl of Bothwell.” (ONDB Vol.52 666)

As mentioned before, Bothwell was not only closely related to the Stuart family, but also “benefited at an early age from his strong royal connections.” (ODNB Vol.52, 666) By the mid 1580s, he was seen as one of the James VI's most trusted political advisers, whose mastery of diplomatic skills provided him with a

key role in the marriage negotiations between Scotland and Denmark. Bothwell was only four years older than James VI, yet the two of them could not have been more different from each other; “[w]hile James was bookish and machiavellian, Bothwell was intelligent and with an aristocratic pride comparable to James's sense of royal privilege.” (Normand & Roberts 39) Stewart had a clear advantage in “self-fashioning”, but James VI was a skillful manipulator as well, whose genuine talent laid in his great ability to hold his temper, even in seemingly hopeless political situations. In any case, during the early 1580s James VI and Bothwell still seemed to tolerate each other's political inclination and handled official matters together without causing serious damage to James VI's ideal of kingship.

Bothwell's quick temper began to cause trouble first in 1587, when he (quite surprisingly) allied himself with the northern Catholic Earls by taking “unkindly to James's low-key response [to the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots] and criticized the king's choice of mourning clothes as opposed to armour.” (ODNB Vol. 52, 667-8) James's neutral reaction to the decapitation of his mother provoked widespread discontent among the Catholic nobles that finally peaked when the parliament made clear, Scotland does not intend to attack England. Hence Bothwell's aversion to James VI's 'wisest confidant', Chancellor Maitland of Thirlestane – father of Scotland's Anglophile attitude – increased considerably, giving way to a set of aggressive and disruptive actions against both the politician and the King. Finally as Bothwell refused to change his violently lawless behaviour and “continued to ally with 'anti-English' interests, an increasing detachment developed between the king and the earl.” (ODNB Vol. 52, 668)

On 15 April 1591, when Bothwell appeared in front of the privy council in Edinburgh for the first time, he denied to plead guilty to such charges (high treason and witchcraft) he had (allegedly) never committed. As the events progressed however, Bothwell gradually became “convinced that his enemy [Chancellor] Maitland was behind the witchcraft charge.” (Normand & Roberts 41) Making false statements about a fierce opponent – in order to outmanoeuvre him effectively – has been widely used as a political weapon in

Early Modern Europe, so accordingly – as it has been argued in a previous sub-chapter¹⁰⁸ – “[c]harges of witchcraft against political enemies had long been familiar in Scottish politics.” (Normand & Roberts 41) As far as Stewart's involvement in the magical witchcraft conspiracy is concerned, it is more likely that he fell into a trap of his own; his constant feuding and bloody rivalry were long overlooked by the government, but soon needed to be harmonized as the English succession turned from plan to reality.

After several (unsuccessful) rounds of impeachments, the case against Bothwell finally came to an end in 1595, whereby he was excommunicated, condemned as a traitor and forced to leave Scotland at once.

6.2.1.1. Representation of the Earl of Bothwell in the play

SIM. ...they say Both-well has a...superhuman capacity¹⁰⁹.

JESTER. – there is more to that Bothwell, than meets the eye¹¹⁰.

The Earl of Bothwell – as portrayed by Stewart Conn – is a complex and highly ambivalent character. He is a man full of pride, who apparently has little respect for anybody but himself. He is not afraid to plot the death of his King and escapes the charges without any punishment. He is able to mobilize (and spearhead) both the wealthy elite and the common social layers against James VI, but refuses to die for their professedly 'shared cause'. His enthusiastic vigour and daring action makes him a born leader, but as the action progresses, Bothwell fails to walk his talk. His final decision not to stand up for his accomplices turns him into a obnoxious social chameleon, who blends in by adopting the norms of those being (at the particular moment) in control. Thus by the end of the play, it is rather hard to decide, whether Bothwell's sheer bravado equals with simple demagoguery or with his unique talent to transform himself into anything when it is needed the most.

¹⁰⁸ 4.4.1. “Weather Magic vs. Political Propaganda”.

¹⁰⁹ Conn, Stewart. *The Burning*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1973. 30.

¹¹⁰ Conn, Stewart. *The Burning*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1973. 30.

As the play opens (Act 1, scene two), the audience learns that Bothwell is kept imprisoned in Tantallon Castle – probably for concocting various schemes against James VI already – and is reputed (in royal circles) as a smart political rival, an astute defender of democracy. Bothwell's best – pragmatic and clear argumentation – brings out (as he enters the stage) James VI's worst, the excessively moralizing, self-appointed theologian whose dark suspicion fills the air:

JAMES. ...Bothwell is bloody hell-bent creature, that has no care for those he drags to purgatory with him. A dark rider, on a dark mount. It befits him to perish in a desert of flaming sand – as all that are violent against God. There shall he lie, defiant in death as in life, like Capaneus obdurate under judgement. (Conn 19)

Neither Bothwell's self-assurance, nor his audacity and bad reputation – that has already earned him more foes than friends at the royal court – are of much importance compared to the impact of his smug response to James VI's next searching question:

JAMES. Before you go...do you frequent ...the east sector of the Kingdom?
 BOTHWELL. Seldom. There is a snell wind there, they tell me...
 (Conn 28)

The Earl's ironic utterance about his future whereabouts gives him immediately away – he is indeed part of the magical conspiracy! His union with the seductive noblewoman (Effie McCalyan), is seemingly also a result of his growing concern about Scotland's political future, though the audience encounters the couple at the beginning of *The Burning* as rough and lustful lovers and not as comrades. To her pertinent question, whether he wants to be the next king of Scotland, Bothwell reacts somewhat sharply:

BOTHWELL. My aim is not self-advancement, but the renewal of the Kingdom.
 EFFIE. When James ceases to be King?
 BOTHWELL. There will be another. (Conn 47)

Then couple of minutes later, as Bothwell voices his prime motive in removing James VI, it becomes clear that his idea is a direct reversal of the King's moral argument for his divine authority:

BOTHWELL. May winds rise and grow, that they destroy the false King
and Queen.

EFFIE. Why dost thou bear such a grievance against the King?

BOTHWELL. For reason he is the greatest enemy we have in this world.
(Conn 50)

In sum one can say that, Bothwell's character is built around three main strands; heroism, pleasure and spirit in *The Burning*. He is probably the most distinctively described person of all historical characters in the play, whose engagement in the magical witchcraft conspiracy is described in a consistent, yet largely fictitious manner.

6.2.2. Effie McCalyan

As a result of her high social status¹¹¹ we know a little more about the life of Effie McCalyan than about the other witches presented in *The Burning*. She was born as the only daughter of the rich and prosperous Thomas McCalyan (Lord Cliftonhall), a senator of the College of Justice, and married later the son of a close friend, Patrick Moscrop, who was (like her father) a successful and accomplished person. (Normand & Roberts 216) The McCalyans were considered as just and able people whose fine fortunes and substantial estates were envied by many of their contemporaries. Given that Effie had no other siblings, she alone inherited all her father's wealth after his death in 1581. However, it has been argued¹¹² that it was primarily her position as a man's exclusive inheritor that gained her the most bitter and dangerous foes during the course of her life, in reality, Effie McCalyan has been accused of witchcraft and sorcery already years before her father's death.

What is more, McCalyan was not the only noble woman who was known to the wider public as a secret sorceress previous to the (ominous) witch convention in the churchyard in North Berwick (31 October 1590). According to the Witchcraft Law, she was guilty of attempting (repeatedly) to poison her husband and her father-in-law, to paralyse a man by witchcraft and to ease her own pain during childbirth with the help of diverse magical potions. (Normand & Roberts 218) While there is no historical evidence regarding her ability to inflict harm upon anyone; and accordingly her machinations against her husband also fell short of being a serious threat – Patrick McCalyan was required (thus still alive) to pay a large sum for their forfeited estates a year after his wife's execution – Effie McCalyan was condemned in 1591 to be burnt on the stake. (Normand & Roberts 218) Apparently, Pitcairn has argued correctly when he claimed¹¹³ that

111 Cf. Yeoman, Louise. "Hunting the rich witch in Scotland: high status witchcraft suspects and their persecutors, 1590-1650." Ed. Julian Goodare. *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*. Manchester: Manchester UP. 2002. 106-121. Yeoman has argued that the strongest indication of the McCalyans' noble standing is the fact that, Partick Moscrop took up his wife's surname right after their wedding. (107).

112 Maxwell-Stuart argued that, "many of the women [who] had inherited property from their fathers or husbands, [...] could [...] be seen as a threat to the patriarchy", thus the suspicion of witchcraft proved to be the most 'reasonable' weapon against them. (2001, 95).

113 Pitcairn, Robert. *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland 1488-1624*. Vol. 1, Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1833. iii 249.

the royal court's special interest to involve McCalyan in the North Berwick trials seemed to have more to do with her ardent and explicit support of the rebellious Francis Stewart (Earl of Bothwell) than with her suspicious involvement in witchcraft and sorcery. (qtd. in Normand & Roberts 217)

McCalyan's prosecutors nevertheless made an enormous effort to represent her as “a certain female stereotype associated with witchcraft in the early modern period: the rebellious and quarrelsome woman, the bad wife, the scold and the shrew” (Normand & Roberts 218) during her trial in 1591. This clever legal step provides a logical explanation for her participation in the murderous plotting, since

...in the homologies of the early modern period the king was to his subjects or realm, as the husband to his wife. [...] A wife disobedience to her husband, or even her shrewish behaviour, let alone her attempt to murder him, was a rebellious or treasonable act. With this analogy in mind, similar motifs emerge in the stories of MacCalzean's¹¹⁴ plotting against her husband and conspiring against the king. Both are treasonable attempts to kill which fail. (Normand & Roberts 218-9)

Considering the contemporary sixteenth-century society, it must be acknowledged that all of these arguments of witchcraft and sorcery had been of great importance, yet they did not fully explain every detail of McCalyan's accusation. Recent historical research revealed another, much simpler (and thus more plausible) reason for Effie's alleged involvement in the murder of King James VI of Scotland. According to this evidence, she was closely related to¹¹⁵ a certain David Seaton, deputy bailiff of Tranent, who was the chief initiator of the North Berwick witch-hunts in 1590. Interestingly enough, Effie was named as one of the prime suspects for James VI's alleged murder, after Gilles Duncan, housemaid of Seaton, confessed (under savage torture) their magical witchcraft conspiracy against the life of their legitimate King¹¹⁶, James VI.

114 Since there was no standard spelling in Scotland during the sixteenth-century, the names of the historical persons were written in many different ways. One of the most problematic one is the name of Effie McCalyan; there are at least a dozen 'correct' ways to pronounce her full name.

115 Her husband, Patrick Moscrop was the brother of Seaton's wife, Katherine Moscrop. (Yeoman 107).

116 Cf. Normand, Lawrence and Gareth Roberts. *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James*

(Yeoman 107)

In view of these implicit connections one might say that the North Berwick witch-hunt is a prime example of how a local legal dispute – the healing ability of a minor cunning-woman¹¹⁷ – can turn into a royal affair and a national hysteria, when some of the accusers use the developments to advance their avid self-interests. It was commonly agreed that although her fame and financial means ensured McCalyan the necessary secrecy and immunity during her first witchcraft charges, her final execution was the manifestation of an appropriate legal system and strong (centralized) royal power. Burning her alive on the stake was believed to bring major relief to her victim, King James VI, but in reality, the legal process was followed by years of political and economical turmoil instead of the peace James VI hungered for. As a consequence, the brutal mass executions of the suspected witches neither strengthened nor validated the position of the Scottish King.

6.2.2.1. Representation of Effie McCalyan in the play¹¹⁸

Stewart Conn's characterization of Effie McCalyan is a vivid portrayal of one woman's struggle to possess and control herself in the depths of complete despair and destruction. Effie embodies the tragic 'Femme Fatale' in the play, who is partly “a mysterious and seductive woman whose charms ensnare her lovers in bonds of irresistible desire¹¹⁹”, and partly a pathetic fool, whose admirer (Francis Stewart) is not willing to be led “into compromising, dangerous, and deadly situations¹²⁰” to save her honour. As a matter of fact, McCalyan's ruination and death is brought about by the negligence of her lover (Bothwell), and by her own blind devotion and compliance for him. By the astute exploitation of her burning sexual desire Bothwell adds more fuel to his

VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches. Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2000. 54.

117 Gilles Duncan.

118 For further details on McCalyan's (actual and fictional) trial see chapter 5.2.3. “The Official Hearing of Effie McCalyan” and chapter 5.2.4. “The Final Verdict”.

119 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Femme_fatale, May 11, 2011.

120 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Femme_fatale, May 11, 2011.

hazardous conspiracy, and treats her as his loyal partner in crime. When it comes to the final evaluation of personal political positions however, it is the dedicated lady and not the treacherous Earl, who receives the capital punishment. This melodramatic relationship has only one serious flaw, it is entirely fictional. The adulterous relationship of McCalyan and Bothwell has been conjured up by the imagination of the author, because there is no (available) historical evidence on such an extramarital affair between these persons.

Let us now take a look at three short passages from *The Burning* , which aim to achieve of a better understanding of Effie McCalyan's character by focusing first on her adulterous relationship with Bothwell, then on the financial background (and importance) of her family and, finally, on her condemnation.

The following conversation is an attempt to highlight the nature of the (sexual) relationship Conn apparently had in mind while creating these two characters:

BOTHWELL. Madam!

EFFIE. My noble Lord!

BOTHWELL. I bring the greetings from the Court...to yourself...and your husband...

EFFIE. My husband...is from home...

BOTHWELL. Then our affection...is yours..., entire...

EFFIE. [...] How I have missed you. [...] It is so good to see you again...after these months. (She puts her arms round his neck)

BOTHWELL. What is this? (He takes the phial)

EFFIE. Three drops each night, Fian said...rare juices from the Orient.

BOTHWELL. Rare juices! One part brose, three parts water of Leith.

EFFIE. You do not trust it?

BOTHWELL. I do not require it. (Sniffs the phial, pours the contents into the chamber-pot) As if we lacked pull in our own bodies, that we should need philtres and 'rare juices'.

EFFIE. I have criet out for you, in your absence. My body longs for yours.

BOTHWELL. And mine, for yours...My blood is firit by your thighs, your warmth, your glow...(He kisses her, draws her on to the bed) By the magic potion that runs in your veins...and beats in your breasts...and makes our bodies one... (He starts to uncloth her. [...]) (Conn 36-7)

The selected extract of the play makes clear that while McCalyan is longing for a deeper, more meaningful bond between the two of them, Bothwell is driven to her by his instincts, primarily to fulfil his bodily needs. Thus he is rather insulted than encouraged at the sight of the love potion¹²¹ – which is intended to bind him spiritually as well as emotionally to Effie, – acquired from the local charmer, John Fian, minutes before his arrival. Their secret rendezvous reflects the unequal nature of their adulterous relationship; Bothwell is presented as the dominant party, while Effie McCalyan is introduced as a piece of sweet female flesh.

As the play progresses the audience becomes aware of the fact that the duo shares other secrets as well. Their fiendish plan is to destroy their king with the help of magic and sorcery; they learn that in order to succeed they must throw a dead cat (with human limbs attached to it) at midnight into the stormy sea and melt a wax figurine (that symbolizes James VI) at the same time in the churchyard of North Berwick. As they gather for the illegal witch summon around the kirk on All Hallows' Eve (1590), the hell seems to break loose for the conspirators find themselves in the midst of a raid executed by the royal guard. Bothwell's sheer luck saves him from being taken into custody anew, Effie's fortune however, is apparently not on her side; she is led away together with the other witches.

While there is little doubt that in case of a virtual regicide Bothwell would have received full support from McCalyan to take advantage of the situation and seize the crown, he seems less eager to help her. He completely alienates himself from his feelings for McCalyan and ducks his responsibility by blaming Lord Maitland directly – for misusing his position as Chancellor at the royal court – for Effie's captivity:

BOTHWELL. [...] Maitland had her taken, because he is after the lands she inheritit from her father. It is not his first try. (Conn 70)

¹²¹ For further details of this conversation between Effie McCalyan and Doctor Fian see Chapter 6.2.4.1, "Representation of John Fian in the play".

McCalyan's public disgrace eventually culminates in Bothwell's cruel indifference towards her execution, and in view of this, his remarkable reluctance to save her from the burning flames reveals once more how one-sided their allegiance was. Although she has no desire to share the fate of her executed collaborators, in the end Effie McCalyan must walk alone into the fire. As the final verdict is read out to her in the royal courtroom, Effie cannot help expressing her desperation in assuring the committee that Bothwell will save her. By the end of the proclamation however, she begins to understand her situation better and gradually recognises that there are no good grounds left for further hope.

DEMPSTER. 'That the said EUPHAM McCALYAN, as culpable and guilty thereof, be taken to the Castel-Hill of Edinborough, and there –
EFFIE. Not stranglit...never stranglit...

[...]

DEMPSTER. – The Castel-Hill of Edinborough, and there bound to a stake and burnt alive to ashes. And all her lands, steadings, heritages and cattle to be forfeit. Which I, Dempster to this Court, do hereby give for doom.'

EFFIE. Sweet Christ...to be burnt alive...never to be...have pity on the poor child in Christ...sweet Jesu, have pity...

JAMES. There can be no appeal. It is not that we do this thing, but Christ God; in that we are the Lord's anointit, and true servant and child of God, while thou art a vessel of his wrath.

EFFIE. He [BOTHWELL] will save me...he will rescue me...never fear...

JAMES. Thus perish all Infidels!

EFFIE. No...you will never...I defy you...I defy you, to the uttermaist, and your vicious ways...I glory in it...I glory...glory...glory... (Conn 92-3)

6.2.3. Gilles Duncan

Although “some trials had taken place in East Lothian before the king and the council became involved” (Normand & Roberts 95), the confession of Gilles Duncan marked the beginning of a crucial stage in the North Berwick witch-hunts. Duncan, who was originally interrogated by her master (David Seaton)¹²² – on the occasion of her unauthorized absence (from his house) and increased nightly activities – served later as one of the crown witnesses in the cases of other suspected witches. Although Gilles's participation in the magical witchcraft conspiracy – at least in the eyes of contemporary society – was verified by her forced confession, it has recently been argued that Seaton's personal spite and power hunger played a much more significant role in the course of events than did Duncan's additional fragments of information about the witches' secret gathering. (Goodare 2002,107-8)

Duncan's initial refusal to comply with the law and firm denial of participating in any illegal activity resulted (inevitably) in her torture and public disgrace. Guiley describes the housemaid's physical abuse in *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* as follows:

Duncan was not able to explain to Seaton's satisfaction how she had obtained her power, so he had her tortured. Duncan's fingers were crushed in a vise called the pillwinkes, and her head was “thrawed,” which consisted of it being bound with a rope that was twisted and wrenched savagely. Still she would not confess to witchcraft. A diligent search of her body was made, and the Devil's mark was found on her throat. At this incriminating evidence, Duncan confessed to being in league with the Devil. (Guiley 243)

As far as Gilles Duncan's personal criminal history is concerned, it is highly unlikely that she had any troubles with the law before the North Berwick witch-craze. The fact that prior to her interrogation she was serving as a housemaid in Seaton's home, suggests that Duncan – unlike the other prime suspects (Agnes Sampson, Barbara Napier and Effie McCalyan) – was a young, immature and inexperienced woman. The remedies she offered for those who suffered from

¹²² For further details on the cross-examination and torture of Duncan see Chapter 5.2.1.

pain or illness proved to be in accordance with the established and well-known methods of her folk culture and were not set up as her private initiatives.

In view of this, Seaton's implicit assumption about his servant-girl's unlawful and downright devilish powers – which she reputedly received by Satan – was rather induced by the dogmatic teachings of the Protestant Kirk and his personal drive to acquire local authority¹²³ and not by Duncan's suspicious dealings.

As has been pointed out before – like so many of her ancestors accused of witchcraft, – Duncan eventually decided to bow to the necessity by making a full confession. She pleaded guilty to have taken part in regular (organized) witchcraft meetings with her accomplices (whom she later named) in order to dispose their ruler. Furthermore, Duncan unconsciously raised the debate to a new level, when she admitted that she “heard Bothwell talking about plans [to replace James VI], but never saw him.¹²⁴”

6.2.3.1. Representation of Gilles Duncan in the play¹²⁵

In spite of her virtual absence, Gilles is very much present in the play from the beginning onwards, as she becomes the subject of the conversation between David Seaton and the local minister in the opening scene. Rumour has it that she has engaged herself in nocturnal activities that are clearly against the (Witchcraft) law, thus causing suspicion and fear in the neighbourhood. Seaton's patronizing (and almost fatherly) attitude towards his housemaid unquestionably erupts the cold rage of the Protestant clergyman, who does not think twice about threatening the depute bailiff seriously with the possibility of a future cross-examination:

123 This argument will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.1.3. “David Seaton”.

124 <http://www.shc.ed.ac.uk/Research/witches/>, May 10, 2011.

125 For further details on Duncan's (actual and fictional) trial see Chapter 5 “The Witchcraft Trials”.

MINISTER. Have you lost your senses? (As SEATON turns) To stay out in this?

SEATON. My...maidservant...Gilles Duncan...

MINSITER. She is never out in this?

SEATON. I fear she my be.

MINSITER. For what purpose?

SEATON. These past three weeks, she has absentit herself from under my roof, alternate nights. Most like she trysts with some lad.

MINISTER. That were illicit. (Pause) There are tales abroad in Tranent, of this Gilles Duncan's potency to heal the sick. By laying-on of hands. [...]

MINISTER. Where there is potency to heal, there is also potency to hurt. By unnatural means. If she is again absent, the Session must be alertit. (Conn 14-5)

Even though her master does his utmost to preserve Duncan's dignity as a human being throughout the whole play, her role as the state's chief informant leaves no place to negotiate on her behalf. As it has been argued in the previous chapter, Duncan's extensive investigation for her healing activity reveals a larger conspiracy and provides the authorities with the key to understanding the schemes of the rebellious nobility. Duncan's confessions bring about the failure of the Kirkyard gathering in North Berwick and contribute unwittingly to the downfall of Effie McCalyan.

6.2.4. Doctor Fian

Not many details are known about the life of John Fian prior to his accusation of high treason in 1590. According to *News from Scotland* (1591) he was director of the school in Prestonpans, but in another source¹²⁶ he was mentioned as “a young schoolmaster in Saltpans”.¹²⁷ What seems certain about Fian is that he reportedly used a range of alternate names – John Cunningham, John Fean or Dr Fian, just to name a few – and was a widely known sorcerer in his home region. He was a single man and used to live in the town of Tranent. There is no historical evidence, however, on his relationship to Effie McCalyan, but “[a]t his execution he supposedly confessed to adultery with thirty-two women.” (Normand & Roberts 205)

Considering his witchcraft activities, it is no small wonder that Fian could remain active, even at a time when the Witchcraft Act (1563) and the stipulations of the Reformed Kirk forbade any association with alleged witches. In 1590 however, he could no longer avoid falling under suspicion and his

downfall [...] was brought about by a young servant girl named Gillis Duncan, whose gift for natural healing was suspected by her master [David Seaton] as the Devil's magic. Under torture, she accused several persons of witchcraft, including Fian [...]. Fian, who had a reputation as a conjurer, was arrested on December 20, 1590, and charged with 20 counts of witchcraft and high treason. (Guiley 124)

According to the database of the *Survey of Scottish Witchcraft*, when Fian appeared in front of the judiciary of Edinburgh on the second day of Christmas (1590), he was formally charged with practicing white magic, demonic maleficia and a set of unorthodox religious practices which he was thought to convey directly from the Devil. He was also suspected to have a strong political motivation to arrange the murder of James VI, the legitimate king of Scotland. In light of this, he was submitted to systematic and brutal torture (one of the worst of its kind in the history of Scotland), which though intended to break his silence, quite shockingly, brought no significant result. Rosemary Guiley recalls

¹²⁶ Guiley, Rosemary. *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*. London: Facts on File, 1989. 124.

¹²⁷ Conn introduces Doctor Fian in *The Burning* as the schoolmaster of Saltpans. (34).

the events in *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* as follows:

After having his head “thrawed” with a rope¹²⁸ (bound and twisted in various directions) he still denied the charges. Fian was then given the torture described as “the most severe and cruell paine in the world,” the “boots,” a vise that went around the legs from knee to ankle, and that was progressively tightened with blows of a hammer. Fian was given three hammer blows while in the boots, and passed out. (125)

His judges found hard to explain his perseverance in terms of rational reason, and as a consequence, Fian's sheer mental and physical endurance was soon equated with a gift from the Devil. He was eventually thrown to the burning flames in January 1591, after “the enraged king [...] condemned him to die” (Guiley 125) for a crime he (possibly) never committed.

6.2.4.1. Representation of Doctor Fian in the play

Doctor Fian is one of the minor characters in the play, who appears as the local charmer, specialized in love potions and magic spells. He conveys the impression of being a well-respected sorcerer, a white (beneficial) magician, who has a world-wide network of suppliers. The key to his remarkable success lies in – as he very aptly affirms – his anonymity and fierce determination to satisfy his customers' needs.

The audience encounters a Fian in *The Burning* who is in the midst of practicing his profession – he offers his bewitching products to Effie McCalyan in her bedroom:

FIAN. This phial contains a secret philtre, comprisit from rare juices of the Orient. I receivit it only after great effort, from a merchant who exchanges local salt for timber, in the German ports. He had it from a sea-captain, a Hollander, whose wares are claimit never to fail. In that he secures substances from Samarkand and beyond. He once had one from snake-juices could kill instant.

EFFIE. This... is not to kill?

FIAN. No, ladyship... this is... for the other.

EFFIE. Is potent?

128 Gillis Duncan was questioned and tortured in a similar manner in December 1590.

FIAN. It will bind the recipient to yourself, so long as you please. See... three drops in the evening... either in the ale or wine... the latter being less destructive to the desires... nightly upon requirement, till the potion be done.

EFFIE. Nothing else?

FIAN. But womanly wiles...

EFFIE. I am in your debt.

FIAN. Never reveal the source. (Pointedly) I am only sorry that ladyship's husband Patrick is abroad this months, that you cannot put it into practice straightway... (Conn 34-5).

Soon however, the audience finds out that the schoolmaster is much more than a simple local sorcerer, in Scene 6 Fian gives precise and detailed instructions to Effie and Bothwell (this time in Bothwell's house, in Leith) on what must be done in order to put an end to the rule of their king, James VI. Additionally to his customer-seller relationship to Effie, we bear witness to a conversation which lays bare the whole truth behind the trio's (secret) alliance. Fian's original (fiendish) ambition is to spearhead the political conspiracy against the rule of King James VI, and to secure the Earl of Bothwell's rapid ascent to royal power. The discussion between him and Effie is as follows:

FIAN. (to EFFIE) You have access to a black cat?

EFFIE. I do.

FIAN. Black from snout to tail. Castrate it, and do on it the marks of thy will. Christen it, then attach to it the chief parts of a dead man. The joints of the body to be broken apart and attachit. Then the beast cast into the full flood. At such time as James sets sail for the further shore. That he fall utterly. Repeat to me the instructions for the beast, which you will pass on.

EFFIE. Two of them to hold a finger, one on each side the chimney-cruik, the two nebbes of their fingers meeting together. Pass the beast through the links of the cruik, thereafter under the chimney. Still at the house, knit the four feet of the beast to the joints of a dead man. Then fetch it to the shore at Pittenweem, it being midnight for our cause. Then cast the burden into the sea.

FIAN. Your words being?

EFFIE. 'See that there be no deceit among us'.

FIAN. After which the boat should perish. (To BOTHWELL) To the same end we meet tomorrow.

[...]

FIAN. This [killing James VI] must have a speedy conclusion. (Conn 44-5)

As the last sentence suggests, removing the legitimate ruler from his position is not only a highly ambitious deed, but one full of hidden dangers. Fian senses the potential consequences of their undue delay and does not let the local rumour – which states that one of their adherents, Gilles Duncan has been questioned and tortured by David Seton (her master) and the local blacksmith – go by. He is deeply worried and urges the party to take action as soon as possible. For the time being however, the historical significance (along with the future financial benefits) of the moment dispels the doubts of the trio and they remain cautiously optimistic and hopeful:

FIAN. They say the Session has stratit to smell out folks' business.
 EFFIE. To what effect?
 FIAN. Some servant-lass has been questionit.
 BOTHWELL. I have been questionit by the King. It aidit him little.
 EFFIE. Too much is at stake, to call a halt.
 [...]
 BOTHWELL. You [Fian] will be well rewardit.
 (Conn 45)

Eventually things are taking a turn for the worse, and the illegal witch gathering in the churchyard of North Berwick (Scene 7) brings about the utter destruction of Fian (who leads the witches). His sad fate is sealed, when the royal army arrest him instead of the Earl of Bothwell (who appears earlier at the place disguised as the Devil).

6.3. Major Fictional Characters

There are two major fictional characters in *The Burning* whose role is essential in the course of events: the local (Tranent) Protestant minister and the royal herald. Although they stand on opposite sides in the play, they both hold high offices and are keen observers of the alarming situation (high treason camouflaged as witchcraft accusations) that develops around them. The following sub-chapter aims to provide the reader – through the introduction of these fictional characters and their theatrical purpose – with some additional commentary to complement the comparative analysis of the play.

Although there is no concrete evidence regarding the person of the Protestant minister of *The Burning*, it is not unlikely that Conn borrowed the identity of the local pastor of Haddington, James Carmichael, in order to refine his character. Carmichael “became a national figure in 1584 when he fled to England along with the other anti-episcopalian ministers following the execution of the earl of Gowrie, leader of the Ruthven Raid in which James was captured in a Protestant *coup*. (Normand & Roberts 292) When he returned to Scotland in 1588 he took up his former position as minister of Haddington and began to show elaborate interest towards the crime of witchcraft and sorcery. In fact, he “may well provide the link between local witchcraft cases in East Lothian and the ‘discovery’ of conventions of witches plotting against the king’s life.” (Normand & Roberts 293) Due to his extraordinary writing skills and the amount of information on the local witchcraft cases he bombarded the royal court with, James Carmichael was notably close to King James VI in the late 1580s. In view of this, Carmichael was also long thought of as the author of the infamous witchcraft pamphlet, *News from Scotland*, though recent scholars have refuted this idea by exposing more exact details of the biography of the former Protestant minister.

The local minister portrayed by Stewart Conn shows in many ways striking similarities to James Carmichael. They both seem overly ambitious in their strive to serve the dogmatic theology of the Reformed Kirk and abuse their religious authority constantly. In sum, it is their lust for power and influence that

determines their fundamental character. The following conversation – taken from the play – provides a valuable insight to the lack of moderate behaviour religious leaders showed at times, when their personal advantage was at stake:

SEATON. This [the interrogation of GILLES] is on my conscience.
 MINISTER. There is also your duty. Take care of the demands of one and do not blind you to the dictates of the other. Else I should not care to answer for you.
 SEATON. Sir, I am prepared to answer for myself.
 MINISTER. Before God?
 SEATON. Before God.
 MINISTER. And the King?
 SEATON. And the King. (Conn 16)

The royal herald too plays a significant role in *The Burning*, as he is a treacherous insider at the royal court, committed supporter of Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell and a messenger, who brings the news of the upcoming disaster (a warrant has been issued to capture Bothwell). His repeated – yet abortive – attempts to drive the earl's attention to a voluntary exile prove his absolute loyalty towards such fundamental human rights as the freedom of thought, speech and religion. He also stands – together with Bothwell – for a modern, purely rationalist political division whose general intention is to reform the trying political circumstances:

BOTHWELL. I expectit you sooner.
 HERALD. I had to be careful, not to be interceptit. I have come to warn you.
 BOTHWELL. Has Maitland turned into the Fox he is?
 HERALD. James has had you proclaimit outlaw. [...] Your armorial bearings have been torn, at the Mercat Cross.
 BOTHWELL. I terrify him so!
 HERALD. He blames you, for raising storm.
 BOTHWELL. If he catches the croup, he blames me.
 HERALD. Soldiers are on the way. (Conn 67-8)

One of the most crucial differences between the herald – as portrayed by Conn – and his superior, Bothwell, lies in their sense of allegiance to those sharing their cause. As long as the royal courier treats the memory of his political comrade, Effie McCalyan, with the utmost respect, Bothwell denies any

responsibility for her sad fate:

BOTHWELL. Something I must do, first.

HERALD. You mean...the Lady...

BOTHWELL. Lady?

HERALD. McCalyan.

BOTHWELL. What of her?

HERALD. It is too late...to save her.

BOTHWELL. Why should I save her? (Conn 68)

7. The Outcome

After surveying all major characters of the play, let us now take a look at the historical and fictional outcome of the North Berwick witch-hunt (1590-1). In doing so, this chapter will focus on the most critical phase of the hunt; the time, when James VI was directly engaged in a life-or-death struggle with his (by then) much-loathed cousin, the Earl of Bothwell.

7.1. Bothwell's Exile (1595)

As it has been argued¹²⁹ before, the initial period of the criminal inspection raised James VI's curiosity rather than his alarm, as he became familiar with the first, vague details of the affair. (Maxwell-Stuart 1997, 216) It has also been pointed out that, when Bothwell was eventually identified – first by Gilles Duncan and later by Agnes Sampson too – as operator and financier of the secret group of witches, James VI's worries began quickly to multiply.

Bothwell's public accusation was followed by a series of unsuccessful attempts to impeach him that almost backfired on the royal court when Stewart, deeply angered by the scathing indictments¹³⁰, launched repeated revenge raids against Holyrood palace. Instead of giving his cause humbly up, Bothwell decided to shock his King by assailing him in the middle of the night on 24 July 1593, where “James, emerging from his privy with his clothing in some disarray, found [...] [his cousin] in his presence chamber offering his sword in surrender and loudly calling for the King's pardon.” (Akrigg 121) James VI ensured the aggressor to enjoy due leniency and thus entered bravely his game. As Akrigg has pointed out “James met Bothwell's pretended submission with pretended forgiveness. For a few weeks Bothwell was able to have things his own way, but

129 Cf. chapter 4.4.1. “From Weather Magic to Political Propaganda”.

130 A compelling argument suggests that “James's failure to punish Huntly [who was plotting against the Scottish royal court and England with the Spanish King at around the same time] was contrasted with his obsessive persecution of Bothwell. (Cowan 132) Outfoxing Bothwell must have seemed – mainly out of James VI's unreasonable partiality towards Huntly – an easier solution, but it aggravated the Earl severely.

adroitly King James was able to regain the direction of events.” (121) After the aforementioned nocturnal incident, Bothwell was tried and acquitted from the charges of witchcraft in August 1593¹³¹, but he soon went on the political offensive again. Although he was offered – in order to clear his name – a voluntary exile¹³² earlier that summer, he sharply declined the (fairly generous) royal proposal.

Two years later the tables have turned just as abruptly as in 1593, but this time luck was no longer on the pugnacious Earl's side: “[i]n an extraordinary misjudgement [...] [he] joined Huntly in rebellion, but was excommunicated by the kirk and lost his popular support. Outright rebellion was an unambiguous form of violence far easier for James to handle than clan feuding” or secret sorcery¹³³. (Croft 34-5) Bothwell left Scotland in 1595 and never returned.

7.2. 'Bothwell the Conqueror'

Conn's play ends with Bothwell's attack on Holyrood palace on 24 July 1593. Given that the portrayal of this savage intrusion follows directly the execution of Effie McCalyan, it is easy to take it for the frenzied rage of an ill-fated lover. Sadly however, the audience soon has to learn that Bothwell's nightly visit has more to do with self-concern and egoism than heroic gallantry. As he denies the burden of moral responsibility for the (North Berwick) witchcraft fiasco and demands his forfeited position at the royal court back (even though he is guilty of conspiring against the King), it becomes clear that, not bravery but a shrewd sense of self-advancement motivates him. He steals the breath of the audience away with his highly inappropriate behaviour, as he turns his back on his previous plans and confesses devotion to James VI. This complete submission however, makes – yet again – a pitiable fool out of James VI, ruins his most spirited moment and enables the treacherous Earl to rise mercilessly above him

131 It is important to keep in mind that at the time Bothwell was released, all other key informants and accused were already either hanged, strangled or burnt.

132 Cf. Cowan, Edward J.. “The Darker Vision of the Scottish Renaissance: the Devil and Francis Stewart.” Ed. Brian P. Levack. *Witchcraft in Scotland*. A Garland Series. Vol. 7. New York: Garland, 1992. 130.

133 Cf. with chapter 4.3.2. “James VI's battle for survival”.

in one single strike:

JAMES. We are the Truth. You do Devil's work. And are now come to seek your King's life. I am wholly in your power. Better die with honour, than live in shame. I am ready to die. Take my miserable life. But before God, I swear thou shalt not have my soul. -(James bares his chest, closes his eyes. Instead of striking, BOTHWELL kneels at James's feet. JAMES opens one eye) Kneel not, adding hypocrisy to treason. [...] I am no longer a boy minor, to be treatit as a fool. You, Francis Hepburn, have plottit my death. I call on you, discharge your dishonorable purpose. I will not live a prisoner, and dishonoured. I am ready! (But BOTHWELL kisses his sword, renders it up)

BOTHWELL. I harbour no ill-will toward your person. You are my sovereign, and I your subject. (Conn 97)

8. Conclusion

As the title of this thesis – “Political Witchcraft: Re-reading Stewart Conn's Play, *The Burning* in its Historical Context” – indicates, the scope of this paper was to identify and compare all similarities and differences between the actual witch-hunt in North Berwick and its fictional portrayal. In order to create the framework for both the historical event and its literary reflection, those legal, religious, political and sociological issues (such as witchcraft, absolutism and the divine right of kings) have been touched upon which shaped and defined the worldview of those – from royals to commons – who lived in Scotland during the second half of the sixteenth-century.

During my extensive historical research I came to realize and tried to prove that, the tragical event of North Berwick (1590-1) was much less about finding local sorcerers in the East Lothian region of Scotland, than about hunting one particular political opponent, Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell, whom James VI (out of various reasons) mistook for his 'greatest enemy on earth'. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, although accusing troublesome nobles with the crime of witchcraft was seen as a customary habit in Scotland already during the Middle Ages, the importance of such a charge changed completely after the Reformation. From that time on, the ruler was seen as the personification of God and as such, rebellions (including the practice of any kind of witchcraft) against his person equaled with the crime of high treason. Thus the North Berwick incident carried the potential of becoming a rather important turning point in the reign of James VI from the beginning on, because the fierce and prolonged disputes about the Devil's involvement in it both proved and justified the King's godly origin and divine right.

As Clark has pointed out,

[t]he recurring theme of both the dittays of 1590-1 and *Newes from Scotland* was that the king's Christian rectitude made him the Devil's principal target, and yet at the same time protected him from all machinations of his. [...] This fundamental principle of the politics of demonism is of crucial significance. It transformed the very impotence of the North Berwick witches into an affirmation of the truly divine nature (or the most powerful magic) of James's early, and hitherto very hesitant magistracy. (1992, 198)

But whereas in reality, – apart from the confessions of three dubious defendants – one finds no historical evidence on the role of Bothwell in the alleged conspiracy, Conn had (and used) his chance to crown him king of the rebels in his fictional tale. By a curious paradox however, even if Bothwell – as portrayed by Conn – betrays his King in front of the very eyes of the playgoers, neither the fact that he roasts a wax figurine (similar to James VI) on fire, nor the idea that he dresses up as the Black Devil is enough to make him guilty in the eyes of a modern audience.

I found it truly exciting, how profoundly and genuinely Conn understood both the social importance and the political foundation of the North Berwick witch-hunt, in such a time, when the intellectual battles between researchers who depicted King James VI's court as a weak and miserable division and those who refuted these strictly traditionalist ideas were just about to begin. Given the fact that “one of the great achievements of the Scottish stage in the last twenty-five years, [...] has been the variety and complexity of the ways in which it has dealt with history”¹³⁴ it must be kept in mind however that, *The Burning* offers a subjective version, and not a factual reflection of the country's Early Modern political circumstances. Observing it alone – without its historical context – can be enough if one wants to enjoy an exceptional interpretation of history, but it can never stand exclusively to draw valid conclusions about Scotland's international and domestic policies of that time.

134 *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies*. Eds. Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996. 85.

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11. Abstract

Researchers who study the North Berwick witch-hunt (1590-1) are in a unique position, for these accusations marked the beginning of a long tradition that included enormous literary corpus and authentic documentation¹³⁵. This fortunate situation of dealing with such a fascinating material is thanked on the one hand, to the personal involvement of King James VI, whose person gained special prominence to the events and continues to distinguish the affair from other Scottish witchcraft cases even today, but on the other, also to the fact that, these trials embodied much more than simple witchcraft charges. The case of North Berwick was the most extensive – yet not the first – political witch-hunt in the history of Scotland that aimed to eliminate one particular rival (Bothwell) whom James VI and his court – seemingly – feared the most. The craze started as a relatively marginal affair – the healing potency of a maid, Gilles Duncan became suspicious – and ended with the fierce removal of the King's cousin, Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell from the royal court.

This thesis explores and compares the original historical events of the actual witch-hunt with the incidents portrayed by Stewart Conn in his play, *The Burning*.

In doing so, the paper introduces the reader to the author and his play, examines the theory of witchcraft and absolutism, analyzes the historical background of the event and compares it with its fictional counterpart, deals with the witchcraft trials, focuses on the dramatic characters and reviews both the historical and fictional outcome.

135 Cf. Croft, Pauline. *King James*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003. 1.

12. Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Lange galt der Fall von North Berwick als Beginn der ersten großen Welle nationaler Hexenverfolgung in Schottland, doch vielmehr bildeten diese Anschuldigungen den Anfang weitgefächerterten öffentlichen Interesses und politischer Aufmerksamkeit.

Als zu Beginn des letzten Jahrzehnts des 16. Jahrhunderts eine hitzige Debatte um die Vormachtstellung König James VI und seine Übernahme des englischen Throns entbrannte, stachelte die nun überreizte, politische Stimmung den Fanatismus der Hexenverfolger zu nie zuvor dagewesenen Ausmaßen an. In dieser Arbeit wird nachfolgend dargelegt werden, wie Anschuldigungen, die anfangs als simple Zauberei bewertet wurden, geschickt für verschiedenste politische Zwecke eingesetzt wurden: Sie befriedigten die Forderungen der reformierten schottischen „Kirk“, die Vorstellung des „Königs von Gottes Gnade“ und verstärkten außerdem die politische Machtdemonstration Elizabeth I und ihres Hofes dem schottischen Volk gegenüber. Der Fall von North Berwick mag also zwar anfangs als unbedeutender Zwischenfall gegolten und nur wenig Aufmerksamkeit genossen haben, doch gewann während der öffentlichen Verhandlungen, die in Edinburgh unter sorgfältiger Aufsicht von König James VI von Schottland abgehalten wurden, rasch mehr an Komplexität und Bedeutung für die Monarchie als je ein Hexenverfolgungsprozess zuvor.

Forscher, die sich mit den Hexenprozessen von North Berwick (1590-91) beschäftigen, befinden sich in einer einzigartigen Position, sind diese Verfolgungen doch der Beginn einer langen Tradition, die einen enormen literarischen Korpus sowie authentische Dokumentation mit sich brachte. (Goodare: 2002, 7) Verständlicherweise geht die Existenz solch faszinierender Materials auf den persönlichen Einsatz von König James VI zurück, der den Ereignissen persönlich beiwohnte, und dazu beitrug, diese Prozesse von anderen schottischen Hexenverfolgungen abzuheben.

Nach den Lehren der protestantischen Theologie, zu deren Anhängern James VI persönlich zählte, bestand die Hauptaufgabe einer Hexe in blindem

Gehorsam ihrem Meister, dem Teufel, gegenüber, sowie im Abschluss eines freiwilligen Pakts mit demselben und dem Ziel, persönlich zur totalen Zerstörung der existierenden Weltordnung beizutragen (durch geheime Versammlungen, genannt „Sabbate“). Diese neue Ideologie, die durch die Reformation ins Leben gerufen wurde, erhielt überschwengliche Unterstützung der gebildeten Minderheit und wurde durch eine erschütternde Nachricht im Sommer des Jahres 1591 noch weiter verstärkt: König James VI und seine junge Verlobte Königin Anna wurden angeblich selbst Opfer von ortsansässigen Zauberern.

Dadurch war die Hexenverfolgung von North Berwick von 1590-91 mehr als ein bloßes unbeabsichtigtes Resultat einer unglücklichen Verkettung von Zufällen. Vielmehr war sie das Produkt ausgeklügelter staatlicher Propaganda und das absehbare Ergebnis eines hoch diffizilen Staatsapparates. Laut Barstow waren „öffentliche Hinrichtungen von Hexen mehr als bloße polit. Eliminierung; sie vermittelten den Eindruck, dass der Herrscher, der sie anordnete, gottgleich war, und – noch viel wichtiger – dass seine Macht die Mächte des Bösen noch überstieg.“ (143)

Es mutet ironisch an, dass diese tragischen Ereignisse einen Wendepunkt in König James VI Leben konstituierten, der es dem Herrscher erst ermöglichte, wirkungsvoll in einen Wettstreit um die königliche Macht zu treten und eine starke, zentralisierte Monarchie aufzubauen. Die heftigen und lang andauernden Streitigkeiten um die magische Verschwörung der angeblichen Hexen gereichten James VI zum Vorteil, da sie langsam die säkulare Auffassung eines von Gott gesandten und gelenkten Herrschers zu bestärken begannen. Die Idee war einfach und treffend belegt: Der Herrscher muss Gott selbst sein, wenn der Teufel persönlich Interesse an seiner Ausrottung hat. Zusammengefasst ebneten die Hexenprozesse von North Berwick von 1590-91 in Bezug auf politische und religiöse Ansichten und sozio-ökonomische Umstände den Weg für die Frühmoderne.

Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die tatsächlichen historischen Ereignisse der Hexenverfolgung (1590-91) und die in Stewart Conns Drama „The Burning“

dargestellten Geschehnisse zu erforschen und vergleichend gegenüberzustellen. Wenn man bedenkt, dass die Prozesse von North Berwick zu den bestdokumentierten Fällen in der Geschichte der Hexenverfolgung zählen, ist es verwunderlich, dass das Drama in den letzten vier Jahrzehnten weder ausführliche akademische Kritik, noch besondere Rezeption der Öffentlichkeit erfuhr. In diesem Sinne sieht sich diese Arbeit als einzigartig in der Forschungsgeschichte, denn sie stellt die erste akademische Arbeit dar, die einen Vergleich zwischen dem historischen Kontext und den fiktionalen Ereignissen, wie sie im Drama dargestellt werden, zieht. „The Burning“ zeigt genau jene historische Epoche, die einen großen kontroversiellen Einfluss auf die schottische Geschichte nahm. Dadurch verdient das Stück kritische Aufmerksamkeit, „sowohl in der historischen Realität, als auch in der dramatischen Darstellung von Geschichte.“ (Wetschka 1)

Zuerst wird der Autor, Stewart Conn, vorgestellt, gefolgt von einer inhaltlichen Zusammenfassung und einer kurzen Beschreibung der Ursprünge des Dramas und seiner Entstehungsgeschichte.

Danach werde ich auf die theoretischen Grundlagen des Dramas eingehen und die wichtigsten Beziehungen des Verbrechens der Hexerei mit der Theorie des „Herrschers von Gottes Gnaden“ und mit dem Absolutismus darlegen. Weiters soll die einführende Begriffsklärung dem Leser einen kurzen Überblick der Geschichte der Hexerei in Schottland geben, sowie die kontroversiellsten Theorien und Interpretationen zu Hexen und Hexenkunst darstellen.

Wie auch schon der Titel dieser Arbeit zeigt („Politische Hexenjagd: Eine Neuaufnahme von Stewart Conns Drama „The Burning“ in seinem historischen Kontext“) ist es ihr Ziel, alle Unterschiede zwischen den tatsächlichen und den fiktionalen Ereignissen des Theaterstücks zu identifizieren und zu vergleichen. Um diesen wichtigen Kontrast herauszuarbeiten wird eine genaue Analyse des historischen Kontexts und theatrischen Umfelds, zusammen mit der Verschwörungstheorie gegeben, gefolgt von einer ausführlichen Diskussion der Hexenprozesse. Ein weiteres Kapitel beschäftigt sich mit den Hauptfiguren des Dramas im Vergleich mit ihren historischen Vorbildern. Im darauffolgenden

Kapitel werden jene dramatische Figuren behandelt, deren Gegenpart nicht mehr nachvollziehbar ist oder fehlt. Das Augenmerk liegt hierbei auf Conns möglichen Gründen für die dramatische Verwendung dieser Charaktere.

Abschließend werden die historischen Fakten mit den Ereignissen im Drama verglichen, bevor diese Arbeit zu einer Schlussfolgerung und abschließenden Aussage kommt.

13. Curriculum Vitae

My name is Zsófia Forgó. I was born in Mosonmagyaróvár (Hungary) on 3 April 1985. Passing successfully the entrance exams of the local secondary school – more than a decade ago – was my decisive step towards English language and culture, for there, I had the opportunity to engage myself into intensive literary, philosophical and historical explorations in various languages. In the same year, I was fortunate enough to visit the United States for the first time, and spent the whole summer in New York State and Pennsylvania. Looking back from today I must say that this journey has left such deep mark on my intellect that I eventually came to the decision to continue my studies at the Department of American Studies at the University of Budapest (ELTE) four years later. Despite the fact that the department provided us with a selection of excellent academics and lively intellectual debates, I have decided to move to Vienna after finishing my sophomore year.

After an uncertain start in my new host country (speaking no German prevented me from accessing university), things began to take a turn for the better by spring 2006, when I acquired my final exam in the German Language Centre and continued at the English and American Department in Vienna. My improving language proficiency in German brought other advantages as well: a year later I chose to supplement my academic studies with Hungarian Literature and Culture. This discipline that combined expert tuition with a great language training offered an alternative approach to my national heritage. My bachelor's degree – “*Bibliotheca Corviniana*” – was completed within a year and was recently published in a distinguished cultural journal in Hungary.

I am currently working on my final exam at the English Department in Vienna. As the title of this thesis has already suggested, it is concerned with contemporary Scottish Drama in general and political witchcraft in particular. My primary aim was to highlight the similarities and differences between the historical and fictional context of the North Berwick witch-hunt (1590-91). Besides the social and psychological dynamics of witch-hunting in (Early)

Modern times, I am also interested in the role of the family in Modern American Drama and the clash between cultures throughout the course of British colonization.

The first-hand experience of being a foreigner in Austria – I have been living in Vienna for six years now – has turned me into a much more autonomous, self-reliant and patient person than I ever was. My secret wishes are to live and work (for some time) in the United States and to take lessons in Russian again. I love Hungarian poetry, the music of the Rolling Stones and the unique atmosphere of all traditional Viennese coffeehouses.