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**Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona**

**“She confesses in all but word”: Disability and
the Female Monstrosity in *The Last Witch of Scotland***

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Statement of Intellectual Honesty

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The Last Witch of Scotland

I hereby declare that this is a completely original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practice that will lead to the automatic failing of this TFM.

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Abstract

This MA dissertation approaches the topic of witchcraft in Scotland in early modern Europe to expose underlying reasons that could have contributed to the persecution of specific individuals. While the majority of those tried for witchcraft in Europe were women, gender was not the sole criterion; many of the convicted women were previously marginalised in their communities. This research paper claims that social stigma and prejudice towards people with disabilities contributed to their subsequent prosecution and conviction. *The Last Witch of Scotland* (2023), a historical novel by Philip Paris, showcases this statement as it narrates the story of Janet Horne, the last woman in Scotland to be executed under witchcraft charges. Historical documents state that Janet had a mental disorder, which, due to the lack of medical knowledge of the eighteenth century, raised suspicion and prejudice. Moreover, her daughter had a physical disability, and it was used as legal evidence of her relationship with the Devil. The close reading of the novel with the use of both feminist and critical disability lenses allows me to conclude that women with disabilities, whether physical or mental, were more prone to be stigmatised. As such, they were subjected to monstrous feminine perception, which dehumanised them, rendering these women eligible for execution. This thesis highlights the invisible able-bodied norm of early modern society and draws a connection to the 21st century, where these issues persist.

Keywords: *The Last Witch of Scotland*, disability, witchcraft, monstrous feminine, social stigma, mental disorders, history of witchcraft, prejudice, feminism, witchcraft in Scotland

Introduction

To this day, the academic community has yet to reach an agreement on a definition of witchcraft and the motivations behind the extensive witch-hunting phenomenon that unfolded across Europe from the 15th to the 18th century. In his extensive inquiry into the history of witchcraft in early modern Europe, Brian Levack stated that unlike “man-hunt”, “witch-hunting” involved discovering the identity of the witches rather than their location (1995 2). Since there is no clear guide on what witches looked like, it is challenging to establish a particular pattern among those accused and prosecuted as witches. While certain beliefs about witchcraft, such as the Sabbath – group meetings of witches intended for performing harmful magic – were sustained throughout Europe, other beliefs varied significantly. Levack contends that in Scotland, the primary reason behind accusations of witchcraft was a pact with the Devil (2019 43). Subsequently, the prosecutors were looking for the signs of such a pact, which, they believed, was frequently visible on the bodies of the accused. Moreover, since the deal with the Devil required a level of naivety from its victim, the main target of the evil supernatural forces was believed to be women. This is why witchcraft was at the forefront of feminist literary critique by Christina Larner, Julian Goodare and Lyndal Roper, among others. Nevertheless, Diane Purkiss contends that despite the reasonable interest in the feminist analysis of the European witch-hunt, attributing the phenomenon of witch-hunts solely to the negative influence of patriarchy and misogyny is overly simplistic and inaccurate. To support her argument, she contends that most witnesses against the accused in the trials were, in fact, women (92). Therefore, the topic of witchcraft and witches’ identity calls for a more nuanced approach.

According to Christina Larner, most of those accused of witchcraft were women “at the bottom of the social heap” (90). Their age, occupation or lack thereof and the subsequent low economic status contributed to their marginalisation, making them more prone to

witchcraft allegations. Along with the factors mentioned above, historically, one of the biggest reasons for marginalisation has been disabilities, which David Mitchell calls “the master trope of human disqualification” (3). Oxford English Dictionary states that the first documented use of the term “disability” was in 1545, followed by the term “disabled” as an adjective and a noun in 1598¹. Despite that, Scott Eaton argues that in early modern Europe, the term “disability” was rarely used, and such a condition was instead commonly labelled as a deformity or a monstrosity (2020 816). This choice of language reflects an underlying negative perception of disabilities as inherently malevolent. Echoing this sentiment, Chris Foss asserts the enduring historical narrative linking disability with monstrosity (57). Indeed, many villains in fairy tales and literature have been depicted with some disability to highlight their malevolence. This can be seen in various famous villains who permeate the popular imagination, ranging from Captain Hook, who is missing a limb, to Voldemort, who has a facial deformity. In these cases, the disability seems to be a deviation from the established physical and mental norm and contributes to the negative image of these characters.

In the analysis of Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* (1611), Jeffrey Wilson established that the issue of people being labelled as inferior was dramatised in literature as early as the seventeenth century. Caliban, who is depicted as a “savage and deformed Slave” (Shakespeare), is a compelling example of a character whose physical body embodies rich symbolism and is a readable text. According to Wilson, the most frequent attributes that the critics have assigned to Caliban are “the devil, the monster, the humanoid, and the racial other” (146). While much of the critical research on *The Tempest* focuses on postcolonial theory and the portrayal of Caliban as the colonised Other, it is crucial to recognise how Caliban’s

¹ “Disability, N.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4620906658>. Accessed 15 June 2024

‘deformed’ physical appearance contributes to his stigmatisation, which itself acts as a disabling factor.

To closely examine the issue of disability and its socially constructed perception of inferiority, I will use the notion of social stigma as explained by Erving Goffman in 1963. According to Goffman, social stigma is “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Preface). He also argued that people often attribute numerous imperfections based on the initial one (5), which might explain why people with disabilities were believed to be more likely to perform evil. When talking about the connection between disability and monstrosity, Paul Longmore stated: “What we fear, we often stigmatise and shun and sometimes seek to destroy” (132). This is similar to the general attitude towards the alleged witches; they were feared, and only their death could prevent them from doing more harmful magic. Therefore, people with disabilities were more likely to fall victim to the witchcraft allegations since their disability signified inherent malevolence. Monica Germanà argues that the figure of the witch disrupted the social and natural order “with her shrivelled, sterile and deformed body” (65). This reiterates the message that physical deformities were frequently reasoned to be characteristics of a witch. Since legally, people could not be charged with witchcraft solely judging by their appearance, visible disabilities were considered to be signs of the pact with the Devil. King James VI believed that similarly to God’s marking his followers during baptism, the Devil also marked his worshippers with a physical mark (Levack 2019 45). Therefore, while acknowledging the gendered issue inherent in the figure of the witch, I will employ the intersection of disability studies and feminist theory to discern the underlying reasons that would help explain why some women were more prone to be targeted and prosecuted under witchcraft charges.

To explore this statement further, I will be conducting a close reading of Philip Paris’s novel *The Last Witch of Scotland* (2023) using the above-mentioned critical concepts. The

novel deals with the actual case of Janet Horne, who was officially the last person tried for witchcraft in Scotland and the United Kingdom. Apart from being the last witch to be executed, the case also attracts academic attention because of its timing. Janet Horne was executed in 1727 during the decline of the witch-hunt in Scotland. Therefore, while the main periods of execution in the 16th and 17th centuries might have been explained by religious disputes between the Catholic and Presbyterian churches or the fight for independence from England, the beginning of the 18th century is unremarkable in the context of witchcraft prosecutions (Levack 2004 233). Less than ten years after Janet's execution, in 1735, the Witchcraft Act was passed in the United Kingdom, ending the official prosecution of witches.

The singularity of Janet Horne's case underscores the significance of her trial and the reasoning behind it. It is also important to note that Janet Horne was convicted together with her teenage daughter, which was also unusual because the majority of women who were being persecuted were primarily middle-aged or old (Levack 2019 141). Notably, both main characters in the novel who are being prosecuted have different kinds of disabilities – physical and mental. The mother appears to have undiagnosed dementia, while her daughter has a physical disability; her hands and feet were burned in the fire. Both of these disabilities are used against the females in court as evidence of their relationship with witchcraft. Therefore, my research addresses how the plight of the two women in Philip Paris's *The Last Witch of Scotland* brings into focus the continuous stigmas that people with disabilities experienced in 18th-century Scotland. The research hypothesis posits an enduring historical link between concepts of disability and monstrosity, which became a ground for the exclusion of affected individuals. Using the example of witchcraft, my research intends to showcase how disabilities and their negative perception have been used to marginalise, discriminate and ultimately eliminate the people who did not fit the established white male, able-bodied norm. While the feminist perspective on the issue of the persecution of witches is prominent, Philip Paris's novel

brings up the issue of how mental and physical disabilities and disorders also play a pivotal role in the witch-hunting process. The focus on social stigma and its implication connected to witchcraft is central to my academic inquiry. Exploring the historical conception of disability during this time requires analysis of the historical sources, which is why historical fiction, in general, and the novel by Philip Paris specifically, are at the core of this research. The close reading of *The Last Witch of Scotland* will provide valuable insights into the historical construction of views on disability and their connection to the idea of the monstrous.

Since historical fiction deals with a period different from the one in which the book is written, a prominent issue concerning *The Last Witch of Scotland* must be acknowledged: how can a book written in the 21st century adequately comment on the problems of the 18th century? David Lodge addresses this issue and suggests that historical fiction can shed light on social dynamics that were ignored or hidden at the time, using a modern perspective (132). The awareness of disability and its social implications are much more salient in the 21st century than they were in the 18th century, which could contribute to uncovering the stigma around disability and its consequences for females and society at large that continue influencing women around the world. Moreover, according to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*², historical fiction authors use their works to comment on contemporary social views. For example, the first historical novel in the Western tradition, *Waverley* (1814) by Walter Scott, focused on the troubled Scottish political history of the 18th century to shed light on the ongoing social changes in Scotland in the 19th century. Another example is the novel *The Last of the Wine* (1956), where Mary Renault describes Ancient Greece and their favourable views on homosexuality. This helped the LGBTQ+ community demand equal rights in the 20th century when the book was published. Therefore, by drawing on the historical narrative in the

² Cuddon, J. A. (John Anthony). *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* / J. A. Cuddon ; Revised by M. A. R. Habib ; Associate Editors, Matthew Birchwood [and Three Others]. Edited by Rafey Habib and Matthew Birchwood, 5th ed., Wiley Blackwell, 2013, p. 334.

book, my research also intends to showcase how the social stigma that contributed to the witchcraft prosecution is still influencing the lives of people in the 21st century in other forms.

While acknowledging the disability angle, it is crucial to underscore the importance of the feminist lens in my research paper. The debate about the body and its deviance from the established norm differs for males and females. The female body and its functions play a significant role in witchcraft and the performance of magic that it entails (Purkiss 119). Because of its specific features, such as menstruation and child-bearing abilities, women's physique is more fluid than the male one; hence, it is perceived to be more dangerous. The pregnancy and nursing period defies the boundaries between bodies, making the female body uncanny and ever-shifting due to the lack of boundaries between the mother and the child. The female physique, often seen as more grotesque and boundless, challenges the concept of normalcy, akin to magic, which concerns itself with limits and their subversion. Hence, the appropriation of a woman's body is of great concern to feminist theory, and the disability theory helps shed light on how the portrayal of a woman's deformed body invokes the image of the evil Other. To discuss the latter notion in concrete terms, I will use the term "monstrous feminine", coined by Barbara Creed. This concept intertwines the issue of perceived monstrosity and its direct connection to gender. Moreover, in my research, I intend to expand the meaning to encompass the disability, which, Kevin Stagg postulates, "underpins the original category of monstrosity" (20) and is often overlooked.

While focusing primarily on film narrative, Creed discusses the portrayal of the female body and mind as monstrous, as seen in the traditional patriarchal views of a victim, which serves a particular purpose within the narrative. For horror films, this purpose is the creation of the Evil Other that needs to be eliminated by the main character. At the same time, in *The Last Witch of Scotland*, this monstrosity serves as an ultimate consequence of the stigma surrounding the physical and mental disabilities in the 18th century – legal prosecution for

witchcraft. Creed argues that “a witch is a familiar female monster; she is invariably represented as an old, ugly crone capable of monstrous acts” (1). This is undoubtedly the image that the readers get from many fairy tales and other fictional narratives. Moreover, Levack asserts that the majority of women persecuted as witches were over fifty years old – a demographic that was considered much older in comparison to contemporary perceptions of age (2004 141). Even in his poem *Tam o’ Shanter* (1790), one of the most prominent Scottish writers and poets, Robert Burns, describes a witch as a beautiful young girl called Nanny who charms the main character, Tam, with her beauty. She sides with the Devil to capture Tam, which resembles the belief that women, primarily because of their mental weaknesses, were foolish enough to side with the Devil (Goodar 288). Therefore, my academic study intends to explore concepts of abjection and monstrous feminine in their connection to disabilities and disorders.

By delving into the origins of female monstrosity, Creed contends that in the history of art and film, as much as literature, the female monsters were secondary to the male ones. Women were mostly portrayed as victims, and the only truly monstrous female figure was regarded as a witch (2). For Creed, female monstrosity stems from the body, specifically the uterus, the ability to bear children and the “maternal authority” (13) that comes with it. Creed draws on Kristeva’s theory of abjection³, which posits that certain elements must be expelled from social order and stability to be maintained. These typically include objects or concepts that evoke fear and disgust. Creed shows how the mother’s body, with its fluids such as menstruation and lactation, is associated with the abject. (ibid.). Purkiss also touches upon the issue of female monstrosity in her book *The Witch in History* and how the female body contributed to the allegations made against women. She claims, “the witch is a fantasy-image

³ Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection / Julia Kristeva ; Translated by Leon S. Roudiez*. Columbia University Press, 1982.

of the huge, controlling, scattered, polluted, leaky fantasy of the maternal body of the Imaginary” (119). In discussing the fluidity of the female body, Purkiss’s theory connects with those of Creed and Kristeva about the abject and female monstrosity commonly found in the popular imagination in the figure of the witch. While child-bearing abilities are a conventional function of the female body, there are primitive beliefs about monstrous female figures whose bodily features do not fit the norm and, therefore, are considered to be monstrous. James Campbell describes two female monstrous figures that permeate primitive folklore – one is a “toothed vagina” that can castrate, and another one is the “phallic mother” that a witch with a long nose personifies (73). The first example is directly connected to the male fear of being castrated that Creed described. In the phallic-centred patriarchal order of society, the vagina, especially the one with teeth, poses an ultimate threat (5). Although the figure of the witch is described and explored in terms of its inherent monstrosity, it is essential to note that women were not prosecuted as witches solely for possessing a reproductive system; instead, the latter contributed to the unconscious fear of the female that made them more vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. The point of this close analysis of the female body and its conventional characteristics is to show that, coupled with other reasons, the fear of castrating females contributed to the witch craze that took place in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Therefore, there is a need to discern additional, more explicit signs of monstrosity that played a role in the allegations of witchcraft.

While my research primarily focuses on the social implications of disabilities and illnesses rather than medical aspects, it is crucial to recognise that the lack of development in medical studies during the 18th century played a significant role in perpetuating social stigma. In her book, Creed also touched upon mental illnesses, mentioning how schizophrenia in the early modern period was considered to be a female illness usually called hysteria (4). Reinforcing this argument, Eaton postulates that this mental disorder was at the time treated

with “herbs, fire, exorcism and psychoanalysis” (2019 385), which was ineffective in subduing the symptoms. Some of the testimonies provided by women during their witchcraft trials suggest that specific individuals among them may have had a mental disorder. For example, Issobell Watsonne, who was prosecuted as a witch in 1590, confessed that she believed that her baby was replaced by an Evil being, so she refused to feed it and later threw it in the fire⁴. If true, such behaviour could be explained by schizophrenia or post-partum psychosis, which could have been diagnosed in modern society but, in the 18th century, were considered to be a possession by the Devil rather than a mental illness.

Similarly to the misconceptions about mental health, various physical marks that were supposed to be the Devil’s seals can now be explained medically. In his article on witchcraft and superstitions, Eaton also contends that much of the medical evidence used during the witchcraft trials could be easily explained by the advancements in medical science. For example, the Devil marks on the skin of the accused could have been presented as defects of the skin or benign moles (2019 385). This is important because various skin defects were crucial pieces of evidence that the prosecution used during the witchcraft trials, and it is also described in *The Last Witch of Scotland*. In the novel, for the Reverend of the Scottish Church, the physical aspect of the witch is the most important one because it reflects the sacrifices that the witch had to make to get particular magical abilities from the Devil. Therefore, his suspicion starts from the unusual look of the daughter of Janet, Aila, who has deformed limbs and later spreads towards the mother, who has a mental condition similar to dementia. Therefore, applying an intersectional approach that combines disability and feminist theory to historical fiction can enhance the understanding of how the disabled female body was perceived in the early 18th century.

⁴ Goodare, Julian, et al. “The Case of Issobell Watsonne.” *Survey of Scottish Witchcraft, 1563 - 1736*, University of Edinburgh. School of History, Classics and Archaeology, 18 Aug. 2010, witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/case/C/EGD/2453. Accessed 14 May 2024.

After witchcraft trials legally ended in Europe in the 18th century, they continued happening in other parts of the world, many of which stem from misconceptions about various disabilities, both physical and mental. Marion Gibson claims in her book *Witchcraft: A History in 13 Trials* that witchcraft trials continue until this day in some African countries such as Zambia, Tanzania and Malawi (226). Even though the implications of the prosecution have to do less with the religious notion of the Devil, the issue concerns the superstitions about the body that persists in these communities. This is evidence that social stigma persists worldwide and needs to be acknowledged before it can be resolved. Mitchell argues, “Literature makes disability a socially lived rather than a purely medical phenomenon” (166). Therefore, it is a powerful tool which can help expose the invisible social stigma that permeated the popular imagination throughout centuries. My paper is divided into two parts to help convey and expand on the message described in the introduction. The first part deals with the historical background and available trial documents related to the case described in *The Last Witch of Scotland*. Since the book’s genre is historical fiction, it is crucial to establish the historical context of the time described and the social attitudes towards disabilities and to show how the archetype and notion of the witch evolved in Scotland through the 17th century until the gradual downfall in the 18th century. The second, more extensive, part of the research will focus on the close reading of Philip Paris’s novel *The Last Witch of Scotland*, using disability and feminist lenses to establish viable patterns that justify the direct connection between disability and the conviction of the two main female characters.

Chapter 1. Cursed Bodies: Disability and Witch Trials in Early Modern Europe

This chapter will explore the historical context of witchcraft prosecution in Europe, focusing on the social and gender dynamics that fueled the witch hunts, the influence of religious upheavals, and the intersection of disability and its demonisation in early modern Europe. The 15th century was a turning point in European history. This was when Heinrich Kramer published the book *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), which established the groundwork for the future prosecution of many women and some men under a charge of witchcraft. The witchcraft trials officially began in Scotland in 1563, and almost half a century later, England started its fight against witches in 1604. Even though the Witchcraft Act, which legitimised the prosecutions, was repealed in 1736, Levack claims that the beliefs about witchcraft in Scotland continued until the 19th century (2004 171). This highlights the enduring nature of witchcraft beliefs. Witches were proclaimed to be women who, due to being the weaker sex, were fooled by Satan into making a deal with him in exchange for magical abilities. The magic itself was not regarded as evil, as many educated men practised it and claimed they could subjugate the Devil. Instead, the crime that alleged witches were charged with was being a servant to the Devil, which was considered a far worse crime than performing magic itself (ibid. 3).

As the prosecution was launched nationally, the witches were increasingly seen as monstrous figures who had to be destroyed to restore the natural order. It is significant to point out that the ideologies surrounding witchcraft and the witch archetype did not arise independently. Instead, they were a consequence of the religious turmoil experienced by Scotland and the whole of Europe during the 16th century—the Reformation. The new Protestant church emerged, and the people of the formerly one faith were divided. These faith-based tensions culminated in the Thirty Years' War, a protracted series of battles in central Europe, and the subsequent demonisation of individuals practising opposing faiths. Scotland adopted the Presbyterian structure, and the Kirk sessions gained much influence over the local

population (Royal Society of Edinburgh). They participated in establishing “dangerous patterns” (Goodare 291) that helped to identify and prosecute alleged witches with special intensity during the witch craze, a so-called period of increased moral panic. Catholic inclinations were also viewed suspiciously during that time in Scotland, potentially laying the groundwork for subsequent witchcraft allegations. (Levack 2019 109). This explains the massive executions that followed, as Jerome Cohen claims that monsters that permeate the public imagination usually embody the fears and anxieties of the times they are born into (62). He also argues that political and ideological disparities contribute to the monstrous representation of certain marginalised groups within communities (66). This might be the reason why Europe’s religious turmoil increased the vulnerability of the individuals who belonged to these groups and their subsequent prosecution for witchcraft, coupled with other evidence of their malevolent practices.

The historical novel *The Highland Witch* (2010) by Susan Fletcher exemplifies the abovementioned point. It discusses the witchcraft prosecution during the Jacobite Rebellion in the Scottish Highlands. The main character, Corrag, is charged with witchcraft because she was one of the few who helped the Highland clan of Glencoe survive King William’s attack in 1682. She is also targeted for being different from other people. She is smaller than usual adults, which makes her reflect on the meaning of being different in society, drawing parallels between herself and Highlands: “beauty was in differences, in the sights that most folk did not like, or was fearful of” (100). As the plot unfolds, it is evident that what people fear, alongside witchcraft, is the violence and power of the Highland clans, who do not speak English and are known for their brutality. Humans, threatened by the forces they cannot understand or control, seek to punish perceived monsters around them (Mittman and Hensel 3), drawing boundaries between themselves and Others.

In *Demonolatry* (1595), Nicolas Remy first brings forward the fact that the sign of witchcraft can be visibly seen on the body: “Devil brands and seals those whom he has newly claimed [...] marking them [...] on that part of the body which was anointed by the priest on the day of their baptism” (qtd. in Levack 2004 86). He then goes further to claim that the so-called Devil’s mark did not bleed, which is reiterated in *The Highland Witch*: “Men prod women with metal pins, seeking it” (22). This method was called prickling, and it was convenient since it was not legally considered torture but effectively was one. Royal Society of Edinburgh claims that, compared to the rest of Europe, Scottish clergymen took a particular interest in finding the Devil’s mark on the skin of the alleged witches. For prosecutors, the mark was an “empirical indication of supernatural intervention” (Levack 2019 45). They were looking for abnormalities of the skin that could indicate the victim’s connection to witchcraft. McDonald insists that nowadays, the “Devil’s marks” could be explained by malformed moles or naevi and various skin lesions (507). The prickers were successful in their vocation, which endangered those with skin disorders. The fact that the marks did not bleed while pricked could be explained by the fact that the pins were sometimes used in the insensitive parts of the skin, such as old scars (510). Therefore, Eaton points out that not only the witches’ malevolent actions were under scrutiny, but also their bodies, which “functioned as a readable text” (2020 816).

Physical appearance and its relation to evil were prominent as early as 1592, when Shakespeare’s *Richard III* was performed, drawing a clear connection between Richard’s deformity and his evil character. He characterises himself as “Deformed, unfinished sent before my time” (1.1.20), which he later uses as a reason for his malignant nature: “Since I cannot prove a lover, / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain.” (1.1.28–30). Jerome Cohen argues that Richard’s “deviant morality” (66) was reflected in his physical appearance, akin to the Devil’s mark, which was evidence of witches’

pact with the Devil. Richard III clearly had a physical disability; however, Turner and Stagg contend that during the early modern period, the notion of disability was encompassed within other classifications, particularly deformity and monstrosity (4). According to the *Dictionary of Word Origins*⁵, the word monster is influenced by the Latin *monstrare*, which means to show. Thus, the word's origin implies that the visual component is the most important in identifying a so-called monster. It is crucial to point out that the term monstrosity was not limited to the description of physical deviance but was also used as a social metaphor to criticise morals, religion, and politics (Turner and Stagg 4). For example, Douglas Baynton explained how Edmund Burke tried to unveil the monstrosity of the French Revolution⁶ by contrasting the “ugly, murderous sans-culottes hags [...] and the soft femininity of Marie-Antoinette” (34). In this case, Burke's selection of the word hag, synonymous with the witch, as the embodiment of female evil is deliberate rather than arbitrary. According to Creed, monsters are highly gendered, and the witch is a popular figure to which female monstrosity is attributed (2). While trying to identify how female physical appearance might contribute to the socially and culturally constructed monstrosity, Purkiss argues that it “represents a diseased body of early medicine” (119). Indeed, much of the narrative of *The Highland Witch* focuses on bodily sensations and the female physique of the main character, whom the community sees with suspicion. At some point, right before the clan massacre, Corrag says, “I listened to my womb, my belly, my breast” (23), which was a critical part of her alleged witchcraft. There is a clear connection to the body and its female parts, which gives the main character foresight.

Turner and Stagg contend that although the term disability (or deformity) was traditionally applied to physical limitations, contemporary perspectives have broadened this scope to encompass many more impairments, such as deafness, blindness, cognitive

⁵ Shipley, Joseph T. *Dictionary of Word Origins* / by Joseph T. Shipley. Littlefield, Adams & co, 1979, p. 234.

⁶ In his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Charles Dickens also portrays the revolutionaries as monstrous, especially during the Carmagnole, the dance of the revolutionaries. The author describes how an ordinary innocent dance was “delivered over to all devilry” (330).

challenges, various mental health conditions, and even impairments that are typically more prevalent among older individuals (3). The authors claim that while these disorders and illnesses are not medically considered and categorised as disabilities, they do have the effects of being socially disabling and can inflict stigma and prejudice. This perspective resonates with crip theory, as articulated by Robert McRuer, which advocates for a specific social model of disabilities. By shifting focus from the medical implications of disabilities to the social barriers and attitudes towards disabilities, it challenges the cult of able-bodies established in Western society. McRuer claims that “Able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things” (1). By obscuring the hegemony of normalcy, the negative consequences of exclusion from this category are also hidden. Combined with queer studies, crip theory seeks to expose the concept of normalcy and its hegemony which marginalises those who do not conform to societal norms. In her essay on being a woman of colour, Gloria Anzaldua argues: “because we do not fit, *we are a threat*” (209). This sentiment echoes the experiences of women prosecuted for witchcraft; due to the stigma they carried, they were considered a hazard.

In the early modern period, together with physical disabilities, many mental illnesses were misrepresented and considered part of the monstrous nature of individuals. While not visible, many of the neurological disorders were still regarded as monstrous and, in some cases, were attributed to the feminine monstrosity. For example, epilepsy was considered “suffocation of the uterus” (Juárez-Almendros 118), and “demonic temptations” (ibid.), which echoes the connection between the women and the Devil that alleged witches were accused of. *The Highland Witch* uses the trope of neurological impairments and their misconception in the 17th century. Corrag’s mother, Corra, was also charged with witchcraft and executed, and it is hinted at various times in the narrative that she might have had a mental disorder or epilepsy: “My mother took her body out into the yard. She roared with two voices” (51). Further on, we can

see Corra having a seizure that is similar to an epileptic one: “Corra fell on the floor and arched her back up. She had the second sight this way – the sight I didn’t have” (53). Since epileptic seizures affect the brain, this could explain the second sight mentioned. Moreover, Maxwell-Stuart claims that the belief in second sight was quite common in the Highlands, so it was attributed to a great variety of people (87) and might have been used to explain mental disorders. There are a few other instances that might suggest a mental illness, for example: “A cloud came down upon her. It made her hiss in the cottage. She would run out into the rain to curse and roar” (63). All of this behaviour made Corra a threat to her community, so she was charged with witchcraft and executed.

As is shown, all of the women who were convicted under witchcraft pretences in *The Highland Witch* suffered from some disability or disorder, making them prone to social judgment and subsequent allegations of witchcraft. Prejudice permeated the legal system during the witchcraft trials in Scotland and the whole United Kingdom, which is why various physical disabilities and neurological conditions were associated with the demonic. This is a consequence of a more extensive system of superstition common in pre-modern society due to underdeveloped medicine. Many doctors of the 16th and 17th centuries were reluctant to admit their failure to cure the disease, blaming evil for their professional misgivings (McDonald 199). Levack claims that even though, with time, medical professionals managed to weaken beliefs in witchcraft, the superstition connecting illnesses with black magic endured (1995 284). While natural causes of some illnesses and disorders were claimed to have been discovered, the belief that the Devil worked through nature persisted (ibid.). In his book *Short Discoverie* (1612), an English doctor stated: “generall madnesse of this age, which ascribeth unto witchcraft whatsoever falleth out unknowne or strange unto a vulgar sense” (Cotta). In his work, he paid particular attention to the myths surrounding mental disorders, claiming that what was considered to be hysteria in women was, in fact, a series of “epilepticall fits” (37).

While the issue of disability and its unfavourable perception might initially appear universal rather than gendered, there is a notable distinction in how disabilities are perceived in males and females. To illustrate the prejudice against women with disabilities or atypical physical appearances, one can examine a prominent historical example: the trial of the Witches of Pendle in Lancashire in 1612. This trial coincided with John Cotta's efforts to debunk the myth of witchcraft and its purported effects on human health. The trial gained much attention and was described in the book *Discoverie of Witchcraft* 1613 by Thomas Potts, an English clerk. There, he gathered the evidence and witness statements against the alleged witches, ten of whom were executed as a result of the trial. One of the prosecuted, Elizabeth Sawyer, said right before her execution: "And why on me? why should the envious world/Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?/'Cause I am poor, deform'd, and ignorant,/And like a bow buckled and bent together..." (Potts). As we can see, Sawyer considers her deformity the primary source of her accusations. Another woman executed in Lancashire, Elizabeth Device, apparently suffered from a facial deformity since birth and was described by Potts as an "odious Witch [that] was branded with a preposterous marke" (ibid.). This woman is mentioned in a historical novel, *The Familiars* (2019) by Stacey Halls, described as follows: "a beast of slattern with one eye on Heaven and the other on Hell" (154). Such a portrayal presents her not as a human but as a monster, which implies that human ethics do not have to be followed when executing her. Potts considers her facial deformity to be a mark, supposedly made by the Devil, for her witchcraft. The religious connotation is reiterated in the novel as well: her facial deformity places her in a liminal position between Heaven and Hell. Turner and Stagg argue that physical stigma is a vital part of humanistic scholarship, and the attitudes towards people affected by these issues determine "what it means to be human, how we can respond ethically to difference and how different societies have given value to human life" (2). The connection to witchcraft and the execution of people who appeared to look and behave differently from

the established male norm shows how widespread the stigma was and how demonised people with disabilities were in the early modern period.

Potts's record of the trial is one of the most critical examples of how physical appearances and their stigma were used against the female victims, and he states it explicitly. In a description of another accused, Grace Sowerbutts, it is stated: "for the wrinkles of an old wiu'es face is good euidence to the Iurie against a Witch" (Potts). In his work, he also discussed male involvement in the trial, albeit only in the capacity of witnesses. For example, John Law stated during the trial that he was "transformed beyond the course of Nature" (ibid.) by one of the witches. As we can see, illnesses and physical impairments that could not be explained medically were ascribed to the results of witchcraft – either as its victim or perpetrator, where the latter was almost always a woman. Interestingly enough, Richard III and his deformity described above are attributed to the harmful effects of a curse by "Edward's wife, that monstrous witch" (Shakespeare, 3.4.72). Therefore, while Richard himself is a victim of social stigma, he is also a victim of a being that is more monstrous than him – a witch. Physical disabilities that were not congenital but a result of an accident were also perceived differently in males and females. For example, in *The Highland Witch*, the protagonist's grandmother suffered an accident, leaving her hand deformed by the fire. Later, this was used against her in the witchcraft trial: "They said her hand like a hoof was His mark on her. Proof, they tutted, of your sin" (45). When it comes to similar male disabilities, Gibson argues, the image of a "one-legged veteran" (91) was a positive and even heroic representation of men who were injured in battles, and their deformities were a sign of honour. Therefore, these examples suggest a prevailing belief in the early modern period about the direct connection between deformities, witchcraft and gender.

Christianity also played a role in the different perceptions of men's and women's bodies. According to Jeffrey Wigelsworth, the physical appearance of women and their sexual

organs diverts from God's design, and men are closer to God because they are the direct descendants of Christ (80). Following that logic, the female body was considered inherently monstrous and more prone to evil influences, which is the main accusation that was put forth during the witchcraft trials. Baynton also suggests that in the early modern period, the social reality in Europe was mainly constructed through the opposition between natural and monstrous, the natural being the one that was constructed by Nature and the Creator (35), which, as I established earlier, adhered to the male norm than the female one. Therefore, any additional physical differences in women served as telltale signs of their inherent monstrous nature. Interestingly, Larner asserts that in the mountainous regions of the Highlands, where the Kirk of Scotland lacked authority, there were no instances of witch-hunting (80). This notion is further reinforced in *The Highland Witch*, where the protagonist lives in Glencoe, in the middle of the Highlands, and is later accused of witchcraft by officials from Edinburgh. This underscores the influence enforced by the Kirk over the local community and the circulation of superstitions.

Interestingly, according to the beliefs of common people and physicians alike, the Devil was more disposed to hurt the mind rather than the body (MacDonald 200). Just like in the case of epilepsy, a lot of neurological conditions were misinterpreted as possession by harmful spirits. People with these conditions were also seen as monstrous, a view explained by Kristeva's theory of the abject, which Barbara Creed uses to describe the monstrous feminine. According to Kristeva, the abject is something disconcerting that disrupts "identity, system, order" (4), much like mental illnesses. An example of that could be Jean Brown⁷, a woman prosecuted for witchcraft in 1706 in Dumfries. She was charged with devilry and blasphemy and confessed that spirits frequently visited her. She was allegedly married to one, and they

⁷ Goodare, Julian, et al. "The Case of Jean Brown." *Survey of Scottish Witchcraft, 1563 - 1736*, University of Edinburgh. School of History, Classics and Archaeology, 18 Aug. 2010, witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/case/C/EGD/2453. Accessed 14 May 2024.

were planning to take her to Heaven with them. It is stated in her file by Goodare et al. that the case is unusual to characterise, especially considering that it was not part of a national witch-hunt. Instead, it was a local incident, which indicates that she was singularly targeted, probably for having delusions that were not medically recognised.

While talking about mental and neurological disorders, it is probable that the social stigma around those spread not only to females but also towards males. There were cases when men were prosecuted for witchcraft, and there is a possibility they might have also been suffering from some impairment that made them prone to social abjection and judgment. Nevertheless, Wigelsworth contends, the issue is still inherently gendered and directed against females and the essence of womanhood. According to his argument, as witchcraft was primarily associated with the renunciation of God, and since women were believed to be more susceptible to it, men who committed such transgressions were frequently accused of adopting feminine characteristics (82). Hence, witchcraft beliefs help demonstrate that the ultimate evil and the monstrosity were perceived to be inherently feminine (Goodare 308). Consequently, when women were affected by certain illnesses, disorders or disabilities, it contributed to the construction of their monstrosity and was frequently used as evidence of their evil nature. Baynton claims that disability has a long history of being used as a reason for discrimination, especially against minority groups and women (33). According to his research, disability was one of the factors in the decisions concerning who is entitled to rights and who is not. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the claim persisted that women were disabled by nature, and that is why they could not have the same rights as the people who fulfilled the white male norm (ibid.). Upon identifying the problematic link between disability and femininity, women initiated their fight against it. However, instead of advocating for equal rights for both women and individuals with disabilities, they asserted their non-disability status to justify their entitlement to rights (51). This example highlights the ongoing struggle of the disabled

community to be recognised and represented in society as equals rather than being perceived as inferior or as subjects of monstrosity in the popular imagination.

Despite much progress that has been achieved in Western societies, there are still problematic links between female monstrosity and disability that can be traced in media. For example, the film *The Witches* (2020) has received backlash from disability community for portraying the main villain, The Grand Witch, with limb abnormality. This, activists claim, contributes to the negative perception of people with this disability⁸, especially considering that the villain in the book the film is based on does not appear to have such abnormality. In Roald Dahl's novel, published in 1981, the witches have distinct hands, but only because their fingernails are different: "about two inches long, those claws, and sharp at the ends" (Dahl). The decision to portray the main villain with abnormal limbs was probably made to highlight her monstrous nature through 'grotesque physicality'. This example showcases the persisting link between disability and monstrosity. Body still serves as a "readable text" on which societies project images of what is acceptable and what is not, similar to what happened during the witch craze in Scotland and Europe as a whole.

⁸ Rubin, Rebecca. Warner Bros. Apologizes After 'The Witches' Sparks Backlash From People With Disabilities. *Variety*. 4 Nov 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/the-witches-backlash-warner-bros-apologizes-1234823081>. Accessed 19 May 2024.

Chapter 2. *The Last Witch of Scotland*: The Body as a Text

In this chapter, I will conduct a textual analysis of Philip Paris's novel to determine how its narrative portrays stigma and the monstrous feminine through the figure of the witch. *The Last Witch of Scotland*, published in 2023, is a historical novel about a real person, Janet Horne, who was officially the last woman convicted and executed in Scotland under the Witchcraft Act. The blurb of its edition by Black&White Publishing says, "Being a woman was her only crime". Nevertheless, to attribute her execution solely to her gender would be simplifying the history and glossing over some of the critical issues aside from the general misogyny of 18th-century Scotland.

In 2013, Bayton argued that "disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write" (52), and the claim still holds. Aside from merely being a woman, Janet Horne was suffering from neurological disorders that ultimately contributed to her prosecution alongside her daughter, who had a visible physical disability. The inscription in the book is more specific, as it says: "dedicated to all those who suffer persecution because of their appearances", pointing out the prejudicial nature of the witch-hunt, directed foremost against those who did not fit the established norm of the society. Examples of the negative portrayal of people with disabilities, such as found in *Richard III*, Mitchell contends, help connect these limiting literary portrayals with demeaning attitudes towards people with disabilities (18). He argues, "One cannot narrate the story of a healthy body or national reform movement without the contrastive device of disability to bear out the symbolic potency of the message" (64). Breaking from this tradition, *The Last Witch of Scotland* portrays disabled people not as mere contrasts to able-bodied notions of progress but as central figures, reversing the tendency. The novel narrates the historical downfall of the witchcraft persecution in Scotland from the perspective of the marginalised minority, shedding light on their undervalued role, even within liberal movements.

There is not much information on the real case of Janet Horne, aside from a few key facts used by Philip Paris in the novel. Janet and her daughter Aila moved to a small town in the Highlands called Dornoch, where they were later prosecuted for witchcraft in 1727. Soon after, Janet was executed, but her daughter managed to escape. The date is essential, considering the fact that their conviction happened long after the national witch-hunt launched throughout Scotland, the last one ending in 1662, with the gradual decline in the legal interest in witchcraft afterwards. At the beginning of the 18th century, only a few cases were tried, and those were relatively isolated in time and place (Larner 60). Furthermore, this point is emphasised by Maxwell-Stuart, who contends that at the beginning of the 18th century, people in Scotland were rapidly losing interest in witchcraft and witches (206). Given these facts, the case of Janet Horne becomes particularly puzzling as to what could have instigated the suspicion of witchcraft. The close reading of this book aims to establish possible reasons for their prosecution.

There are relatively few historical facts about Janet Horne and her daughter. In the book's afterword, it is mentioned that Janet was said to turn her daughter into a donkey, which made it easier for her to travel and perform witchcraft. This fact is probably derived from Charles Sharpe's book *A Historical Account of a Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland* (1844), where he states that Janet: "was accused of having ridden upon her daughter, transformed into a poney, and shod by the devil, which made the girl lame, both in hands and feet" (199). According to Sharpe's account, the locals widely believed in the theory of donkey transformation because Aila's limbs looked like donkey hooves. According to this belief, Aila's physical disability was the consequence of the pact with the Devil her mother made. There is, however, a natural explanation for the state of her hands and feet. Cowan and Henderson were able to retrieve letters from Countess of Sutherland to Sharpe, in which she claims to have met Aila and that her deformity is a consequence of a fire that she suffered as a

child (206). Sharpe later goes on to explain that Aila's son, whom he saw later, had the same physical condition (ibid.). This suggests that Aila may also have had a genetic condition that predisposed her to have malformed limbs. The predisposition to attribute fire damage to the body to Devil's influence is not unique. One of the characters of *The Highland Witch* suffered the same treatment after being injured in the fire and was drowned, a method of execution frequently used in England. The prosecution was convinced that she also had made a deal with the Devil and had gotten the injuries from that. This belief goes back to the Christian tradition of baptism. It was believed that the same way God marked a person, so did the Devil (Levack 2019 45). This prejudice is featured in *The Last Witch of Scotland*, as the novel reflects on the superstitions about disabilities that permeated popular imagination in 18th-century Scotland.

According to the novel, Aila suffered fire damage to her limbs when she tried to save her father from a burning building. This is how she describes it: "Two of the fingers on my left hand had fused together, and they'd all contracted so much that the hand was almost useless" (33). After the father's death, the family was forced to move to Dornoch, which intensified Aila's anxiety about her disfigured limbs and how the community would perceive them. Aila states that upon their arrival, she was surprised by the superstitions that still existed there, especially towards her disability: "People didn't want any physical contact; children were frightened and adults either wary or repulsed" (75). Shortly after moving towns, Aila experienced social stigma because of her disability, which plays out on two levels once we delve into the definitions and origins of the term itself. According to the Oxford English Dictionary⁹, the word stigma was first used in 1596, and it meant "a mark of disgrace or infamy" and "a brand", which implies a degree of physicality involved. Goffman argues that this word was used to refer to the signs on the body that intended to reveal something unusual

⁹ "Stigma, N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, September 2023.
<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=stigma>. Accessed 20 May 2024.

and negative about the person's morality (1), much like the Devil's mark found on the skin of the witch.

It is important to note that the stigma does not necessarily have a negative connotation. In Christian tradition, for example, the word *stigmata*, a synonym for stigma, meant the mark on Christ's body, and the appearance of such *stigmata* on people's bodies was considered a holy sign (*ibid*). The so-called Devil's mark that the church officials were using as evidence against alleged witches in court, therefore, may be an inversion of the *stigmata*. Nowadays, Goffman postulates, there are three main types of stigma: a physical one, one connected to a person's character and mental disorders, and a stigma connected to race, religion and descent (4). All the stigmas listed above are socially damaging and are widely used to exclude people with an "undesired difference" (5). Because Aila is stigmatised by her community, she is also excluded from it. At one point, she confesses to her horse Abel that it is the only creature who "sees beyond my disfigurement" (29). Aila is wary of the special attention, so she wears thick gloves to avoid her disability being seen. Mitchell contends that the prevalent expectation for the disability community is to hide their disabilities and "de-emphasise their difference" (3), which inherently conveys the message that these disabilities deviate from the norm and warrant a negative perception.

Aila starts to attend the local Kirk together with her mother, and Reverend McNeil notices her disfigurement, making a subsequent judgment about it. He immediately considers Aila with suspicion, which is evident in the first church scene in the book: "Then [minister's eyes] alighted on me, and I felt a physical jolt upon my body" (57). He then delivers his sermon, which is centred on the evil and the witches, instilling fear in the community. His particular focus seems to lie in the Devil Marks on the skin of the alleged witches that appear when "imps feed at their breast" (57). Feeding the Devil's creatures was a common belief and one of the many reasons for the Devil's marks to appear on the bodies of alleged witches. This is

connected to the topic of a familiar, usually an animal, that the witch would turn into or have as a companion given by the Devil himself, “a material embodiment of the Demonic pact” (Parish 135). Beliefs in animal companions of the witches contributed to the monstrous portrayals of the latter, diminishing their human characteristics and rendering them almost animalistic in demeanour and essence. Specifically, the image of women breastfeeding domestic animals instead of children disrupted the societal conventions (Parish 141) and unveiled their believed female monstrosity. The animal companion fantasy that endured in the minds of clergymen is the example of the encoded juxtaposition of the natural mother who is feeding Christ and the demonic mother feeding the Devil’s imps. It was believed that these creatures fed on the blood or the breastmilk of the mother, which, in both cases, invoked the image of the abject, where female bodily fluids are features as repulsive and serve an evil purpose.

While McNeil’s suspicion of witchcraft initially falls on Aila, he soon begins to suspect Janet as well. In one of the scenes, he comes to their house to accuse them of witchcraft, more to instil fear than to pursue legal action. McNeil cannot arrest the Horne family at the mere stage of suspicion, but he warns them that he has enough evidence to admit them to the court. The proof of witchcraft, he claims, lies in Janet’s unconventional behaviour that suggests her being in contact with the Devil. While describing the actual case of Janet Horne’s execution, Lerner describes her as “confused and senile” (78), the reason for that being the belief that at the moment of her execution, she thought the fire was lit to warm her up. This fact is also described by Sharpe, who claimed that Horne was cold because of the weather, so the fire provided her with great relief right before it consumed her (200). Thus, her confusion, which is stated by multiple separate sources, can be a sign of a neurological disorder possibly connected to her old age.

In *The Last Witch of Scotland*, it is evident that Janet Horne has dementia. On numerous occasions, Aila voices her concerns towards her mother's memory and distorted perception of reality. One night, she cannot find her mother and looks for her. When she finally sees her, Janet is confused, "almost childlike in her manner" (35), and Aila is forced to take care of her, even to feed on various occasions. Janet's short-term memory also seemed to have suffered significantly, which is another sign of dementia: "There had been an increasing number of incidents recently where she seemed to forget what she was about to say or do" (104). Dementia is not an uncommon disorder to occur in older people, and considering the fact that a lot of the prosecuted women were older, it is possible that their confusion was used against them in the trial. Juárez-Almendros claims that both ableism and ageism stem from a similar system of oppression and that ageing exacerbates societal biases against women (84). He draws a parallel between the societal treatment that older people and people with disabilities might receive, which is, in both cases, "repulsion, alienation and invisibility" (ibid).

At some point in the book, the Horne family meets travelling artists who come to Dornoch from Edinburgh and soon play a significant role in the narrative. From their description, we can establish that they also deviate from the norm in one way or another. Jack is haunted by visions of his mother's execution for witchcraft; Sim has a dark past of being a hitman in Glasgow; Bess rejects taking on a traditional female role and does not have kids or husbands; Ellen used to be a sex worker; and Hector has a notably distinct physical appearance. This is how Aila comments on his bodily presentation: "he appeared to have no hair anywhere" (99). At one point, she also feels intimidated by Sim but quickly reprimands herself: "for I had complained often enough about being judged solely upon physical characteristics" (101). The group also travels with a teenage girl, Malie, who was orphaned. Because of her small physical complexion and ginger hair, she also raises suspicion from the

Reverend McNeil, and he says: “such a colour of hair... it’s the sign of a witch” (230). At some point, Aila admits that it is hard not to judge people by their physical appearance. She even ironically ponders why Kirk never suspected the troupe of witchcraft: “I would have thought they provided him with an ideal target, such strange, evil people living in the parish” (209). The rationale behind Aila's thinking is her acknowledgement of the different kinds of social stigmas the travelling group carries, which inevitably makes them outcasts of society. They do not fit the norm of society; moreover, because of their previous occupation, Sim and Ellen would have been stigmatised not only socially but physically. In early modern Europe, stigma also used to be directly cut or burned into the skin to differentiate and downcast the people who were murderers, thieves and sex workers (Goffman 1).

Thus, all of the main characters in the book are portrayed as deviating from the established norm in one way or another. By positioning people who would be considered as Others in the centre of the narrative, the meaning of the norm is reconfigured. This allows readers to view people who would be considered dangerous or repulsive as the story's protagonists, getting the readers to empathise and identify with them. In doing so, *The Last Witch of Scotland* defies what Davis called “the hegemony of normalcy” (10) that can be seen in most Western literary works. According to him, normal is a configuration that depends on the historical, cultural, and religious contexts and dictates what is acceptable and what is not (ibid.). Moreover, many literary narratives that feature disabled characters eventually bring these characters to normalcy, even if they are unable to do so, eliminating them, like, for example, Richard III, who is killed at the end. This issue stems from the fact that over the centuries, people have tried to ascribe some higher meaning to disabilities and portray their “hypersymbolic nature” (Mitchell 16), which resulted in the majority of negative connotations across literary narratives. In *The Last Witch of Scotland*, the main characters, rather than being “marked with ideological meaning” (Davis 12), are portrayed as ordinary people, reconfiguring

the norm of that literary universe and highlighting another way of perceiving disabilities apart from monstrous or metaphorical.

While initially, Janet and Aila do not raise suspicion of witchcraft from the local people aside from the Reverend, they start being wary of the two women. The reason for that is the fact that McNeil started interrogating the local community because he “wanted to know whether anyone had unusual marks upon their body” (112). After that, slowly, people started to avoid having any contact with the Horne family, fearing to be associated with witchcraft by the church. Given the strong influence of the Kirk of Scotland over people’s lives, as established in the first chapter, it is unsurprising how easily people’s opinions could be swayed by it. Such excessive influence of the church over people and its tragic consequences is not a unique event that happened in Dornoch in 1727. It was also known to be a reason for one of the famous witchcraft prosecutions in history – Salem’s witch trials of 1692. In 1953, Arthur Miller wrote a historical play called *The Crucible* about this trial. The story revolves around the execution of women who were believed to be witches, which the writer described as “one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history” (2). While focusing on the 17th century, Miller used his play to indirectly criticise the politics of the United States, drawing parallels between the witch-hunt of the early modern period and the hunt for Communists during the Cold War. This is a controversial subject, and Cristine L. Krueger claims that the parallels between witches and communists “erase material particularity in favour of the ideological construct of the victim as feminized other” (43). Besides the controversy, the core of Miller’s parallel is the fear instilled in people by power structures, whether governmental or religious and the aspect of mob mentality that bred and sustained the suspicions.

This is how Sogliuzzo describes the mob mentality in connection to the Salem witch trials: “Part of a population given to lawlessness, its hostility focused on the destruction of a particular scapegoat through fear and hysteria, resulting in the financial ruin or deaths of a

number of its citizens” (366). This description also applies to the situation that unfolded in Dornoch, as Horne family effectively became a scapegoat, and a victim of “fanatical Othering” (Awan, 2). Miller argues that the mob mentality is a trope widely used by the far Right parties all over the world, and they still operate on fear, creating a subjective reality that slowly adopts “a holy resonance” (Miller, quoted in Awan 5). Brown argues that fear is a useful emotion not only for controlling large masses of people but also for perpetuating the continuous stigmatisation of people for being different; yet, it is not a natural response to a stigma but an acquired one (150). This seems to suggest that stigma is a highly social phenomenon directly connected to mob mentality, as it arises from collective social attitudes and behaviours toward people with disabilities, and fear is its vital component. When Janet and Aila are summoned to the Kirk for questioning, the Minister of Dornoch repeatedly mentions this feeling: “the fears within the local community that you are involved in witchcraft” (213), and “people fear you are conversing with the Devil” (216). During the questioning, it becomes clear that his primary evidence for their connection to witchcraft is linked to women’s physical and mental differences. Aila is accused of being “tall for a woman”, and Janet is accused of reciting curses as she was seen multiple times talking to herself. The women are let go after questioning, but the following day, they are apprehended after being seen with witch potions, which were herbal remedies for Aila’s burned hands.

Swiftly, the women are transported to prison to await their trial, and Janet, due to her illness, is confused about their whereabouts. When she asks Aila why they are in prison, the daughter replies: “Because we sound different... Because I look different...” (236). Therefore, she immediately connects the incarceration to their social stigma, which proves to be correct. During the trial, the primary evidence of the prosecution is Aila’s deformed limbs and her mother’s confused state. At some point, the prosecution asks Aila to take off her boots to showcase her burned feet: “Let the people see with their own eyes the Devil’s work upon her

body” (258). Whether people in the courtroom actually believed that the Devil marked her feet and hands is unclear, but due to the fear and the prevailing power of church officials, they were led to accept it as accurate. Brown claims that physical disabilities are one of the most stigmatised because of their extreme visibility and because they are an abnormality that is often unchangeable (148). That is why Aila’s abnormal limbs were used in court as evidence of her connection with the Devil. The matters were complicated by the fact that accused women were generally not allowed to speak in court, so they could not defend themselves against the accusations: “This means that unless she had a significant amount of money or an influential male willing to speak on her behalf, a woman could face a huge challenge in proving her innocence” (238). Such a claim brings into focus a question of class as well, as poor women were more likely to be marginalised and had less social and economic protection. Moreover, this gendered legal issue is reiterated in *The Highland Witch*. After being accused of witchcraft, Corrag could not speak up to defend herself and did not have any material possessions, so she had to tell her story to the male priest, who could relay her situation to the officials.

In another Scottish historical novel, *Hear No Evil* (2022), a young deaf woman is tried for allegedly killing her infant son in 1817. Due to her disability, she has to trust a man who knows sign language to tell her story. At some point, her disadvantage is clearly stated: “It is not God who says what will happen to Jean. It is a group of men who look down on her because she is deaf and poor and a woman” (307). Even though the main female character is not accused of being a witch in this particular context, she suffers stigma and prejudice not only because of her gender but also because of her low economic status and the disability she has, just like the alleged witches were a century earlier. The book is preoccupied with the status of disabled females in early 19th-century Scotland and the widespread belief that deaf people had lower intelligence than non-disabled people. Smith stated in her author’s note: “There is still a long way to go to achieve meaningful equality” (436). Therefore, in the three cases, women are

being unjustly accused of a crime, but due to their gender and difference in appearance, they could not defend themselves in court. This, Krueger claims, sets a dangerous precedent and ultimately defines “women’s relationship with the law as traumatic” (26).

As the trial proceeds, the prosecutor’s attention shifts towards Janet. She is asked to recite God’s prayer, but because of her confused state, she fails to do so and is proclaimed guilty of witchcraft. It was believed at the time that witches could not recite God’s words, as they had previously entered into a deal with the Devil. That is why, when Janet missed a few verses, Revered McNeil shouted: “WITCH! The Bible is clear – *thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*” (271). Notably, he uses an actual excerpt from the Bible, Exodus 22:18, which indeed states that the witches have to die. Nevertheless, the issue is that the translation from Hebrew into English was done in 1611 under the rule of King James VI, who believed in witches and the harmful magic they performed. James VI was also the leading figure in the history of Scottish witchcraft. Levack states that James VI wrote *Daemonologie* in 1603, which became the principal guide and foundation for most Scottish legal actions against witchcraft, as it detailed the crime and provided prosecution recommendations (2019 34).

A little more than a decade earlier, one of the most extensive witch trials in Scotland took place in North Berwick in 1590, with James VI once again playing a central role as the primary instigator of the prosecution. His belief in witchcraft and its malevolent consequences was primarily shaped by Danish traditions, mainly because his bride was the daughter of the Danish King. Her ship could not travel to Scotland because of the bad weather and the stormy sea, which made James VI suspect that witchcraft was at play. Sure enough, the guilty party was found – it was an older woman, Agnes Sampson, who, under torture, confessed to the crime and allegedly had the Devil’s mark on her body (ibid. 35). The context of this period was charged with suspicion and prejudice against malevolent magical practises in general and the witches in particular, so there is no wonder Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was performed around that

time, in 1606. It tells the story of a Scottish general who was convinced by the witches that he was supposed to be the King of Scotland, and quickly, a senseless massacre ensued.

Influenced by the beliefs in witchcraft prevalent during his time, James VI oversaw the English translation of the Bible to align with his concerns. That was why the Hebrew word that refers to “the use of magic for the manipulation of situations or circumstances” that more accurately translates to a “sorcerer” or a “sorceress” was translated as a “witch”. Nevertheless, these two translations are not equivalent. Sorcerer, a wizard, is a person, usually an educated male, who practises magic in its broader sense. On the other hand, a witch is a person, usually a woman from an underprivileged background, who practises harmful magic and engages in a pact with the Devil (Levack 2019 43). The distinction in this case is crucial, as most European legal systems recognised the two crimes as separate entities (ibid.). Subsequently, such a partial English translation of the Biblical verse was widely used in trials as supporting evidence, targeting the marginalised groups of the society instead of the educated, well-established and mostly male performers of sorcery.

After the two women were convicted, they were brought back to their prison cells. Aila manages to escape, urging her mother to follow her, but Janet says that because of her illness, she would put both of them in danger, so she had to stay. The following day, she is burned publicly, and Aila, after witnessing it, decides to move to Ireland with Jack, one of the travelling artists. Once there, she narrates the change that she witnessed: “No one tried to link my injuries to anything other than what they were, the result of a tragic fire” (322). It is evident throughout the narrative that disability greatly influences the lives of the two main characters, both physically and socially. The only place Aila feels safe is where she is not judged by her physical appearance, and it is not attributed to the pact with the Devil. The choice of a country is not accidental, as Ireland had a lower rate of witchcraft prosecutions compared to the United Kingdom; Andrew Sneddon goes as far as to claim that the witch-hunt there never actually

started (1). Despite adopting the same legal procedures as England and Scotland, the trials and executions were scarce, and the reason lies in the fact that the belief in witchcraft was not widespread in Ireland (ibid 2). Similar to the Highland region of Scotland discussed in the first chapter of my thesis, people in Ireland had a less threatening perception of witches. The most common harm attributed to witchcraft there was preventing milk from being churned into butter (ibid 6). Despite the increase in the number of trials in the mid-seventeenth century, it never reached the numbers of Scotland, which was “twelve times more intense: of the 3,837 people tried for witchcraft, around two-thirds were convicted and executed” (ibid, 1).

Unable to overcome her social stigma, Aila was forced to leave her native country. McRuer contends that “the compulsions of compulsory able-bodiedness and the benefits that accrue to nondisabled people within that system are bigger than any individual’s seemingly voluntary refusal of them” (36). Therefore, the issue in question is bigger than the individual’s will to deny it and has to be changed on the societal level. The examples of Aila and Janet illustrate how previously accepted members of society can fall out of favour for various reasons, often beyond their control. The travelling folk featured in the book, which challenged the concept of normalcy, in the end, had to mask their identities to live safely. Interestingly, the Roma ethnic group, often referred to as “Travellers,” faces significant stigma in many Western European countries due to perceptions of their lifestyle and challenges related to social integration. The process of stigmatisation is rarely irreversible, and Brown contends that stigma will disappear when social segregation is no longer accepted (157). Differences, especially those deemed undesirable, create fear, perpetuating the perception of these differences as monstrous and abject. In the early modern period, such perception proved deadly to many women who were executed under the Witchcraft Act.

The book is titled *The Last Witch of Scotland*, but it is hard to ascertain whether Janet Horne was actually the last. Cowan and Henderson argue that “the execution of the putative

last of their kind by no means destroyed the last believer or the final practitioner” (199). While Janet was the last officially executed woman under a witchcraft law, she is certainly not the last one accused when it comes to persisting beliefs of witchcraft and their connection to physical and mental disabilities. People with disabilities are still featured in the popular media as monstrous, especially when it comes to film and television. Nordea states that a lot of the film directors who use the trope of monstrous disability argue that due to the great visuality of their content, they need to use specific “physical markers” (126) to connect with a personality trait. Visuality, in this case, is not the same as visibility, which is the issue that postmodern disability studies are trying to address and tackle. Witchcraft beliefs, too, persist around the world, mostly in developing countries. The most recent famous “burning of the witch” happened in Brazil in 2017¹⁰. A group of nationalists were protesting against Judith Butler coming to their country. She was vilified for being an outspoken woman on gender issues, and her dummy was burned publicly. This is one of the many examples of how physical appearance or opinion differences can be turned monstrous and connected to evil.

¹⁰ Jaschik, Scott. Judith Butler on Being Attacked in Brazil. *Inside Higher Ed*. 12 Nov 2017. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>. Accessed 31 May 2024.

Conclusion

My research paper addressed Philip Paris's novel *The Last Witch of Scotland*, which uses the plight of its two female characters to highlight the continuous stigmas and social barriers experienced by people with disabilities in 18th-century Scotland. In the course of my analysis of historical documents and novels, I established a prominent connection between disabilities and various disorders and the concept of monstrous. Multiple historical documents, including records of the witchcraft trials, showcase the strong focus on the physicality of the women prosecuted, where differences in their appearance were attributed to innate evil. Any difference in a woman's bodily image was considered to be a possible Devil's mark, which was legally used as evidence in the witchcraft trials against the prosecuted. This was explained by the fact that the pact with the Devil was the core Scottish witchcraft belief, which made the physical evidence of it plausible and compelling in court. More universally, the stigma that women in the early modern period experienced because of their age, economic position, or their health was socially disabling, which resulted in their expulsion from society and subsequent demonisation. As the theories of monstrous feminine and the abject applied in connection to witchcraft show, women were more prone to be considered witches because of their specifically feminine bodily functions. Therefore, any additional difference in their appearance was critical and almost surely resulted in their prosecution.

The repulsion and fear towards disabilities that permeated the early modern period is resembled in *The Last Witch of Scotland*. The narrative exposes the innate prejudice and stigmatisation processes established firmly in place by showing multiple characters who do not fit the established norm of contemporary society. The travelling artists and both main female protagonists are Othered by society. The consequence of such marginalisation results in the group's constant need to move places so they do not raise suspicion. In the case of Janet and her daughter Aila, their respective mental disorder and physical disability established a ground

for their legal prosecution for witchcraft due to the prejudice and stigma they carried. At the end of the book, although Aila manages to flee from the prison, she is not safe in Scotland. As established earlier, stigma is a form of social control that rarely disappears on its own; it is even less common for it to disappear due to the efforts of stigmatised people. Therefore, Aila follows the example of travelling artists and moves countries. She chooses Ireland because there, the witchcraft prosecution is less prominent, and the difference in appearance is not necessarily connected to the Devil's pact, as it was in Scotland.

My research suggests considering the unjust treatment of disabled people throughout centuries, and it also seeks to highlight the continuing harmful superstitions connected to the body that do not fit the established norm. This study could potentially become a base for future literary research to explore how the portrayal of female disabilities contributes to their Othering and representation as monstrous figures across other literary genres. Further research on the topic could include conducting a close reading of the books mentioned in the first chapter. *The Highland Witch* has the potential to be an insightful statement on the social dynamics between urban inhabitants and rural highlanders and how the perception of the latter is connected to the social stigma and how it manifests itself. Also, *Hear No Evil* could be analysed in the context of disabilities in the 19th century, specifically the female experience. Also, this study could become a base for more critical lenses to be employed to research witchcraft in early modern Europe. For example, one of the promising prospects could be through critical race theory and postcolonial theory.

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