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"That puts it not unto the Touch, To win or lose it all": The Moral Metaphor of Witchcraft in John Buchan's *Witch Wood*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how John Buchan uses a cultural gap between the disciplined church and the living-conditions of peasants in Woodilee to raise questions about the knowledge of evil and witchcraft in seventeenth-century Scotland. Published in 1927, when Scotland was not prepared to cope with a politico-religious struggle between King Charles I and Parliament during the English Civil War (from 1644 to 1646), *Witch Wood* depicts how a young Presbyterian minister, David Sempill, witnesses the pretenses and prejudices of three other church elders. The novel depicts how the seventeenth-century Scottish church interprets the concept of evil and convicts its members of witchcraft, focusing on the controversial relationship between nature and morality. This essay will explore how several of Buchan's more negative political-religious characters lead to the eventual banality of domestic evil within the Scottish church; furthermore, it will point out the ironic moral contrast between the speculations and deeds of the Church's Chief Elder Chasehope and the secular farmer Shillinglaw. This essay ultimately offers observations, on a somewhat more speculative level, in relation to the novel's discourse concerning unorthodox, if not Christian, interpretations of evil, using manifestation of several convincing representatives of human nature. It questions whether witchcraft should be recognized as a phenomenon of the human impulse towards *natural* worship, or as a ritual with evil motive.

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「不要試驗良心，賭全贏或全輸為要」：約翰・布肯的《巫師森林》中巫術的道德隱喻

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摘　要

本論文旨在探討約翰・布肯如何以蘇格蘭十七世紀訓化的教堂和「巫地利」(Woodilee) 村民生活間的文化落差為議題，進一步質疑傳統宗教對邪惡觀念與巫術的詮釋。出版於1927 年，正當蘇格蘭尚未準備好如何因應英格蘭內戰時期查理王一世與國會之間的政教紛爭時，《巫師森林》敘述一年青長老教會(Presbyterian)的牧師大衛(David)如何見證其他三位較年長教會前輩的虛偽與偏見。此小說敘述十七世紀蘇格蘭宗教如何詮釋邪惡的觀念與如何判決執行巫術者，尤著眼於自然與道德的爭議關係。本論文將討論布肯筆下的負面政教人物們如何製造蘇格蘭教會中的惡習。再則，本論文將進一步指出，教會首席長老「追望」(Chasehope)與世俗邊疆農夫「世令法」(Shillinglaw)間的言行落差與道德諷刺。本論文最後提出一些有關非傳統宗教詮釋邪惡的觀察，且這些觀察皆與此本小說中內蘊蘇格蘭宗教文化的改革有密切關係。值得質疑的是，巫術應該被認為是人類崇拜自然環境的本能現象？或者，巫術應該被視為一具有邪惡動機的神秘儀式？

關鍵字：約翰・布肯、《巫師森林》、巫術、邪惡、自然與道德

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> The more he looked into his soul the more he was perplexed. He thought of the gloom at Calidon, to whom had gone out from him a spark of such affection as no other had inspired. That face was little out of his memory, and he longed to look on it again as a lover longs for his mistress.
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> —— John Buchan, *Witch Wood*

John Buchan's novel *Witch Wood* is a meditation on the religious struggles of seventeenth-century Scotland. Published in 1927, the novel depicts how a young Presbyterian minister, David Sempill, witnesses the pretenses and prejudices of three church elders. Set in the years during the English Civil War (from 1644 to 1646), the novel is concerned with major differences between the attitudes of King Charles I and the English Parliament towards the Presbyterian Church. Charles, a representative of the House of Stewart,[1] wishes that the Church might give him supreme authority in decisions concerning both politics and religion. The English Parliament, however, longs for greater autonomy in religious beliefs and opposes Charles I's political control of the Church. Members of the English Parliament were, at this time, quite close to the Scots, and many Sots were called upon to oppose the King's army in this matter. Many Lowland Scots and members of the Scottish Parliament supported the rebellion against Charles I, while many Highland Scots remained loyal to the King. The Marquis of Montrose, who served as a general of the Royalist army in the Highlands, attempted to take over centers of government in the Scottish Lowlands.

John Buchan revised his royalist history against this backdrop. Having grown up in the Scottish borderlands, Buchan understood well that Scotland had never been without its civil wars, particularly not since the Union of 1707. In order to explore Scotland's heterogeneous heritage, Buchan chose a controversial historical warrior to open his religious retrospective. In Janet Smith's biography of John Buchan, Smith mentions that in Buchan's 1928 revision book *Montrose*,[2] Buchan wrote to Stair Gillon, taking it as "a guide

[1] The House of Stewart had ruled Scotland for centuries until a twist of family history made King Charles I's father, James, heir to the throne of England. This led to the Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England in 1603. The Union of the English and Scottish Parliaments began formally in 1707 until the Scottish Parliament restored its political autonomy in 1999. See R. Mitchison 334-36.

[2] Cavendish recalls that as a historian, Buchan has long been out of the mainstream, saying that "his

to the topography of nearly all Scotland and it contains most of [Buchan's] philosophy of life" (233):

> His [Montrose's] troubles came primarily from a divided soul—a clear, Practical intellect pulling against an obscurantist creed, the Highland chief at variance with the Presbyterian statesman, a brain, medieval for all its powers, fumbling with the half-understood problems of a new world.[3] (233)

Born in the late nineteenth century, and confronted with a twentieth-century new world, Buchan's national consciousness of an ideal Scotland reveals his concern about the nation repeating its historical disintegration of the seventeenth century, particularly with regard to religion and politics. I propose that it is this consciousness that motivates Buchan to recover the historical character of Montrose in *Witch Wood*, in such a way as reveals the national sense of falling apart.

David's journey represents the supposed dilemma of Scottishness,[4] illustrating how the Reformed Kirk[5] in Scotland had been greatly expanded in the early seventeenth century and how it had been gradually complicated into Covenanting politics.[6] The novel explores a cultural gap between the

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1913 biography of the dashing Montrose was savaged for inaccuracy" (63). His revised version in 1928 came "with its brilliant stratagems, close shaves, rousing victories against odds and tragic finale", as "one of the most thrilling biographies in the language" (63). See Cavendish's "Union," 62-63.

[3] A passage quoted from Buchan's biography of Montrose published in 1928. See Janet Smith 233.

[4] I use "Scottishness" here to refer to the construction of a Scottish sense of identity, and particularly to a religious cultural identity involving an entangled scenario between religion and politics.

[5] According to Schwend, the reformed Kirk "began in the 16th century with a nationalist appeal and advocated the ideals of a united nation. But this national approach succumbed quickly to a strict adherence to principles of doctrine. Despite this national appeal of fighting for a free Scotland and against a tyrannical oppressor, most important for the leading figures was the defence of a particular dogma, no matter whether this made Scotsman fight against Scotsman or not." Schwend comments that "[i]n the fight for national independence the Kirk was not on the side of the nationalists….It rather favoured the preservation of the status quo. But it always claimed to represent the 'moral monopoly' and tried to influence and guide public life." See Schwend 337, 344.

[6] According to *The New Companion to Scottish Culture*, the covenanting movement resulted from "the ill-conceived policies consistently pursued by Charles I after his accession in 1625" (66). An Act of Revocation aimed to help the Church finances because the king enraged magnates, and the taxation and the use of bishops as royal advisers caused further disturbance. The National Covenant was announced in 1638 with emphasis on "measures to be taken in 'free assemblies and in parliaments'" (66). In 1641, the Covenant "demanded for a parliament free of royal influence" (66). Therefore, "these two causes, the triumph of Presbyterianism and the establishment of constitutional monarchy, proved incompatible and led to opposition to covenanting policies" (66). See Cowan's "The Covenanters," 66-67.

disciplined world of the Church and the practices of peasants in Woodilee, both of whom are cared for by David as a Presbyterian Minister. Symbolically, Woodilee is Buchan's device of moral metaphor. It is obscure to vision, just as the hue of its forest changes fast day and night. For David, the wood carries an air of moral ambiguity: the worship of nature can be thought as either innocent humanity or evil Paganism. Appalled to find several chief elders at an altar in the central wood, David feels shocked and panicked to witness their exercise of witchcraft. With the aid of a drunkenly inconsiderate peasant, Andrew Shillinglaw of Reiverslaw (a name referencing the Border Reivers), David attends this nighttime Sabbath in disguise, hoping to secure evidence against three church elders who are suspected of having used witchcraft to secure private interests or for an ill-minded purpose. Ephraim Caird of Chasehope (a name referencing hope maker) is a hypocrite. He makes an alliance between the chief elder of the Woodilee church and the witches meeting in the wood.

The other two elders, Mungo Muirhead and Ebenezer Proudfoot, also represent alternative ways of transformation to the young minister David, as he discovers the moral discrepancy between the daytime actions of these trustworthy church elders and the private interests of their coven at night. Muirhead, as a clergyman, is far more interested in the combative politics of the Church than in any spiritual sermon. He undoubtedly treats the Church as an essentially political society. Ebenezer Proudfoot, who is the minister of Bold Village, is a stubbornly unsophisticated Protestant, sticking to the doctrines of his kind of Christianity (drawn from the Reformation a century before). His rigid religious beliefs stand in contrast to Muirhead's cunning political resilience. Both are deficient in insight and can rarely be justified by righteous reason.

In Buchan's eye, Scotland, like Woodilee, was morally and metaphorically haunted by a shadow. The wood, called "Melanudrigill" (*Witch Wood* 4),[7] has a name that David interprets (from his knowledge of Greek) as "the place of dark waters" (*WW* 15). David's encounter with pure romantic love in Katrine Yester, the embodiment of aristocratic elegance and the simple innocence of nature, urges him to rethink the significance of humanity in nature, best shown through Katrine's attempt to comfort the sick and needy during a time of plague. Montrose, who is called Mark Kerr before

[7] References to *Witch Wood* will hereafter be abbreviated as *WW*.

he raises a Royalist army in the Highlands, risks his life to help David when the young minister falls into a trap set by the other church chiefs; Montrose guides him to a new understanding of himself and the world, an understanding that differs from the politicized preaching of the Church. In order to demonstrate the various religious capacities and political dispositions of seventeenth-century Scotland, Buchan exposes Katrine and Montrose to various attitudes of religious and political leaders. Buchan thus shows that various reactions to the beauty of nature (represented by Katrine) and the glamour of the cavalier (represented by Montrose) make self-evident the true meaning of innocence and righteousness.

The narrator's vision of Woodilee in the Prologue sets a moral theme at the beginning of the novel:

> There were no highways—only tracks, *miry* in the bogs and stony on the braes, which led to Edinburgh on one hand and to Carlisle on the other. I saw few houses, and these were *brown* as peat, but on the knowe of the old kirkton I saw the four *grey* walls of the kirk, and the manse beside it among elders and young ashes. Woodilee was not now a parish lying open to the eye of sun and wind. It was no more than a tiny jumble of crofts, bounded and pressed in upon by something vast and *dark*, which *clothed* the tops of all but the highest hills, *muffled* the ridges, *choked* the glens and overflowed almost to the edge of the waters—which lay on the landscape like a *shaggy* fur cast *loosely* down. (*WW* 4; emphasis added)

The sunlight and shadow are emblematic of the condition of moral ambiguity existing among residents of the wood.

This moral dilemma is the main theme that runs through Buchan's much celebrated historical narrative. I borrow the title of this paper from Montrose's fictional poetic stanza in the border ballad "To his Mistress":

> He either fears his Fate too much,
> Or his Deserts are small,
> That puts it not unto the Touch,
> To win or lose it all. (*WW* 50)

"Deserts" is an old word, meaning "deserving"; that is, to deserve what one is worth; "Touch" means the test applied to a piece of metal to see whether or not it is gold. My reading of the above balladic stanza suggests that some soldiers can generally be categorized as two types: the coward and the traitor. Both dare not put their conscience to the test when it comes to fidelity in faith. While the former follows the mainstream to secure his life, the latter is bold enough to bet for a win or a loss at the cost of his life. Both are ignorant of the condemnation of their guilty consciences.

Regarding the discussion about the motif in *Witch Wood*, many scholars in a variety of disciplines have begun to examine Buchan's sense of cultural identity in terms of his political career in Britain, Africa, and Canada. In a biographical memoir about his father, William Buchan, John Buchan's son, recalls:

> My father loved Scotland, knew its land, its rhymes and legends and history as well as anyone living. . . . His roots may have been elastic, but they were as strong as nylon gut. As he [John Buchan] makes clear in *Memory Hold-the-Door*, however, they were most strongly embedded in Scotland [the intimacy of childhood] and in Oxfordshire [the second of Youth]. (9; emphasis in original)

Although Buchan's political career expands throughout many countries, his cultural identity never leaves the cultural construction of Scotland under an umbrella of the united British regime. It is notable that some scholars interpret Buchan's cultural identification in terms of his view about the development of civilization.

Juanita Kruse explains that "civilization, for Buchan, was a thin crust of law and order and decency imperfectly covering a chaotic and savage underworld" (31). As with Robert Stevenson's insight into human weakness in *Kidnapped*, Buchan knows well that people can rarely avoid the temptations of evil, particularly when confronted with fame and self-interest. Undoubtedly, Buchan considers that the key restraints of civilization fail to educate savages or hypocrites. Buchan thinks that it is the evil motive that destroys the civilization in people's mind; it the enemy from within that one should examine first. Christopher Harvie also talks about Buchan's creation of the

"typical Buchan villain," saying that he is good at using

> an irony—a joke in the Freudian sense—to dramatize his own isolation and insecurity within the political system to which he gave formal assent. Then an effort will be made to prove that the attempt to end this isolation, the quest after social and psychic well-being in Buchan's later novels, involved him in ransacking the same "myth-kitty" as the other novelists. (32)

Buchan's later departure from Scotland is a self-exile from the environment that makes him feel culturally unsecured and politically isolated. This physical exile involves a deep internal exile from Scotland, making him into a past shadow of the seventeenth century.

However, it is hard to assert that Buchan's political attitude towards Scottish cultural construction is a kind of negative and passive resistance. Ralph Harper mentions Buchan's purpose in his fictional creation of villains, maintaining that Buchan's "awareness of the evil is sentimental," and that this tells "more about the boy's sense of duty to kill the dragon [evil] than about the character of the dragon" (32). Gertrude Himmelfarb also suggests that Buchan's devil bears "a Gothic, almost apocalyptic vision of the dark, destructive forces contained in human beings and society" (268). If destruction is the ultimate goal of a villain's vanity, then it is notable that Buchan understands—as a political statesman—the significance of helping citizens to understand what evil-doers desire beyond their deeds.

Philip Ray analyzes the Buchan villains from a different perspective, claiming that it is their "menace to society" (81) that causes a transformation in social institutions: their menace not only raises an awareness of transformation in the seventeenth-century Scottish church culture, but it also leaves a revolutionary record for later ages. Christopher MacLachlan indicates that the duality of political-religious extremes in this novel is a vital factor that indicates Scotland's falling apart since the seventeenth century: "It is a part of the Wood of Caledon, the primeval forest which covered Scotland, and hence the wood is not just a local landmark but a national feature" ("John Bunchan's Novels about Scotland" 49-50).

John Miller also comments on the dilemma of duality:

> [D]uality of old [the secret rites of witchcraft] and new [the rigours of new Calvinism] contains a further subdivision as each exhibits a degreeof internal conflict. David's moderate Christianity is seen in contrast tothe harsh orthodoxies of the church elders; simply the order paganism contains both a wholesome and innocent aspect and a degenerate carnality. (137)

This dilemma is deeply rooted in the long-term battle among different religious ideologies. The wood, as a symbol of black magic, is the place where nature worship or witchcraft takes place. As a last remnant of the ancient Caledonian forest, the wood is emblematic of pre-Christian intimations of nature worship. Whether or not this nature worship, or rite of witchcraft, is positive or negative for constructive human development remains controversial.

Although these scholars generally dismiss both devilish deeds and the conflict of duality as essential factors in Scotland's cultural deterioration and degeneration, their discussions still hover around the topic of an entangling confrontation between publicly acknowledged representatives and privately acknowledged *illegal* forces. Although the above criticisms identify the negative sides of evil, they do not clearly explore what substantially causes evil and its complicated relation to the political and religious powers' struggle in seventeenth-century Scotland. Most importantly, these sides seem superficially linked to the rites of nature worship or witchcraft. In this regard, the root of evil seems obscured. Substantially, both the authentic nature of the devil and the significance of nature worship have not yet been emphasized. Apparently, *Witch Wood* is a fiction about the most disturbing Scottish religious history, and especially about the controversial relationship between nature and morality.

This essay aims to analyze implications of the novel concerning nature worship and to clarify its efforts to associate nature worship with evil. I contend that witchcraft must be recognized as a phenomenon of the human impulse towards *natural* worship rather than the result of an evil motive. If so, then there must be those evil minds that want to use the power of witchcraft to reach purposes of personal interest and private domination. This essay will explore how certain political-religious characters in Buchan's *Witch Wood*

lead to the banality of domestic evil in Scotland; furthermore, it will point out the extreme (and ironic) moral contrast between the deeds and speculations of the Church Chief Elder Caird and the secular farmer Shillinglaw. This essay ultimately offers observations, on a somewhat more speculative level, in relation to the novel's discourse on unorthodox (if not Christian) interpretations of evil, through the manifestations of Katrine and Montrose. This essay does not use the content of religious ideology as its axis, but instead aims to discuss how the moral challenge about evil differs from an orthodox acknowledgement of evil.

I. "It [the parish]…with bear for the use of the poor, as at once a thank-offering and a renunciation": the extremist as evil

Reading *Witch Wood* as a demonstration of the disparate and fanatic condition of seventeenth-century Scottish religion involves recognizing the distinctive features of Scottish religious fanaticism. The alliance between the Scottish Church elders and the political powers has not ceased since the Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England in 1603. Smout observes that even after the Union of the English and Scottish Parliaments, "[C]onfirming Presbyterianism as the established polity for Scotland even in a United Kingdom seemed to open and to fix in perpetuity the gulf between the Church of Scotland and the Church of England" (213). He also emphasizes that the contribution of the Scottish churches to the welfare of Scottish society cannot be denied; more than a few ministers were deemed traitors to their legal charge, suggesting:

> Declining the active and energetic discharge of the duties of their spiritual and evangelical functions, too many of the pledged servants of the Lord betook themselves to literary study, or the culture of their glebes, perhaps farms, or to other secular concerns. They cultivated connection with the upper classes of society in their parishes, declining intercourse with those of low degree to whom the Gospel is preached, and set themselves earnestly so to arrange matters connected with the poor as to

> save expense to the heritors.[8] (221)

Although the Church may guide its members to social order, those ministers who use religious resources to pursue private interests—so called *political* religious dissenters—can easily destroy social interest.

In *Witch Wood*, the two ministers, the politically-minded Mungo Muirhead and the religiously unswerving Ebenezer Proudfoot, are both ignorant of the public maintenance of positive social values and security. Buchan fictionalizes the two types of church characters, Muirhead (a political authoritarian under religious cover) and Proudfoot (a dogmatic religious adherent to cavalier codes of the sixteenth-century Reformation), in order to expose the nature of religious extremism. Describing the condition of the parishes, the narrator in *Witch Wood* witnesses the widespread poverty suffered by the residents: in some parishes, particularly in Bold,

> [T]here was a lonely field of thistles [symbolized as the perseverance of Scots] known as Guidman's Croft, which had been held to be dedicate[d] to the Evil One. The oxen of all the parish were yoked, and in an hour or two it was ploughed up and sown with bear for the use of the poor, as at once a thank-offering and a renunciation. (*WW* 51)

Alford in *What Evil Means to Us* comments that "evil can be a discourse on suffering and loss," asserting:

> Above all (or perhaps I should say beneath all), evil is a refusal to submit to the conditions of being human: that the vitality of life is fed by the autistic-contiguous experience that lives just next door to dread—not just the dread of pain, helplessness, and abandonment, as though that were not enough. Autistic-contiguous anxiety is about the way these experiences evoke the fear of losing oneself, falling through the net of the world. (119)

[8] Smout supplies this quotation from G. D. Henderson's religious history book *Religious Life in Seventeenth Century Scotland* (Cambridge, 1937), 116.

Seductively, evil may take advantage of the sufferers' desire to be out of pain and helplessness; however, this mask of evil-doers would be soon torn down.

Muirhead and Proudfoot contrast sharply with another minister, James Fordyce. Despite his obvious modesty, the other church elders falsely accuse Fordyce of holding to unorthodox beliefs. As compared with Muirhead and Proudfoot, who are eloquent and capable preachers, Fordyce is rather humble in the manner of doctrine. After numerous church sessions concerning the relations between religion and politics, church and state, the young minister David visits Fordyce and shares his awareness of the undercurrent of blind excitement that prevails among certain members of these congregations. Fordyce's faithful piety is rooted in his willingness to take the positive side of others. This stands in great contrast to Muirhead's and Proudfoot's self-righteousness. Hence, David quite naturally appeals to Fordyce for constructive advice; however, Fordyce's physical frailty cannot help David to fight against Muirhead and Proudfoot in the Church; instead, Fordyce's effort in a defensive speech which supports David's decision of witch-hunting at the Presbyterian congregation simply hastens those radical extremist church elders' repulse of David (*WW* 265-69).

Born in the mid-nineteenth century, Buchan observed the banality of domestic evils in the Scottish Church and felt regret concerning the negative political-religious entanglements passed down from the Scottish church culture of the seventeenth century. Harvie indicated that James Kellas, a son of the manse in the nineteenth-century Scottish church, recorded this of the conflict:

> [I]t brought out the worst in Scottish Presbyterianism—intolerance, arrogance and irrelevance. The more they were alike, the more they hated each other; *the more they argued about mundane matters, the more they attributed them to divine intervention*; and while industrial Scotland wallowed in the slums of Glasgow and the crofters starved in the highlands, the Scottish middle classes argued about church attendances and the size of members contributions to the church plate.[9] (35; emphasis added)

[9] Harvie makes this quotation from James Kellas's book *Modern Scotland* (London, 1968), 61.

Ironically, while the church elders could not satiate their political ambitions, they excused their secularism using religious titles and groundless, self-justified interpretations of divine intent. Pretending to offer substantial financial assistance to the needy, church elders either blindly filled their minds with personal worldly concerns or made insincere financial offers so as to advance other private political goals.

Buchan's most extreme characters—the cunningly sophisticated and the simple-minded alike—are insincere in their beliefs concerning human truth. The deeds of both types stand in variance with the core spirit of humanity that every religion is supposed to advocate—benevolence and honesty. Sketching out a theory of ethical practice, Badiou indicates two points: "First, every event is historically punctuated by the void, which fastens the event to its past…Secondly, in terms of fidelity, we must bear in mind that *the attachment of a subject to its name is never inevitable*" (62; emphasis in original). This comment precisely discovers human weakness in self-righteousness and self-deception.

It is notable that Badiou's first point refers to the fact that human beings, in the course of pursuing personal interests, are too easily seduced by circumstances that appear to be true to themselves; they tend to formally obey the protocols of virtue, while secretly running after private fame. This point is evident in Buchan's fictional caricature of Muirhead. Whether or not the clergyman Muirhead is aware of his own *twisted* beliefs, his purposeful self-interest has undoubtedly led him away from an Evangelical code of ethics. Here, Badiou's first point implies that there could never be any excuse for religious fanatics' sin in *completely* converting a religion's ideology into their own values of life *without* any thought of past history. The Protestant minister, Proudfoot, can obviously be considered as this type of religious fanatic. His simple-minded and complete reception of the religious doctrines of the Reformation (from a century before) satirizes his unsophisticated and non-introspective Christianity. Using the village of Bold as a backdrop, Buchan satirizes Proudfoot as a religious leader seriously deficient in his knowledge of the environmental change and its cultural demands.

Both Muirhead and Proudfoot are internally violent individuals: they have inflated their own capacities whilst deflating criticism, so as to justify their religious practices and beliefs. Regretfully, these beliefs are often wildly at variance with the facts. In other words, their extreme religious and ethical

practices result from their obscuration of the supposed clear line between religion and politics. They cross the line into doing radical deeds most readily when they cannot even see for certain that the line is there. Buchan seems to postulate that although cultural identity is anchored in one's values, one must be cautious that self-identification is of one's own preference. Moral standards are supposed to be experienced as external, not idiosyncratic, and thus carry with them a greater weight than personal preference.

II. "He was fighting not with human frailty, but against a resolute will to damnation": acknowledgement of the nature of evil

The most intriguing part of the novel is the Chief Elder Chasehope's participation in the nighttime ritual held by the witches at their altar in the woods—a scene full of suggestion concerning cultural interpretations of evil in seventeenth-century Scotland. It is not until chapter five of the novel that David begins to suspect this undercurrent of black magic. Acting against the advice of Isobel, Katrin's housekeeper, David makes plans to explore the woods a second time, entering the area at dusk. Although David gets lost as he tries to recall the track to Katrine's Paradise, he eventually finds a small area lit by the moon: "It was all of soft mossy green, without pebble or bush to break its carpet, and in the centre stood a thing like an altar" (*WW* 55). He discovers that the altar is covered with a linen cloth and prepared for a ritual. Furthermore, he is appalled to find many people wearing animal masks and dancing around the altar to the sound of pipes. Feeling furious at this sight, David rushes into the centre of the crowd in order to denounce the pagan activity. After struggling with the participants, David is struck down and loses his senses.

Returning to the church, David is vexed over what measure to take as a reproach to this offense, particularly because he has no proof to validate what he saw. He awakes the next day in his bed, battered, having been found unconscious in the manse yard in the early morning. He is denied any information from Isobel. On the following Sunday, David preaches a sermon against idolatry and calls upon those in the wood to confess. After this service, many elders praise his preaching performance, and the chief church elder Chasehope is one of them. His physical appearance of pale skin and red hair

implies the contradiction in his own personality—he lacks any passion but is full of fury. David soon recognizes Chasehope as the dance leader in the wood:

> It was Chasehope of whom he chiefly thought, Chasehope, that darling of the Presbytery, the ally of the Kirk in hunting down malignants, the one in all the parish who flaunted most his piety. The man grew in stature as he contemplated him. Here was no feeble sinner, but a very provost in his craft, who turned all the uses of religion to his foul purposes. And at the thought David, fired by his new happiness, almost rejoiced; he was fighting not with human frailty, but against a resolute will to damnation. (*WW* 132)

Confronting Chasehope's powers of alliance between church and the wood gathering, David knows well that what he faces this time is not a coward but a traitor to his own good conscience.

Appealing for help, David eventually meets Shillinglaw and is granted some assistance at witch-hunting. Reiverslaw creates an animal disguise and tries to join the dance, hoping to catch Chasehope for legal punishment. David hides himself behind a tree to watch the dance. Much to his amazement, David finds that the dance is elegant and innocent, but soon becomes furious and amorous. Suddenly a storm breaks and the witches in the dance disperse due to the heavy rain. David climbs down, meets Reiverslaw in the hut, and marks Chasehope as the leader of the coven. With proof in hand, David later accuses Chasehope and five others of witchcraft in front of the church congregation; however, the elder rejects this charge with every gesture of astonishment. David's attempt to prohibit the witchcraft by official means is continually interfered with by the events related to the civil war in Scotland. As a rival character to Chasehope, Shillinglaw serves as an access point for readers to understand what is more sincere, despite the villagers' rejection of him due to his frequent drunkenness.

Commenting on the deeds of devil-worship, McCleery maintains that the "*claustrophobic atmosphere* of the small village and the repressed emotions of its inhabitants finds an outlet not just in spite…but also in the evil of devil-worship. The claustrophobia is given substance in the surrounding

menace of the wood" (284; emphasis in original). It is worth inquiring here: why cannot this natural worship be sanctioned by the Church as a constructive social activity? It is notable that those who insist on interpreting the deeds of idolatry as pagan behavior are also those who are psychologically afraid of the unknown powers possessed by witches, and also of their purposes in witchcraft.

In regard to the history of witchcraft in Scotland, according to *A Source-book of Scottish Witchcraft*, witchcraft was taken as "a criminal offence from 1563…There were known executions for witchcraft in Scotland before 1563, but the process was obscure and these cases are not included in the present Source Book" (iv). Although the prosecutions for witchcraft were legal in seventeenth-century Scotland, we might ask why witchcraft is considered sinful. If the purpose of some witchcraft rituals is benevolence for those in need, such as offering psychological comfort for the ill, or providing spiritual encouragement for the inert, then on what grounds should these rituals be forbidden as crimes?

Regarding the relationship between witchcraft and the dominant culture, Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist and member of the folklore society, maintains that what Christianity demonized as witchcraft was a medieval survival of an ancient Paleolithic/Neolithic religion based on the agricultural cycle.[10] In her book *The Genesis of Religion*, Murray regards witchcraft as a force of epochal change, namely, from a medieval world, dominated by feudal social structures and religious orthodoxy, into a modern culture, a cult favored in post-Enlightenment models of history. Murray considers the members of this ancient fertility cult as victims of bigotry.

In contrast, Montague Summers views witchcraft as an attempt to disrupt the social and moral order, suggesting that the occult practices of spiritualism and Satanism remain a threat to social security, although he alternatively adopts a more positive view of other mystical activities (42-43). Murray seems to lay stress more on the social function of witchcraft rituals in the course of human social development, while Summers emphasizes the possible negative impact of witchcraft in its interactions with the unknown world in nature. Obviously, the motive behind witchcraft depends on the witch and also on the procedure of its ritual practice. It is more significant to note here that the official motive in the prosecution of witchcraft is likewise ambiguous and

[10] See Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*.

variable. Whether the authorities were attempting to obliterate a distinctive pagan sect for power control, or whether a genuine satanic cult was attempting to undermine Christian civilization, is again a question of conscience in the minds of the authorities.

In a chapter entitled "Hallowmass," the divisions between David and other church elders are deepened. The five elders (led by Chasehope) accuse David of failing to attend to his duty and service. To his surprise, Amos Ritchie, who had earlier refused him any help, now takes his side; many of the poor in the parish also offer their support, returning their love and gratitude to David. Unexpectedly, Reiverslaw becomes addicted to drinking and notorious for being involved in fights. It is said that evil powers would come into the world simply after All Saints' Day. Chasehope calls for a gathering not in the wood, but in the Woodilee church in the name of witch-hunting this time. Chasehope, the so-called witch-picker, identifies Bessie Todd as a witch. She is a woman of low education and limited knowledge, who is tortured into confessing her associations with the devil. David realizes that she is merely a scapegoat in Chasehope's plan. If Bessie takes the blame, then the Presbytery can be persuaded that the case is finished, and the rest of the coven will escape discovery and further punishment. Although David finally takes Bessie away from her imprisonment, she dies soon after.

Brian Levack, a historian of witchcraft, indicates the irony existing in the Scottish officials' thoughtlessness and in the blind public fear of witchcraft in the court of conviction, recording:

> Most Scottish witchcraft prosecutions, like the majority of cases throughout Europe, originated in charges that the witches had harmed their neighbours by magical means. These charges would not have been of interest to the church courts if they had not been viewed as offences against the reformed religion. The main reason that the devil was not mentioned in many records of witchcraft prosecutions is that the victims of these acts, who provided most of the incriminating testimony against the witches, were not concerned about the demonic dimension of the witches' crime; their only grievance was the misfortune they had suffered. (8)

This historical report implies that the judicial officials introduced the devil because they viewed criminal damages according to religious rather than physical terms. In other words, a witch was convicted under accusations of religious offence and blind public fear. By understanding the judicial operations of Scottish witchcraft rituals since the sixteenth century, it becomes easier to infer that these seemingly justifiable reasons provided an excuse for religious groups who were always concerned with power control and self-inflation.

Following an attack of the plague, many survivors became enormously afraid of infection. Showing courage in the face of disease, Chasehope claimed that he was not afraid of the plague because he could do no wrong—his actions were the will of God. He says, "I fear no ill, for I am in the Lord's hand till His appointed time" (*WW* 161). His remarks undoubtedly show the deep-rooted pride of every Presbyterian who believes himself chosen by God as the elect; he is justified in being both a Christian and a pagan witch. Therefore, David's direct charge against this sophisticated church elder results in nothing but his own disaster. Not only are David's charges against Chasehope and his followers dismissed, but David himself is also accused of ungodly service. Later, after the public trial in the church ends, David intentionally drags Chasehope to the witch altar. In mounting fear, Chasehope finally confesses his witchcraft and promises to repent. At this time, he flees; according to a farmer's report, the chief elder goes raging across the hill, killing sheep and yelling like a dog. In Mark's eyes, Chasehope has been rewarded with punishment for his own idolatry.

In Scotland, the legal accusation against a witch was primarily defined in religious terms. Brian Levack again records:

> Ever since the 1590s, when intense witch-hunting began, witches were routinely accused of having made pacts with the devil, of renouncing their baptism, and of swearing allegiance to their new demonic master. . . . Indeed, the reason why the Scottish witchcraft statute of 1563 prescribed death as the punishment for all convictions was that the men who drafted the statute subscribed to the biblical injunction in Exodus 22:18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." The reason Scottish witches were burned at the stake (after being strangled) rather

> than hanged was that burning was traditionally the punishment reserved for heretics in all European countries. (7-8)

If this outcome is common practice in sixteenth-century Scotland, Buchan's intention in arranging a different punishment for Church Elder Chasehope seems an *irony*, not only aimed at the cruelty of *the method* which Scottish law takes to punish the witch, but also at the *official interpretation* of witchcraft as an antithesis to Christian belief. It is notable here that the punishment for idolatry does not primarily come from the authorities; religious authorities' *active* conviction of idolatry reflects nothing more than their fear of losing power to an unknown world. If the witch's motive is evil (an attempt at alliance with the devil), then once his link with the devil is broken, he must necessarily become the direct victim of his own devilish power, destroyed by his mental corruption. Chasehope's embarrassment is actually Buchan's most profound protest against the unthinking and self-righteous treatment practiced by the Scottish authorities against witches since the sixteenth century.

The Epilogue of the novel returns to the modern narrator. The narrator makes a brief summary of the official church history, portraying Chasehope as a virtuous man and David as a blind minister misled by Mark Kerr. The end of *Witch Wood* becomes most satirical of the religious judgments of official church ministers. Even Shillinglaw's inadequacies (his moral speculations), although not discreet, provide counterpoints to Chasehope's elaborated cunning. Although the decline of witchcraft becomes most evident in late seventeenth-century Scotland, Buchan seems to call attention to "judicial scepticism"[11] in order to raise public concern over the origins of evil rising in the course of human development.

III. "The numbness of loss, the languor of fear, gave place to recrimination": justifiable meaning of innocence and righteousness

Providing some contrast between the church elders and David, Buchan

[11] Brian Levack proposes this term, providing an explanation for the doubt concerning Scottish evidence in 1697-1700, and also calling for higher judicial standards of evidence by judges and lawyers. See Levack 7-33.

uses two other characters, Katrine and Montrose, to counterbalance different emotional responses to nature. The natural setting of the countryside and the wood does not appear until chapter four, in a scene that begins with David attending a woman's funeral. Many passages in this chapter show farming practices and the way of harvesting in seventeenth-century Scotland. David occasionally provides advice to the farmers about how these agricultural ways might be improved. However these innovations are rejected by the farmers because these new methods are not the "auld way" they are familiar with (*WW* 35). Although the new ideas are not popular among these country folk, David frequently likes to visit these field avenues, showing enthusiasm for nature. Wearing a hat with a bunch of primroses, David finds himself deeply obsessed with the beauty of nature. As he wanders through the bushes, he catches sight of a girl in a green dress, Katrine Yester, the niece of a farmer.

After a brief dialogue, Katrine takes David to her favorite place called Paradise where one can find peace and comfort free from worldly speculations, a symbol of innocence. David is fascinated by her beauty and learns with interest of her French background; he is particularly fascinated by her artless enjoyment of nature. Furthermore, she tells David that the groom who guided him to Calidon was the Marquis of Montrose, a cavalier poet and soldier in charge of an army on behalf of the King. Although Montrose wins some victories in the Highlands, his success does not remain long. On his second trip back to the wood, David finds certain village soldiers hunting for fugitives among Montrose's defeated army remnants. With Katrine's assistance, David sends Mark safely to Paradise, offering him food, and planning the next escape. Nevertheless, their visit to the woods does not go unnoticed: Isobel reports that Mark's cavalier clothes, hidden under a table in the manse, have been stolen. Katrine also mentions a village rumor indicating that Montrose has been meeting with the Queen of the Fairies in the Wood.

In addition to his gratitude towards David, Montrose attempts to intimate himself with Chasehope to see what he can catch as witchcraft proof of Chasehope. Later, Montrose explains the origin of the witches' to David. He recalls that the church "has banned innocence and so made a calling of hypocrisy, for human nature is human nature, and if you tell a man that ilka honest pleasure is a sin in God's sight, he finds a way to get pleasure and yet keep the name for godliness" (*WW* 145). Montrose's remark offers some insight: where there is a taboo, there is also a desire to transgress, and even to

obliterate it altogether. Sometimes the transgressor's pleasure of transgression may actually lead to his enjoyment, particularly while he attempts to demolish the taboo.

The ultimate climax of *Witch Wood* is an attack of the plague on Woodilee. The unusual mild weather lasted over into the New Year, causing great fear of illness. Within one week, fifty-nine people are dead and visitors refuse to come to the parish. The plague-stricken houses become isolated as their inhabitants migrate to other places. Although he makes every possible effort to help those who are ill, David feels depressed by his inability to help. The wood inhabitants become paralyzed with the long-termed pain of deprivation and fear, eventually turning their rage against the young minister:

> It was a proof of the returning strength of the parish that the burning of the cots started it out of apathy. Woodilee feebly and confusedly began to take stock of things, and tongues started to wag again. The numbness of loss, the languor of fear, gave place to recrimination. Who was responsible for the calamity of the pest? It must be a mark of the Lord's displeasure, but against whom? They remembered that their minister lay under the ban of the Kirk—had been forbidden to conduct ordinances—was convicted of malignancy and suspected of worse. In their search for a scapegoat many fastened upon David. (*WW* 159)

It is worth our attention to note that once the church cannot fulfill its educational function in society, people's social conscience could worsen and social order might soon break as a consequence.

Although confronting blind reproach from the inhabitants of the wood, David spares no effort in restoring order out of chaos, aided by Katrine who experienced many attacks of the plague in France. Also, with the physical assistance of Mark Riddel (a disguise name of Montrose in the wood), David constantly visits the sick, bringing them food, burying the dead, and burning the plague houses in order to halt the spread of the epidemic. Expectedly, their acts of assistance are often misunderstood and even resented; however, some are helped by their aid and manage to recover from the plague. Nevertheless, when the plague recedes, the village rumor spreads that David is in league

with village outsiders Katrine and Montrose, as well as with the Queen of the Fairies who plans to one day take the whole village under siege. Several ungrateful people begin to say that the plague attacked Woodilee as a punishment for its minister's sins.

In a chapter called "Sacrifice," Katrine eventually dies, overcome by weakness caused by her efforts during the plague. David insists on burying her in the wood called Paradise. Katrine is a romantic, innocent and benevolent figure for David as he encounters a series of dilemmas between church obligation and wood mystery. Daniell asserts that Katrine's sacrifice is symbolically "a need for [the] purgation" of Woodilee (183):

> Her ethereal nature also leaves the foreground free for compelling scenes like that with the witch-pricker. The old Roman altar where the Satanic rites take place is a Scottish High Place, like the grove of Ashtaroth; but it is without sweetness, reflecting the state produced by perverted Christianity rather than by African magic. (183)

The above criticism suggests that the orthodox Christian interpretation of evil might be taking advantage of its official privilege during the period, misleading people's moral judgment of evil in religious terms and appearances; however, it cannot avoid the moral imperative that any judgment about evil must rely on the doer's motive (as benevolent or selfish) rather than his behavior (as legal or illegal).

Katrine's representation of nature (both of the landscape and humanity) can be regarded as an alternative to both the mysterious witchcraft in the wood and to the cunning bigotry of the church. Her departure from the human world leaves David with a sense of fulfillment. David has no choice but to leave Scotland and seek possible new growth. MacLachlan suggests that Katrine "in a sense is Scotland, but a Scotland of natural feeling and pleasure without guilt, almost an older, pre-Reformation Scotland, which is denied and destroyed by everyone else" (*Scotnotes* 23). Katrine's symbolic link with past Scotland refers to the time when worship of the natural force is celebrated with an actual fertility ritual. In this kind of natural worship, the participants are contented in an actual embrace and in their interactions with nature's energy. However, by contrast, the wood meeting of erotic dancing and raging

music decreases the participants' innocent willingness to join such natural worship. It is notable here that as David returns to the wood and witnesses them in the first phase of the ritual, he says:

> He felt a boy again, for in the call there was the happy riot and the far horizons of childhood, and the noise of the hill winds and burns, and the scent of heather and thyme, and all the unforgotten things of memory. . . . He felt a *curious* pity and friendliness, for there was innocence here, *misguided* innocence. (*WW* 85; emphasis added)

The problem of evil evidently does not stem from the witchcraft ritual itself, but rather from the illness in people's minds.

Commenting on the problem of evil in the Western tradition, Kelly writes:

> Well into the seventeenth century, most westerners looked to the Bible, tradition, and reason as guides for knowledge. Reason usually played the role of explicator of the other two, especially the first. No one could really use reason completely on its own because Scripture came with divine inspiration, and human reason corrupted by original sin might err but the Bible could not. (119)

It can be inferred from the above criticism that evil can rationalize itself in every possible way, particularly in the way of divine will. It does not mean here that what Scripture preaches is wrong; rather, it does imply that the evil-doer may *partially* or *mistakenly* interpret the divine will for his own purpose. David is a literary man who himself tried writing a commentary on the Book of Isaiah. Carrying his books together with a small sword, David knows well to protect himself in the battles of an ideological world, "for he had won some skill of fenc[ing] in Edinburgh" (*WW* 64).

As a devout Christian and trustworthy parish minister, David has many personal attributes which seem very radical in seventeenth-century Scotland, such as his criticism of traditional farm methods, his enthusiasm for nature,

his open-mindedness in public discussion, his readiness to accept new ideas, and his courage to oppose church authorities, and so on. The more modest minister, Fordyce, actually suggests to David that it is the humans' fault if innocence goes astray in every possible way: "if young life may not caper on a spring morn to the glory of God, it will dance in the mirkwood to the Devil's piping" (*WW* 77). Montrose makes a similar suggestion concerning the truth of innocence: "Is it not more pleasing to God that His ministers should comfort the sick and the widow and the fatherless, and guide souls to Heaven, than that they should scrabble for civil pre-eminence?" (*WW* 30). These suggestive insights truly point out the fundamental problems of Scottish church society in the seventeenth century. David's failure to find the ultimate fulfillment in his homeland is Buchan's most poignant articulation of his expectations of Scotland's future.

IV. Conclusion

Witch Wood in itself does not aim to clarify which seventeenth-century religious sect offers the most convincing interpretation of evil; rather, it calls for an inquiry worth pondering—whether the nature of evil exists in the external or the internal, in the behavior or in the thought? After his father's death, David returns to the church congregation, preaching:

> as one who saw from a high mountain the littleness of life against the vast background of eternity. He spoke of the futility of mortal hopes, the *fallibility of man, the certainty of death*. In a passion of tenderness he pled for *charity and holiness* as the only candles to light the short dark day of life—candles which, lit by a heavenly hand, would someday wax into the bright everlasting day of the New Jerusalem. (*WW* 117; emphasis added)

David's speech highlights core values of the moral standard—the happy acceptance of the Fall and sincere charity towards fellow human sufferers. Humans are supposed to make their lives more dignified, avoiding evil seeds of thought such as those discussed above: extremes, hypocrisy, adherent

prejudice, and so on. After all, humans know subconsciously, if not consciously, that life can never be peaceful until a common identity is forged through a shared experience of nature. The key to this shared experience is to be motivated by benevolence in every deed.

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