The Witch-Finder King:
A Study of James I of England and his Relationship to Witchcraft

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Introduction and Background

King James the VI and I of Scotland and England has long been known as a witch hunter. Born in June 1566 to Mary Queen of Scots, James was placed on the throne a year later, replacing his unpopular mother. He was quickly taken into the care of the newly formed Presbyterian church and tutors, under whom he developed a scholar's mind. By 1583, James had taken full control of his Scottish throne and grown into a confident young king.[1] In the wake of a 1590 witchcraft conspiracy that threatened his life and bride, James became interested in witchcraft, actively participating in the trial, and later writing a demonological treatise. In the minds of many, including his subjects, James was a witch-finder king forty years before the notorious witch-finder general, Matthew Hopkins.[2] However, there have been few efforts to consider James' use of witchcraft as a state-building tool, instead describing his interest as paranoia resulting from his traumatic childhood. Studies of James have also tended to focus either on his Scottish or English reign, ignoring continuities and connections between the two in favour of a sharp divide; he is almost treated as though he were different people, rather than one king with multiple kingdoms.[3] Consequently, this thesis seeks to reconcile the perceived differences in his attitudes toward witchcraft over the course of his life and illustrating that James was not behaving erratically, but making conscious political decisions to use witchcraft trials for specific political ends, often quite successfully.

James' childhood and his Scottish minority had a significant impact on James, which influenced his reaction to future threats or political opposition. Despite his privileged position,

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[1] Jenny Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland" (Oxford University Press, September 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/14592.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Roger Lockyer and Peter Gaunt, *Tudor and Stuart Britain: 1485-1714*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 295; Jenny Wormald, "James VI and I: Two Kings or One?," *History* 68, no. 223 (1983): 188.

James' childhood was far from stable and loving. Within a year of his birth, James' father was murdered and his mother Mary was toppled in a coup, after which she fled to England. Baby James was then declared king of a politically unstable nation, embroiled in a civil war, and instructed by tutors such as the notoriously harsh humanist George Buchanan, an advocate of a strictly ordered lifestyle and a rigorous education.[4] This lack of a loving or supportive upbringing would have scarred anyone for life, and in James' case likely contributed to his nervous nature. Yet, it was a robust and effective education, which fostered a love of scholarship in James while also steeping him in political theory that gave him the tools to be a highly effective politician.[5] Although psychohistory has fallen out of favour, there is still a tendency to ignore this aspect of James' life and impose modern ideas of trauma on James' psychology, namely his neurotic tendencies. But if one takes a different view of his childhood, one which resists the impulse to impose modern attitudes, a different perspective emerges. More specifically, James' education was designed to prepare him for kingship and it did that with brutal efficiency.

However, it is important to acknowledge the political turmoil which shaped James' early years. Outside his nursery walls, James' kingdom was in disarray, with four different regents holding power between 1570 and 1573, two of whom were assassinated, and ongoing religious struggles over the Scottish church. Perhaps the most striking story from this period is that in which young James saw his paternal grandfather, who was regent at the time, bleed to death after defending the young king from an attempted coup, which was a deeply traumatizing event.[6] Additionally, for the first several years of his reign, there was an ongoing civil war with a faction

[4] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland"; Roger A. Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," in *Scots and Britons: Scottish Political Thought and the Union of 1603*, ed. Roger A. Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 115.
[5] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[6] S.J. Houston, *James I* (London: Routledge, 2014), 5–6.

who wished to restore his mother, then living in England, to the throne, further contributing to the instability.[7] Another regent fell after a messy coup in 1578, in which James was nominally involved, although at age twelve he likely had little real influence. At this point, he also began selecting favourites to assert his kingship and independence, a pattern which would continue all his life.[8] In short, James' minority was marked by instability, factional infighting, and violence. Hence, while James' childhood was what today would be called traumatic, and this trauma produced a man who understandably worried about assassinations and conspiracies, these worries were rational reactions, especially given he was king. So, James' childhood did have an impact on his psyche, but it also fostered a highly competent politician.

James' burgeoning political acumen was put to the test during his early reign by conflicts with both nobles and the Scottish church. One of the most notable incidents, known as the Ruthven Raid, came in 1582 when James began to assert his independence. Born out of animosity towards the Earl of Arran and the Duke of Lennox, James' favourite at the time, the Ruthven Raid was a coup that saw a new group of nobles take control of the government, while also kidnapping the king.[9] The conspirators' main grievances were the rising debt, the deteriorating relationship with England, and perceived hostility to the Calvinist church on the part of the former Catholic, Lennox.[10] James seemed unaware of, or unwilling to address, the other nobles' concern over his favourite Lennox's role in government. They held James captive in Ruthven Castle for ten months, ordered him to exile Lennox, and ruled in his name.[11] It was not a particularly effective coup, as the group began to fall apart almost immediately after seizing

[7] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[8] Ibid.
[9] Miles Kerr-Peterson and Steven J. Reid, eds., *James VI and Noble Power in Scotland 1578-1603* (London: Routledge, 2017), 32, 39.
[10] Kerr-Peterson and Reid, *James VI and Noble Power in Scotland 1578-1603*, 35, 40–41, 37.
[11] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."

power. Although James initially cooperated with the raiders and tried to hide his affection for Lennox, he eventually engineered his escape and declared himself a king above factions, marking the point when he truly began his personal rule with the support of conservatives and moderates. He also executed the Earl of Gowrie, one of the chief conspirators, less than a year later.[12] Hence, James was aware of the growing need to tame Scotland's "overmighty subjects" and establish stronger monarchical control after the Ruthven Raid. He also made it clear that he would not hesitate to strike against those who threatened him and make sacrifices for this goal, a trait he would exhibit for the rest of his life.[13] This does not mean that challenges to James' power were nonexistent after 1583 -- he would continue to struggle with strong-willed nobles throughout his Scottish personal rule -- but he had more control than before.[14] It likely also instilled in James a wariness towards his most powerful subjects and a constant vigilance against potential conspiracies or other signs of danger. Hence, the early experience of "overmighty subjects" and factional politics made James particularly aware of the importance of managing his nobles to protect himself.

Nobles were not the only ones challenging James' authority. The other primary source of conflict was a faction within the Scottish church, known as the Melvillian faction. Melvillians advocated for two main ideas that threatened James. First, they wanted ministerial parity, which meant equal authority for all clergymen and no episcopal hierarchy, which in turn challenged the hierarchical nature of society in general, including James' position as king.[15] Similarly, this faction advocated for radical Presbyterianism, where the only central church government was the

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[12] Kerr-Peterson and Reid, *James VI and Noble Power in Scotland 1578-1603*, 42, 44; Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[13] Kerr-Peterson and Reid, *James VI and Noble Power in Scotland 1578-1603*, 50.
[14] After this point, James also began to play both sides of the confessional debate, giving patronage to Catholics and Protestants in what he hoped was an equal degree of power.
[15] Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," 122–23.

General Assembly, where every minister present had a say, and each individual church was largely autonomous.[16] Second, the two kingdoms theory of government, which stated that there were two separate kingdoms within Scotland, the kingdom of God, or the church, and the kingdom of men, or the crown, was the other central component of Melvillian aims. In this political theory, the two kingdoms were to co-exist without interference from each other, with their own separate governments, meaning the king was to have no role in governing the church and the church was to have no role in governing the state.[17] Together, these ideas created tension between James and some clergymen because it challenged the societal hierarchy, which in turn challenged James' authority as king, and it gave the church an excuse to disobey James as he had no right to interfere in their affairs, according to the two kingdoms theory.[18] However, three things should be noted. First, this situation was a consequence of the Scottish reformation, which happened not under a monarch's authority as in many other states, including England, but in opposition to a Catholic queen. Consequently, until James had reached his majority, the church had largely been left to its own devices and was now being forced to reckon with an active and interested monarch for the first time.[19] Second, most clergymen were moderates and it was a small group of vocal radicals making trouble for James; this is not to say that they were not an influential group, but most church leaders were seeking an agreement with James.[20] Third, James was by no means rejecting Protestantism, and he attempted to behave as a model Protestant

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[16] Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, eds., *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*, 1st ed. (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 73.
[17] Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," 123. This is a brief summary of the issue and it was a much more complicated debate, but for the purposes of this thesis, this description will suffice.
[18] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 74; Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," 123.
[19] Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," 121–22; Jenny Wormald, "Ecclesiastical Vitriol: The Kirk, the Puritans and the Future King of England," in *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, ed. John Guy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 175.
[20] Wormald, "Ecclesiastical Vitriol," 186.

prince during his reign. He simply wanted a Reformed church that was not a political nuisance. Regardless of the nuances of the debate, James viewed the Scottish kirk as a source of potential trouble and rebellion, and which therefore needed careful management.

James' Early Responses to Witchcraft

Before discussing James' particular experience of witchcraft in 1590 and 1591, it is first necessary to establish the context of witchcraft beliefs and trial procedures in late sixteenth-century Scotland. During this period, Satan was a common figure in Scottish religious life, tempting the godly to sin; indeed, fear of the devil appears in records more often than faith in God.[21] Satan's presence extended to witchcraft, which was frequently defined as renouncing God to make a deal with the devil, usually with the promise to never want again.[22] This connects Scottish witchcraft with European and English writers, who defined witchcraft in a similar manner, although each region placed slightly different emphasis on the devil's role and his relationship to witches.[23] Witchcraft was very much a religious concern for early modern people, with some of the most prominent theorists being theologians who stressed that witchcraft was not a sin against other people, but a sin against God.[24] Witches were seen as people who had given in to the Devil's temptations and renounced Christianity in favour of Satan's inversion, which often mocked Christian practices; any association with witches was seen as turning one's back on the true faith. There was also the association of witchcraft with Catholic superstition in Protestant countries such as Scotland, with many witches' practices being described as resembling those of

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[21] Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), 134.
[22] Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion : The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 76; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 139. Some writers such as Christina Larner attribute this emphasis on Satan in Scotland to James' influence, but the situation is not clear cut. This idea will be discussed later along with James' wider influence on Scottish witch-hunts.
[23] Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2008), 11.
[24] Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 437.

Catholics. Thus, in a community which emphasized individual salvation, Protestant practices and moral reform, like Scotland, it was imperative to root out witches and restore God's community.[25]

In addition to the prominent role of the devil, Scottish witchcraft was also defined by maleficium, or evil deeds performed by magic. The most common form of maleficium was cursing a neighbour and causing either disease or death in their household, which included both animals and people. Although maleficium was an element of witch beliefs across Europe, there were regional variations, with coastal areas tending to attribute storms to witchcraft while more agricultural areas attributing crop failure to witchcraft.[26] Despite all these connections, Scottish witchcraft uniquely features fairies, ghosts, and other spirits as accomplices to witches or creatures that witches could summon if they wished. James spends the last book of *Daemonologie* discussing these spirits, indicating that these beliefs were prevalent in Scotland. However, he also dismisses them as the devil's tricks or Catholic beliefs, demonstrating that the Scottish church was trying to stamp out these superstitious beliefs and separate them from witchcraft.[27] Hence, Scottish witchcraft beliefs in the late sixteenth century were a mixture of continental, English, and Scottish features. Additionally, legal procedures were theoretically a mixture of inquisitorial and accusatory law, which made it very easy to begin witchcraft trial proceedings. Trials began after community accusations were brought to the local government, who then petitioned the privy council to try the witch, and guilt at the trial was determined by a jury that only needed a plurality to convict.[28] Unlike in a more accusatory-based system, such as

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[25] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 194–95.
[26] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London: Routledge, 2016).
[27] James I, *Daemonologie* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969).
[28] Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 18–19, 20, 21.

England, Scotland used some elements of inquisitorial justice, such as the government or local kirk sessions conducting investigations instead of the accuser and they theoretically required higher standards of proof. Despite these requirements for central government approval, carefully regulated torture, and more stringent proof, most of the trials were overseen by local officials with little consideration for the imposed regulations; witch trials in practice were very different than what the law said they should be.[29] Thus, sixteenth-century Scotland presented a unique mixture of beliefs and procedures related to witchcraft, which would have influenced James' initial experiences.

Within this context, James' first encounter with witchcraft started as a personal threat, with natural political consequences because James was king. James' first experience with witches was in late 1590 when he was made aware of ongoing investigations into a group of witches from East Lothian, whom historians refer to as the North Berwick witches.[30] The North Berwick hunt focused on a group of witches who conspired to create a sea storm in April 1589 under the devil's direction to prevent James' bride, Anne of Denmark, from sailing to Scotland. A healing woman named Agnes Sampson was the central witch in these trials, naming other conspirators and providing key confessions. In the initial interrogations, Sampson spoke about her role as a cunning woman, various acts of maleficium, and her role in summoning the storm.[31] As the examinations went on and the other accused witches implicated higher-status women, elements of political treason or conspiracy became more pronounced, especially related to the

[29] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 105–6; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 18, 26.
[30] Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 35–36. Some historians refer to the entire period of witch trials between 1590 and 1597 as the North Berwick trials. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to this group of accused witches as the North Berwick witches and the trials which took place in Edinburgh in 1590-1591 as the North Berwick trials in the rest of this thesis.
[31] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 137–38, 139, 148. This book includes transcriptions of all extant records related to the North Berwick trials and these pages reference confessions and examinations of Agnes Sampson.

Earl of Bothwell's role.[32] In addition to meeting at the North Berwick church with Satan as an inverted pastor, these witches also produced a wax image of the king, with which they planned to murder him.[33] Once these allegations surfaced, James became more interested in the trials and in making sure the conspirators were appropriately punished. For example, when a jury was reluctant to sentence Barbara Napier for consulting with Agnes Sampson, James personally intervened. He wrote to the assizes that had indicted Napier and ordered them to immediately "pronounce the doom [sentence] against her," because he believed she was part of the conspiracy to murder him. Under this pressure, the jury did sentence Napier to death, even though it had concluded that she did not attend the witches' meeting which summoned the storms.[34] Most of the individuals involved with the conspiracy were executed and the initial round of trials directly connected to James petered out by the end of 1591.

With a narrative of the trials established, let us turn to the many political implications of and motivations for James' actions. In the earliest records, the witches' treason was limited to preventing the queen's passage with a storm; the murder plot first appears in depositions from January of 1591 and is not fully formed until that May.[35] James' involvement was limited until these first indications in January that he was under direct threat. Although this was not the first time someone had tried to kill James, and these types of threats were arguably inevitable given his position, learning that someone had supposedly tried to kill you would unnerve anyone. It was also treason, which needed to be addressed quickly to preserve the king's safety and authority. These trials likely also reminded him of the Ruthven Raid in its conspiratorial nature, which explains his response to assert his authority and remove any remnants of the personal

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[32] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 166, 174–75.
[33] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 228, 267.
[34] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 251.
[35] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 129–30.

threat. Combined with James' understandable concern about assassination, James' response of forcing a death sentence against two well-off women suggests that he saw witchcraft as a means of attacking him just like any other coup or treasonous conspiracy.[36] This willingness to execute people who threatened him, regardless of their status, echoes the Ruthven Raid, illustrating that James saw these trials as inherently political, and that he would take whatever steps he deemed necessary to secure his position. Hence, James' interest in the North Berwick witches was driven by his belief that these witches attempted to commit treason, and, although he was saved by the grace of God, he wanted to see them punished to send a message to others and firmly establish his authority.

An additional political and personal consequence which explains why James became so invested in the North Berwick trials was the threat it posed to his dynasty. Agnes Sampson and the other witches from East Lothian originally came to the authorities' attention for their potential involvement in a plot to prevent James' queen from sailing to Scotland.[37] In August 1589, James married Anne of Denmark by proxy, finally providing some stability to the Stuart dynasty with the promise of heirs, once his bride arrived from Denmark.[38] This was a particularly triumphant moment for James, as he was fully stepping into his power and role as monarch, so it was imperative that Anne arrive safely and quickly. Additionally, given Scotland's recent history, which was particularly unstable due to a series of minor monarchs, regencies and early deaths, it was especially important for James to produce a male heir to secure the succession and prevent a power struggle like the one from the early years of his reign against his mother's competing claim to the throne. However, in 1589, a group of witches led by Agnes

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[36] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 251, 219; Greg Akgrigg, ed., *Letters of King James VI and I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 114.
[37] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 84–85.
[38] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."

Sampson and John Fian allegedly met in the North Berwick church to summon the storm which prevented Anne from making the voyage from Denmark.[39] Eventually, James made the journey to retrieve his bride himself, staying in Denmark for a few months before returning to Scotland with Anne.[40] Although it was certainly a frustrating sequence of events, it was not until a few months after his return to Scotland that James learned of the alleged conspiracy. In the early stages of the trials, before the revelation that James was also the target of an attempted assassination, James was interested because his wife and queen had been threatened, and by extension, he had been threatened. The lack of a clear line of succession also left James vulnerable to rival claimants, so it was imperative for the stability of his throne to silence potential dissenters and produce an heir. Thus, the plot to prevent Queen Anne from sailing to Scotland was both a political and a personal threat to James, which drove his interest in the North Berwick trials.

While the North Berwick trials presented a personal and dynastic threat, there were also other political considerations motivating James' involvement in the prosecution, namely in the form of power struggles with a supposedly treasonous noble. By June 1591, James believed that his cousin Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, had orchestrated the plot to murder James via witchcraft.[41] Prior to 1590, James had been in an ongoing conflict with Bothwell, not unlike his previous power struggles with other nobles, but the late 1580s were a time of intense tension between the cousins. It is also possible that some other nobles wanted to replace the unmarried and childless king with Bothwell, and while this is disputed by modern historians, there were

[39] James Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: A Horrible and True Story of Deception, Witchcraft, Murder, and the King of England* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 176.
[40] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[41] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 42.

rumours to this effect at the time.[42] Regardless, relations between James and Bothwell were poor, with Bothwell having been convicted of treason in 1589 before he withdrew from court. So, when in June 1591, the accused witches agreed that Bothwell was the one who instigated and organized the conspiracy, even though they did not refer to him in the earliest depositions, Bothwell was already in a delicate situation.[43] Given this context, James perhaps predisposed to believe that Bothwell was plotting against him. This was also an opportunity for James to move against a potential rival claimant to the throne shortly after firming up his position via marriage, while also removing an irritating nobleman. It was also a chance to remove the most prominent supporter of the Melvillian faction at court.[44] Indeed, after Bothwell was arrested, tried, and escaped, James continued to push for his return to Scotland for punishment or sought to ensure he remained far away from Scotland and not build a base in England.[45] Hence, James saw these witchcraft trials not only as a threat others could use against him, but also a political tool with which to defend himself and his crown from challengers.

However, these were not the only political considerations driving James' interest in the North Berwick case. It was also part of James' larger struggle with the Scottish kirk for political control. As mentioned earlier, James was in an ongoing dispute with a faction of the Scottish church, for which Bothwell was a known advocate. These disputes were at a particularly tense moment during 1590 and this conflict can be seen in the North Berwick trials.[46] Witchcraft trials or examinations were supposed to be conducted under royal authority, given by commissions to

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[42] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 39, 40.
[43] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 159, 174. The first reference is the first occurrence in the depositions and examinations of mention to Bothwell, which was in January 1591. The second reference is a later deposition involving multiple people in May 1591, by which point they agreed that Bothwell had organized the plot.
[44] Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," 133–34.
[45] James, *Letters of King James VI and I*, 120, 114.
[46] Wormald, "Ecclesiastical Vitriol," 175.

a specific person; in practice, however, trials were often run by local authorities and dominated by local concerns, with only nominal control by the central government. Usually, this meant the local kirk session would take the depositions and examinations while local judges oversaw the trial.[47] Compared to the rest of Western Europe, the Scottish church was particularly involved in the examinations before the trial. Additionally, in the early 1590s tensions were particularly high between James and the kirk in their broader struggles over church control, making this a particular moment of contention.[48]

During the early stages of the North Berwick trials, the Edinburgh kirk conducted most of the initial examinations.[49] However, this changed once James became personally involved and examined at least one witch. From that point on, administrators and judges connected to the central government, such as James' Lord Chancellor John Maitland, became much more involved in the administration of justice.[50] This was an opportunity to wrest the king's control over witch trials, which was a secular, not ecclesiastical, crime, back from the church and local notables who had been running the trials previously.[51] It sent the message that James was in control and would not let the church interfere with affairs that were his domain; it was a message of kingly authority that reaffirmed the hierarchy the Melvillians sought to challenge. Additionally, given the religious connotations of witchcraft, this was an opportunity for James to demonstrate his commitment to being a Godly ruler who protected his kingdom from a serious moral threat. Thus, James saw these trials as a chance to reassert his political authority where it

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[47] Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 25–26; Larner, *Enemies of God*, 105–6.
[48] Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 11; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 76.
[49] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 76.
[50] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 97–98.This increased interest and involvement of the upper echelons of Scottish society also corresponds with the increased attention on two women of higher-standing, Barbara Napier and Euphame MacCalzean. It is possible that these new suspects also contributed to the interest, but the discussion of witchcraft in relation to social standing is beyond the scope of this thesis.
[51] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 89.

had been quietly ignored and send a message to the Scottish kirk at an opportune moment, as any shrewd politician would.

In the immediate aftermath of the trials, James again used the situation to his political advantage, demonstrating his view of witchcraft trials as a political tool. After the main North Berwick trials concluded in 1591, James authorized a series of standing commissions in 1592 that had the right to try any suspected witches without having to come to the Scottish parliament for approval, as had been the case beforehand. This emphasized to the kirk and local magistrates that it was James who controlled the flow of justice in Scotland, no matter how much influence they had, further centralizing James' power. These commissions remained in place until 1597 and tried an unknown number of witches.[52] Their existence indicates two things. First, there was still a great deal of anxiety about witchcraft in Scotland and a widespread demand for trials, which were also encouraged by these commissions in a positive feedback loop. Second, James was willing to sanction and support these witch trials, even if only from afar.[53] It is evident from James' political writings that he was well aware of the importance of a king's political image or goodwill among both the common people and his highest-ranking nobles.[54] Together with the continuing anxiety over witchcraft in Scotland at the time, James likely established these commissions as a way to show that he took these anxieties seriously and was thus a responsible king who was also committed to removing the religious scourge of witchcraft. This is then not an odd obsession, but a rational, politically motivated response designed to bolster James' public image and power.

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[52] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 92–94.
[53] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 70.
[54] Neil Rhodes and Jennifer Richards, *King James VI and I: Selected Writings* (London: Routledge, 2016), 218.

James had already enacted a similar public relations maneuver with the publication of *Newes from Scotland*, a pamphlet describing the trials up to early 1591. Although James did not write this document, the man who likely did, Minister James Carmichael, had links to King James' court and the trials.[55] In this pamphlet, James is depicted as protecting Scotland from the devil's disorder by fighting these witches.[56] This would have bolstered the king's public image and it is entirely possible Carmichael wrote the pamphlet for this sole purpose, probably at the king's request.[57] So, given that James had already used these trials as a public relations tool to buttress his authority, it makes sense that he would continue to use witchcraft as a way to effectively signal his commitment fighting the devil and protecting his kingdom. This also helped legitimate the extension of his power into local jurisdictions. Allowing the trials to continue via the 1592 commissions, even if they were at arm's length from James, demonstrates this commitment in a more concrete way than any pamphlet ever could. Hence, even after the North Berwick trials were over and the personal threat was extinguished, James deliberately and continually used witchcraft as a public relations or political tool.

Witchcraft as a Political Tool: James' Relationship to Witchcraft in the Later 1590s

Traditionally, historians emphasize that James' views on witchcraft became more rational once he began his English reign because his new-found security calmed the pathological fears which drove his interest in witchcraft. However, as some scholars have pointed out, James' behaviour began to change in the later half of the 1590s, but this is still presented as James

[55] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 296, 292–93.
[56] *Newes from Scotland Declaring the Damnable Life of Doctor Fian a Notable Sorcerer, Who Was Burned at Edenbrough in Ianuarie Last. 1591. Which Doctor Was Register to the Deuill, That Sundrie Times Preached at North Baricke Kirke, to a Number of Notorious Witches. With the True Examinations of the Said Doctor and Witches, as They Vttered Them in the Presence of the Scottish King. Discouering How They Pretended to Bewitch and Drowne His Maiestie in the Sea Comming from Denmarke, with Such Other Wonderfull Matters as the like Hath Not Bin Heard at Anie Time. Published According to the Scottish Copie.* (London, 1592), fol. B2 front.
[57] Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 15; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 292.

taking a more skeptical position regarding witchcraft because of his decreasing paranoia.[58] Both these positions ignore the deeply political nature of James' interactions with witchcraft trials, which he continually used as a political tool. So, although James' outward behaviour changed during his last years in Scotland, when the shifting political circumstances are taken into consideration, James' actions were clearly guided by shrewd decisions about what would best serve his political interests. These shifting calculations occurred not when he moved to England, but when he had firmer control over his Scottish throne.

By 1597, the Scottish political situation had calmed down and James' position was more secure, removing the anxieties which had contributed to his interest in witchcraft earlier in the decade. Indeed, the two main sources of irritation for James in 1590, the Earl of Bothwell and the Melvillian faction in the kirk, were no longer concerns. After numerous attempts to arrest Bothwell so he could be punished as a convicted conspirator and witch-consultor, and an attack by Bothwell on James' Holyrood House residence, Bothwell finally fled Scotland permanently in 1595, removing this threat to James' throne.[59] Additionally, Anne had given birth to a healthy baby boy in 1594, thus making the Stuart dynasty more secure and weakening Bothwell's claim to the throne, which he essentially relinquished by fleeing the country.[60] More generally, troublesome nobles had been neutralized, at least for the moment, and James had managed to restore some measure of stability.[61] Finally, James had largely reversed the gains made by the Melvillian faction's attacks on episcopacy, taming the power of the kirk in the 1597 General

[58] Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 5; Julian Goodare, "Witchcraft in Scotland," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford University Press, 2013), 305.
[59] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 43, 48–49.
[60] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[61] Ibid.

Assembly.[62] James was also no longer in conflict with the most prominent Catholic lords, restoring their influence at court, and the Presbyterians had lost their strongest noble supporter when Bothwell fled.[63] Thus, the political circumstances which fed into James' anxieties about witchcraft in 1590 and 1591 had all but disappeared six years later and it was in this context that James decided to revoke the standing commissions established in 1592.

Given these changes, the commissions no longer bolstered James' authority and image, meaning James had no reason to allow the witch-hunts to continue. Furthermore, these trials were largely operating outside of central government oversight, contrary to James' intention, and, consequently, convicted many innocent people. Naturally, people complained about these injustices, attracting James' attention.[64] Hence, revoking the standing commissions served a new, two-fold, political purpose. First, it re-asserted that the crime of witchcraft was under the purview of the central government, not the kirk or local magnates, by reminding everyone that suspected witches could only be tried with the king or parliament's permission. Second, it was a chance for James to demonstrate that he took the concerns of his people seriously and was dedicated to being a just, Christian king. The latter of these goals was something James emphasized in both his treatises on kingship, illustrating that James believed it to be central to effective kingship.[65] So, the idea of being a just king was critical to James' state-building efforts, and revoking unjust commissions trying, and executing, innocent people certainly contributed to this effort. Therefore, the revocation of the witch-trial commissions illustrates the declining

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[62] Wormald, "Ecclesiastical Vitriol," 175; Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," 134.
[63] Mason, "George Buchanan, James VI and the Presbyterians," 133–34.
[64] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 93–94.
[65] Rhodes and Richards, *King James VI and I: Selected Writings*, 211, 222, 229, 262.

political usefulness of witchcraft for James and his increased control over Scotland, not a calming of pathological fears.

In addition to shutting down the continuing witch-hunts, James published his short treatise on witchcraft, *Daemonologie*, which provides further insight into his views on witchcraft. James likely began to write shortly after the North Berwick trials in 1592 but did not finish it until 1597, when it was published.[66] Although James draws on his recent experiences, counting the making of wax images and Catholic prayers as among the teachings of the devil, there is very little in the way of new arguments in his book.[67] *Daemonologie* begins with a discussion and condemnation of learned magic, or necromancy, as the workings of the devil, just like witchcraft.[68] Here there is a notable difference between James and other authors as James is particularly harsh towards alchemists, court astrologers, ritual magicians, and other occult practitioners, whereas other typically give these types of learned magicians a pass. This is likely because, before and during the North Berwick trials, the Earl of Bothwell was accused of consulting with a ritual magician named Ritchie Graham, who was connected to Bothwell and admitted to consulting spirits. The exact nature of these consultations is unclear; some say Bothwell was just seeking guidance on his relationship with James, but there were rumors that Bothwell was again plotting to kill him with Graham's magical help, explaining why James might have opposed learned magicians while others did not.[69] Hence, even in his scholarly work, James' reactions to witchcraft were guided by rational reactions to political threats from his most important rival. The second book then proceeds with a standard discussion of witchcraft as

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[66] P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, "A Royal Witch Theorist: James VI's Daemonologie," in *The Science of Demons*, ed. Jan Machielsen (Routledge, 2020), 168.
[67] James I, *Daemonologie*, 44; Maxwell-Stuart, "A Royal Witch Theorist," 167–68.
[68] James I, *Daemonologie*, 16–17, 25.
[69] Maxwell-Stuart, "A Royal Witch Theorist," 170.

conceived as a sin, but also as a sin which was usually committed by those who already hated God.[70] However, the final book discusses the uniquely Scottish ideas of fairies or spirits, which are also the products of sin, and the punishment of witches.[71] James' thoughts on punishment, while not particularly out of line with contemporary thinking generally, do reflect Scottish law and his experiences at North Berwick more particularly.

Given the strong political connections between James and witchcraft that have been made here, it is perhaps tempting to characterize James an opportunistic cynic with no sincere belief, but a close reading of *Daemonologie* reveals this is not the case. Although James' arguments are hardly original, there is no indication that he believed witches and Satan had no real power in the world. Indeed, James' stated purposes are to illustrate the reality of witchcraft, the importance of punishing witches and respond to skeptics of witchcraft.[72] Nowhere is there an indication that James did not support these beliefs, especially given the rarity of true skepticism in the early modern world. However, this work also reflects James' broader interest in scholarship. From a young age, James exhibited a strong interest in his studies; he also wrote poetry and several treatises on subjects varying from political theory to tobacco use.[73] Throughout *Daemonologie*, James takes every opportunity to demonstrate this knowledge, mostly by citing scripture and alluding to classical literature, and he has an entire section on the etymology of "sorcerer."[74] His interest as a researcher of witchcraft also appeared during the trials. During an interrogation of Geillis Duncan, another accused witch, James asked her to play a magic song on a harp like instrument, illustrating that he was curious to learn more about witchcraft, even when

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[70] James I, *Daemonologie*, 32.
[71] James I, *Daemonologie*, 56–57, 74, 77.
[72] James I, *Daemonologie*, fol. A2 reverse.
[73] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[74] James I, *Daemonologie*, 5, 31; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 329–30.

investigating a treasonous woman. James also supposedly "tooke great delight to bee present" during the examinations, further pointing to his personal and academic interest in witchcraft.[75] It was this interest which contributed to the writing of *Daemonologie*. But it is important to acknowledge that his academic interest was still deeply political. James' academic curiosity could be seen as an effort to understand God's enemies in his kingdoms so that he might better protect his subjects or to present himself as an active opponent of earthly and heavenly traitors. Hence, for James, witchcraft was also a topic of scholarly exploration, a sincere belief and political tool at the same time.

James also wrote *Daemonologie* with another political purpose in mind. By and large, *Daemonologie* was an explanation for his involvement in the initial witch trials now that he had officially revoked the commissions. James is careful to position his interest in the framework of a divine battle, instead of a personal political dispute. He does not talk about witches as those who use maleficium to harm others, but in religious terms as those who have embraced the Devil over God. James also advocates for harsh punishments for witches, stating "[t]hey ought to be put to death according to the Law of God," specifying they should be burned, which is in line with Calvinist views of a godly magistrate.[76] Additionally, James specifies that it is part of a monarch's divine duty to punish witches and to spare them would be an affront to God. This conception of monarchy is compatible with his thoughts in *Basilicon Doron*, which he wrote as a guide to kingship for his son, and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*¸ a treatise on political theory. In *Basilicon Doron*, James tells his son that a king's first duty is to God and in *The Trew Law* he asserts he is defining kingship on biblical models.[77] Both of these claims suggest that

[75] Ibid.
[76] James I, *Daemonologie*, 77.
[77] Rhodes and Richards, *King James VI and I: Selected Writings*, 211, 261.

James saw kings as filling a divinely ordained role as God's representative on earth. Defending his realm from witches fits neatly within this paradigm because James was seeking to root out the enemies of God from his realm when he took an active role in the North Berwick trials. Furthermore, James again advocates for harsh punishment for witches, telling his son that he is "bound in conscience" to never forgive a witch, alongside murderers, poisoners, and traitors.[78] Hence, James' stance on witchcraft in the *Daemonologie* is consistent with his broader thoughts on a king's duties, and, in this context, was partially a defence of James' actions that furthered his broader public relations project.

Although James took a significantly less active role in the witch trials of the mid-1590s, his actions and writings from the period demonstrate a remarkably consistent viewpoint. James remained personally invested in witchcraft, through his academic treatise, *Daemonologie*, and, although it was no longer a direct threat, it still stirred passionate emotions.[79] However, James' continued to use trials, or rather, access to them as a political tool to demonstrate his control, while also working rhetoric against witches into his presentation as the just, Christian king of Scotland, which was especially important to counter Presbyterian criticisms.

King James I and English Witchcraft

Historians tend to treat James VI of Scotland and James I of England as two separate people, emphasizing the distinctions in his governmental styles, and, similarly, his attitudes toward witchcraft are often described as a move towards skepticism.[80] While one of the primary aims of this thesis is to argue that James' beliefs should be examined over the course of his entire

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[78] Rhodes and Richards, *King James VI and I: Selected Writings*, 221.
[79] Maxwell-Stuart, "A Royal Witch Theorist," 174.
[80] Wormald, "James VI and I: Two Kings of One?," 188.

life, not divided neatly into English and Scottish periods, it is still important to acknowledge the differences between Scotland and England. So, before examining James' interactions with English witches, it is first necessary to lay out the different circumstances James faced in his southern kingdom, especially regarding politics, religion, and witchcraft beliefs.

The political and religious situations in England were significantly calmer than in Scotland, providing a more stable, and less anxiety-provoking, situation for James. Now, this is not to say that it was smooth sailing after 1603. James certainly faced his share of political tribulations in England, the most memorable of which was the 1605 Gunpowder Plot.[81] He had difficulties with uncooperative parliaments, largely born from contentions over Parliament's authority versus the king's authority, James' desire to unify his kingdoms, his spending habits, and general differences in style.[82] But he now had the benefit of twenty years experience as king, even though it was in a different country, which made his English kingship slightly easier. However, objections voiced in Parliament or at court never rose to the level of outright rebellion; English monarchs had already quelled their "overmighty subjects," which created more stability. Certainly, critics objected to his proclamations, his statements on kingship and so on, but they did not try to unseat him when he took the English throne or have quite the same rebellious character as his Scottish court; there were certainly never any noble-organized assassinations or kidnapping attempts.[83] There were a handful of Catholic plots, but James turned these to his advantage by styling himself as a Catholic-hunter, which was generally well received. So, while James did have to manage a difficult relationship with his English Parliament, he was in a relatively more stable position.

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[81] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[82] Lockyer and Gaunt, *Tudor and Stuart Britain*, 327.
[83] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."

Similarly, there was less opposition to James from the Anglican Church, which had developed under the direction of a monarch with a strong adherence to episcopal hierarchy.[84] Indeed, James loved the Anglican Church, contrasting it starkly with the tense relations in Scotland. Some groups in England hoped he would support a Presbyterian style of church governance, but these were not mainstream requests. James also had to be on guard against Catholics who hoped that he would be more tolerant because his mother was a Catholic, but that was not to be, especially after the public spectacle of the Gunpowder Plot.[85] For the most part, however, James steered a middle road, ignoring quiet, loyal Catholics and refusing the suggestions of puritans. There were no factions within the church that challenged James' right to rule the way the Melvillian faction did in Scotland.[86] Thus, while religion presented a source of debate or tension during James' English reign, the church itself never presented a constitutional or legal threat to James' authority that needed to be put down, instead enhancing his position. Therefore, James did not face the same sort of political instability or challenges in England, meaning he did not need to deal with his nobility or church in the same way as he did in Scotland.

Although England and Scotland were neighbours, the experience of witches and beliefs about those witches differed greatly between the two countries. As mentioned earlier, Scottish beliefs tended to bear more resemblance to continental thought than English thought, the latter of which has often been discussed as separate from witchcraft in the rest of Europe. While the distinctions are often overblown and there were more similarities than differences, there was still a gap between what a witch was believed to be. English witchcraft tended to place less emphasis

[84] Ibid.
[85] Lockyer and Gaunt, *Tudor and Stuart Britain*, 306, 312, 315.
[86] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."

on the demonic or religious aspect of witchcraft, instead focusing on maleficium and familiars, which were considered the source of a witch's power.[87] This is not to say that English witch beliefs do not feature demonic or religious elements -- indeed these concerns were present in England as well -- but they take on a different intensity in Scotland under a Calvinist church.[88] Additionally, bewitchment could mean a witch caused someone to fall sick or die, but there was also a strong connection between bewitchment and possession that does not show up as prevalently in Scotland.[89] So, for someone coming from Scotland to England, like James, his idea of what a witch was might not have matched that of his English subjects.

Additionally, the legal process for dealing with a witch was quite different. England's justice system was more of an accusatorial system, which meant the crown was less involved in questioning witnesses and gathering testimony before the trial; that burden was on the person who accused the witch.[90] This also meant that witches were not tortured as often as in Scotland, especially since there was less emphasis on pricking as a method of identifying witches.[91] In theory, Scotland and England both required approval from the privy council to use torture during investigations, but in practice, England rarely used torture while Scotland was more willing to allow it. Punishments were also lighter in England, at least when James arrived in 1603, as witches were hanged, not burned, which is related to the emphasis in English witchcraft on the offence as harm against a person rather than as heresy per se.[92] These differences were also

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[87] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 67.
[88] James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England: Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 51; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 10–11.
[89] Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft Trials in England," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford University Press, 2013), 292–93.
[90] Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, 21.
[91] Alan MacFarlane and James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 20.
[92] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 200.

partly due to the fact that England used a common law system, which emphasized relationships between subjects, while Scotland used civil law, which emphasized the rights of a ruler; this likely contributed to the distinct dynamics around witch trials in the two kingdoms.[93] Additionally, the Church of England played a comparatively small role in English witch trial procedures.[94] Taken together, these features of the legal system produced a different dynamic around witch-hunts, where the emphasis was on community harm and witchcraft was not as tied to the central state. Finally, during the period of the European witch trials, significantly more witches were tried, and executed, in Scotland than in England, especially in proportion to their populations. Even though most of the Scottish trials occur after 1592, this disparity still points to a different procedure for dealing with and understanding witches in this period.[95] Thus, the systems of belief and justice surrounding witchcraft in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England and Scotland produced very different dynamics. And with the context for James' experiences in England established, let us now turn to some particular encounters with witchcraft.

Shortly after James arrived in England, there was a burst of interest in witchcraft, not necessarily because of his encouragement, but because his new subjects and advisors believed it would please him. In 1603, James' *Daemonologie* was republished in London for his English subjects to read, and, during this time, there was also a general rise in interest in witchcraft literature, most famously in William Shakespeare's 1606 play *Macbeth*.[96] This is the first indication people viewed James as a witch-hunter when he came to England. Similarly, advisors

[93] Lockyer and Gaunt, *Tudor and Stuart Britain*, 320–21.
[94] Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 11.
[95] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 60–61.
[96] Stuart Clark, "King James's Daemonologie: Witchcraft and Kingship," in *The Damned Art*, ed. Sydney Anglo (London: Routledge, 1977), 156; John Newton and Jo Bath, eds., *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 39.

close to the king began working on a new witchcraft act modelled on the Scottish one to present to James.[97] This act increased punishments for witches and emphasized the witch's covenant with the devil, which had not been a component of the previous law; both changes were more in line with Scottish beliefs and practices. However, James was not the one driving the Act's creation, although he certainly supported it, and it is likely that this was an attempt by his advisors to flatter him.[98] Here again though, James' interest in witchcraft was political, as a demonstration that he supported the concerns of his advisors and was fulfilling his Godly duty to protect his subjects from the Devil. However, after the passage of the act, James did not push for a concerted witch-hunt and instead focused on other issues, such as the Catholic plots and establishing himself in his new kingdom. This decision to not pursue a pogrom against witches is consistent with James' earlier behaviour after the North Berwick trials.[99] There, although he established commissions, James did not actively encourage witchcraft hunts, seemingly content once the trials had served their political purpose and punished the treasonous witches. In England, neither of these were important factors, as James was safe from witches, and no one at high levels of government had attempted to use witchcraft to conspire against a monarch. Hence, the 1604 Witchcraft Act did not serve an active political purpose but established James' commitment to his role as a Godly king in his new kingdom.

One notable encounter between James and a reportedly bewitched individual points to his continued interest in the subject of witchcraft. In 1604, a young woman named Anne Gunter fell ill, supposedly as the result of bewitchment by two neighbours, with whose families her father had been quarrelling for several years.[100] Her fits, which persisted for several months attracted

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[97] Newton and Bath, *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, 11–12, 39.
[98] Newton and Bath, *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, 118, 10–11.
[99] Newton and Bath, *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, 45.
[100] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 43–44, 46.

attention from the community and some Oxford clergy, who eventually came to observe her. Despite the attention, from the beginning some people thought Anne was simulating her fits at the request of her father, Brian Gunter.[101] Regardless, the two accused witches were tried (but acquitted) in 1605, and it was during James' visit to Oxford that year that Brian Gunter approached the king, asking James to intervene in his daughter's case. However, during this time the bishop of Salisbury also became interested in the case, likely due to the amount of attention it attracted, and moved Anne to his residence.[102] There, away from the influence of her father, Anne developed a positive relationship with her caretakers, who encouraged Anne to confess that she was simulating the fits. James met with Anne four times in the late summer and early autumn of 1605 before concluding that she was not bewitched.[103] Consequently, a Star Chamber case prosecuting Brian and Anne Gunter for fraud began in late 1605 and James pushed for the matter to be completed quickly. This brief encounter demonstrates a few things. First, James was still interested in witchcraft on some level, likely out of a continuing desire to present the image of a godly, just king who protected his subjects, otherwise, he would not have become involved in the case of a minor gentleman with few, if any, connections to court. Indeed, James had an interest in uncovering fraudulent accusations of bewitchment during his time in England, using these as a chance to demonstrate his knowledge of witchcraft and reinforce that he was actively fighting the devil in England.[104] Anne Gunter's case fits neatly into this trend, and the fact that he made the time to speak with her on four occasions illustrates that he still viewed witchcraft as a useful

[101] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 43, 102, 112–13.
[102] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 137–38, 168, 169–70.
[103] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 180, 183. James likely would have met with her at least once more, but was distracted by the Gunpowder Plot in early November. Additionally, he would have left most of the intense interrogations to others.
[104] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 178.

political tool. Thus, James' interest in and motivations around witchcraft remained consistent during the early part of his reign.

After this point, James' public interactions with witchcraft became minimal and followed the same pattern as the Anne Gunter case. The most notable example of this is the 1616 Leicester case involving a young boy who accused fifteen women of bewitching him. James arrived in town partway through the trials after nine of the women were executed, questioned the boy, and deemed him a fraud, thus saving the remaining six women.[105] Again, James was likely interested in the case because he wanted to demonstrate his knowledge of witches by proving that this was a fake accusation when the officials in town could not.[106] Continuing involvement in witch trials remained a good image boost, as a way to depict himself as a king who actively fought the Devil's agents.[107] James did on occasion intervene in cases like this going forward, but these were not common and he had more important concerns on his mind for most of his reign.[108] The traditional argument is that James' previous interest in witches had been dedicated to proving that they were real, so this turn toward exposing frauds and the lack of interest in witch-hunts represents a change in his beliefs.[109] James may have been more likely to be skeptical of English cases, or at least the ones brought to his attention, because they were possession cases, which he does express some level of skepticism towards in the third book of *Daemonologie*.[110] Yet, if one believed in and knew a great deal about witchcraft, exposing fake cases was a way to

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[105] Clark, "King James's Daemonologie," 162.
[106] It is also hard to not to see a certain amount of ego investment for James in these cases, as he had a habit of arguing that he was the one to determine the truth of the matter, including during the Gunpowder plot.
[107] Wormald, "James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland, England, and Ireland."
[108] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 178. Some of the more pressing concerns include the Thirty Year's War and ongoing money debates with Parliament. These were obviously not the only concerns on his mind, but they were one of the more important policy issues, which also contributed to his difficulties with parliaments.
[109] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 31; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 34. These are just a couple of examples of prominent historians stating that his interest waned or his position changed in England.
[110] James I, *Daemonologie*; Newton and Bath, *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, 17.

demonstrate this knowledge. It was also an important part of a king's role to uphold justice, so preventing innocent women from being hanged would certainly be part of this role, which in turn consistently served James' public relations and political agendas. Hence, James' behaviour in England, namely continuing to intervene in witch trials brought to his attention by others to serve as a public relations message, was very much consistent with his behaviour in Scotland.

Consequences, Connections, and Conclusions

Scotland was the region that was most affected by James regarding witchcraft prosecutions. First, the North Berwick trials and subsequent commissions sparked six years of intense witch-hunting across the country, particularly in the Lowlands regions, with spikes in 1591 and 1597. This period was the first national hunt in Scotland, of which there would be three more before the witch-hunts tapered out in the later seventeenth century. Before 1591 there had been isolated cases, but nothing of the scale that was to come after North Berwick.[111] Of course, James was not completely responsible for the witch-hunts that occurred during his reign. The 1591 trials were brought to his attention once they were underway, but without the encouragement and legitimacy his involvement provided, it is highly unlikely that the hunts would have garnered the momentum they did. The 1597 hunt also corresponds with the publication of *Daemonologie*, suggesting that it further encouraged the trials.[112] So, James had a hand in legitimizing and encouraging Scottish witch-hunting in the 1590s, which resulted in a large number of executions across Scotland.[113] But, even here James' impact is mixed, as his direct support for trials were limited to authorizing commissions, of which historians continue to

[111] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 69, 60–61.
[112] Larner, *Enemies of God*, 60–61.
[113] This is not to suggest that James was the only reason that the witch hunts occurred in the 1590s. There were numerous other factors at play, of which James was only one.

debate the significance, and in some circumstances James clamped down on overzealous local witch hunters.[114] Additionally, James attempted to reassert centralized control of witch trials, but this was only marginally successful, as the trials effectively remained under local control, although it sent a useful message to his political opponents. Traditionally, historians have argued that James was responsible for bringing continental demonology to Scotland when he returned from Denmark in 1589. More recent assessments suggest that those ideas were already in Scotland at the time and that James likely did not discuss demonology with scholars in Denmark.[115] Hence, James did not do much to influence elite thought on witchcraft. So, the biggest impacts of James' involvement in the North Berwick witch trials and writing *Daemonologie* was inadvertently sparking a six year long witch panic and creating a centuries-long reputation as a with-hunter.

If James' impact on Scottish witch-hunting and trials was minimal, then it was non-existent in England. There was an initial burst of interest in witchcraft literature upon his ascension, but that was due to public interest in the monarch rather than any real concerns about witches.[116] Similarly, his documented interest in witches may have inspired some advisors to create the 1604 Witchcraft Act, but James was not directly responsible for any of the changes made.[117] Additionally, after the act was passed, there was neither a push from James to seek out witches nor a general increase in punishment or hunting of them. The 1604 Witchcraft Act thus had little impact on the identification or punishment of witches and did not result in people being

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[114] Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 93; Goodare, "Witchcraft in Scotland," 304–5. Some historians argue that the commissions directly stimulated the witch hunts while others believe James and the privy council were responding to pressures from below. It is the opinion of this author that it was likely a combination of the two.

[115] Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 11; Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 39; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 35.

[116] Newton and Bath, *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, 39.

[117] Newton and Bath, *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, 10–11.

convicted for associating with them, so the act failed to achieve its aims.[118] Furthermore, James had no connection with the one highly public trial during his reign, and only became involved in witch cases when he happened to be nearby, as in the 1616 Leicester case, or someone asked him to get involved, as in the Anne Gunter case.[119] Finally, there were no politically important hunts during James' reign similar to the North Berwick incident, which would have pulled him into a trial and thus given him the chance to have some sort of impact on the course of English witchcraft history. Indeed, witchcraft trials and convictions were generally declining in England by the time James took the throne, a trend that continued for much of the seventeenth century.[120] Hence, James did not have much if any impact on English witchcraft trials or beliefs.

If James had little impact on the witchcraft beliefs and trials in his kingdoms believed, the question remains as to how typical James' experiences and views about witchcraft were of larger early modern beliefs about witchcraft. First, as mentioned above, James' beliefs regarding what a witch was, what they were capable of, the methods they used and so on, as expressed in *Daemonologie*, were conventional beliefs for an elite person at this time. There were some unique elements -- largely in the emphasis on fairies and hatred of learned magic -- but *Daemonologie* mostly reflects elite demonological thought in the late sixteenth century.[121] However, in terms of the similarities of James' experience to someone involved in an ordinary village witch trial as a victim, there is a surprising amount of overlap. Village witchcraft cases were often deeply tied to personal quarrels and village disputes that had often been simmering for years, if not decades, before exploding into a witchcraft accusation.[122] This dynamic has

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[118] Newton and Bath, *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, 127.
[119] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 178, 168.
[120] Gaskill, "Witchcraft Trials in England," 293; Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 209.
[121] Maxwell-Stuart, "A Royal Witch Theorist," 167–68, 170, 173.
[122] Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt*, 92–93, 96, 104–5.

parallels to the situation between James and Bothwell, who had been in conflict for a couple of years before 1591 when things came to a head because of the witch conspiracy. There was also a political element to witchcraft cases, even when a king was not involved, as power dynamics in the community often affected the trial's course.[123] Surprisingly, in many cases, the person with higher social or economic standing was often the accuser or supposed victim of the witch, which is also the case in the dynamic between James, Bothwell, and the other accused witches.[124] Finally, it was quite common for there to be a fear of conspiracy in many witch trials, making James' fears not too far outside the norm.[125] Hence, there were parallels between the standard witch trial dynamic and the dynamic James experienced during the North Berwick trials. Therefore, James' beliefs and experiences were representative of early modern witchcraft in general with, of course, added complications deriving from his status as king.

James remained interested in witchcraft for most of his life, including after his accession to the English throne. His initial interest in witchcraft was spurred by two main factors. First, he was personally threatened in multiple ways by the supposed conspiracy of the North Berwick witches. Second, there were multiple political ramifications to the trials, including the role of the Earl of Bothwell and the implications for James' relationship with the kirk. These factors created a situation where James was able to use witch trials as political tool to reassert his authority and bolster his image as a godly king in Scotland, setting an early pattern for his relationship to witchcraft. This experience also spurred James to write his own demonological treatise, much like many other demonologists, which further supported his efforts to strengthen the Scottish monarchy. After 1597, when *Daemonologie* was published, James took a more passive role

[123] Gaskill, *Witchcraft*, 44.
[124] Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter*, 70.
[125] Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 10.

regarding witchcraft partially because it had less political importance in England and was thus of less practical use to him as a tool to counter direct challenges to his authority, although he continued to use it a public relations tool. However, this does not mean that James turned to skepticism, which would be shocking considering what he wrote in *Daemonologie*. It also bears mentioning that the early modern world was one imbued with supernatural power everywhere, and complete disbelief in the supernatural, including the devil's power on earth, was not only rare, but unorthodox. In this regard and the dynamics around his witch trial, James' experience reflected some of the hallmarks of European witch trials, just playing out on an elite level. Regardless, James' relationship with witchcraft was not defined by irrational anxieties born of traumatic childhood that were calmed upon his arrival in England, but rather characterized by consistent and logical political decisions, made within a framework of sincere belief, that served his public image, sent a message to his critics, and strengthened his power.

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