Piercing the Veil

The Experience of Trance in Early Modern Scotland

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**Abbreviations**

<table>
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<tr>
<td><em>Maitland Misc</em></td>
<td><em>Miscellany of the Maitland Club</em>, 4 vols. (1833-47).</td>
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Introduction

It may be supposed not repugnant to Reason or Religion to assert ane invisible polity, or a people to us invisible, having a Commonwealth, Laws & Oeconomy, made known to us but by some obscure hints of a few admitted to their Converse.¹

In early modern Scotland, as in the rest of early modern Europe, there was an entrenched belief that man's terrestrial world coexisted alongside ‘ane invisible polity’. This dissertation is about those select few who developed a relationship with this spiritual otherworld, whether that be receiving spiritual visitors, travelling to unknown places or acquiring information inaccessible to their human peers. In focusing on the means by which these diverse relationships with the otherworld occurred, this dissertation will posit the thesis that the altered state of consciousness known as trance was the critical facilitator and will seek to understand how trance was experienced in early modern Scotland.

Historians of early modern witchcraft, traditionally operating from a baseline assumption that reports of supernatural experiences reflect nothing more than superstitious stories, have tended to focus their attention on what these stories can tell us about people’s beliefs and how such issues as gender, religion and community conflict manifested themselves in witchcraft accusations. As the discipline of History has begun to catch up with the ‘cognitive revolution’ taking hold in other disciplines however, interest has been generated in the ontological foundation of these experiences.² By approaching reports of supernatural experiences as ‘genuine experiences, which occurred in historical time and space’, historians of the likes of Emma Wilby, Owen Davies, Julian Goodare, Éva Pócs and Gabor Klaniczay have sought to understand what lay at

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the core of such experiences. Systematizing these various ad hoc investigations in his controversial work *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe*, Edward Bever set out to irreversibly demonstrate how from a neurobiological perspective early modern supernatural experiences were real. As Bever makes clear in his response to Michael Ostling's critique of his book, this was not an attempt to dismantle the interpretations of cultural historians, but an effort to give neurocognitive explanations ‘a place at the table’; an attempt to show how cognitive mechanisms and cultural constructs worked together to create real visionary experiences. Coming from the other side of the disciplinary dividing line, medical and psychiatric anthropologists Rebecca Seligman and Laurence J. Kirmayer have similarly demonstrated the benefits of a cultural neuroscience approach, insisting that ‘every complex human experience emerges from an interaction of individual biology and psychology with social context’. Such an approach effectively derails the polemical fictional/real arguments that have plagued the question of early modern supernatural experiences; these experiences were neither the real result of neurobiological brain functions, nor culturally scripted fictions, but the result of the two working together. In sharing such a belief this dissertation will be rejecting even those psychoanalytical

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4 Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe*.


interpretations applied by Diane Purkiss and Lyndal Roper. Whilst the suggestion that fantasy elements of confessions served as vehicles for repressed emotion surely reflects some truth, such an interpretation can, as Emma Wilby has convincingly argued, ‘become reductionist’, closing our minds to other possibilities.

In opening our minds to the possibility of trance it is important to first acknowledge that this was a recognized phenomenon in early modern Scotland. Trance was explicitly recorded in a number of instances, as for example at the 1675 synod of Aberdeen where it was complained how ‘under pretence of trances’, people were ‘goeing uith these spirits commonlie called the fairies’. Discerning incidents of trance has also been integral to a number of historians’ theses; Éva Pócs in her work Between the Living and Dead argued that magical practitioners used trance to contact supernatural beings; Carlo Ginzburg in The Night Battles demonstrated how the benendanti used trance to allow their souls to engage in night battles; and in his discovery of the seely wight cult Julian Goodare suggested that its human members entered into trances. In spite of such discussions of trance little attempt has been made to understand the phenomenon or how it was experienced. The exception to this is Emma Wilby. In her books The Visions of Isobel Gowdie and Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits, Wilby reconstructs a number of likely cases of trance-induced visionary experiences. Without taking away from Wilby’s important contribution, her almost exclusive use of anthropological studies of shamanic trance to guide her search for early modern trance experiences is limiting. Shamanic trance constitutes its own distinct form of trance in that it uniquely involves all three of

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8 Wilby, Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits, p.189.
11 Wilby, The Visions of Isobel Gowdie; Wilby, Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits.
the following: voluntary control over trance, interplay with audience and post-trance memory.\textsuperscript{12} Given this restrictive definition of trance, it is likely the case that Wilby overlooked other occurrences of trance that did not fit this mold. Widening the scope of anthropological studies of trance and placing a greater emphasis on medical and psychiatric insights into trance, this dissertation hopes to avoid such a problem.

The present-day medical, psychiatric and anthropological insights into trance will be set out in Chapter One, which intends to conclude with a list of the salient symptoms of trance. Once equipped with this understanding, it will be possible to turn to our two early modern sources, Scottish witch trial records and the literature on Scottish seers, in search of trance experiences. Using the cluster of likely examples of trance isolated in Chapter Two, we will turn in Chapter Three to question whether any of these trances were experienced with a degree of control. The evidence unearthed as a result of using present-day medical, psychiatric and anthropological insights into trance, should hopefully go some way in combatting the criticisms made of retrospective diagnosis as a historical approach to early modern supernatural phenomena.\textsuperscript{13} In hoping to answer Tom Webster’s question ‘what do we gain from such an analysis?’ for instance, this dissertation hopes to demonstrate how using the modern medical, psychiatric and anthropological literature to both confirm that someone was experiencing a trance and understand how or why they experienced trance can yield information about their lives that would otherwise go unnoticed.\textsuperscript{14}

The early modern sources we will be mining for possible trance experiences are not exempt from problems. Whilst the records of Scottish witch trials offer an invaluable source of evidence in that they are replete with reports of supernatural experiences, it has been suggested that such reports reflect elite interests elicited through coercive interrogation questions. In overcoming this problem, Chapters Two and Three will only be discussing reports that contain


enough details of the sort that lie outside interrogators’ interests to convince us that they really were told by the accused. Whilst early modern treatises on the prophetic abilities of Scottish seers might also throw up some likely examples of trance, we should be mindful of the fact that these authors were intentionally setting out in search of supernatural phenomena in order to rebut the mechanical world-view being expounded by contemporary Cartesians. While not entirely disregarding the insights into trance experiences offered by the literature on the seers given that second sight is reported in other early modern sources, this dissertation will nevertheless place less emphasis on the seers. Ultimately it is the hope of this dissertation that in using these sources we will be able to gain a multifaceted insight into the trance experiences potentially had in early modern Scotland. Should we succeed in this aim, we will be forcing an acknowledgment of both how and why the ‘invisible polity’ would have been experienced as a complete reality by certain people in early modern Scotland.

I. The Medical, Psychiatric and Anthropological Literature on Trance

Since the preliminary intention of this dissertation is to ascertain whether trance lay behind reports of supernatural experiences in early modern Scotland, it is critical that we first develop a clear understanding of trance through an assessment of the present-day medical, psychiatric and anthropological literature. In navigating its way through these diverse and often conflicting disciplinary discussions of trance, it is the aim of this chapter to conclusively offer a clear definition of trance, which can then be employed in the following two chapters. Whilst the anthropological literature on trance tends to assess the phenomenon in light of its social and cultural value, the medical and psychiatric literature has focused its attention on the neurobiological basis of trance and, up until recently, considered it to be a wholly pathological disorder. In trying to avoid a polemical either/or definition of trance this chapter hopes to conclude with something more akin to the understanding of trance promoted by medical and psychological anthropologist’s Rebecca Seligman and Laurence J. Kirmayer. 16 Rejecting the one-dimensional, dichotomous, interpretive approaches to trance, these anthropologists embraced a cultural neuroscience approach in their work ‘Dissociative Experience and Cultural Neuroscience’ and in so doing have demonstrated the importance of assessing trance in the light of its full cultural, social, cognitive and biological complexity.

For the larger part of its medical and psychiatric history trance has been subsumed within the category of ‘dissociative disorders’, defined by the American Psychiatric Association as the disconnection between a person’s thoughts, memories, feelings, actions and sense of who he/she is.17 The problem of subsuming trance within a larger medical category whose explanation centers on a link to psychological trauma is that trance has been mostly studied through a pathological lens.18 This has in turn encouraged clinicians and psychiatrists to develop their understandings of only the most extreme types of trance, including possession trance, catatonic trance and absence seizures. The symptoms of these

16 Seligman and Kirmayer, ‘Dissociative Experience and Cultural Neuroscience’.
18 Seligman and Kirmayer, ‘Dissociative Experience and Cultural Neuroscience’, p.35.
severe trances include any number of the following: derealization (the feeling that one's surroundings are not real) and depersonalization (detachment from the self), loss of consciousness, rigidity of body, unresponsiveness to external stimuli, behaviors beyond one's immediate control and distortion of time perception. Indeed, it has generally been the case that any form of dissociation that led to an experience of detachment from the self and the world and that interfered with normal perceptual, cognitive, memory and attentional processes, was considered pathological. In more recent years however there has been an observed shift away from this pathological bias towards dissociation, particularly in relation to trance. In recognizing the distinction between pathological and non-pathological forms of dissociative trance, the American Psychiatric Association opened the floodgates for numerous studies of normative dissociative phenomena. As a result, it is now a widely adhered to fact that in addition to sometimes being a voluntary and/or pleasurable experience, dissociative trance takes place frequently throughout the day. Evidence for such normative types of trance, involving subtle depersonalization and derealization, are found in the simplest of everyday cognitive processes, such as: daydreaming, 'highway hypnosis' and 'getting lost' in a book or movie. These normative dissociative experiences are not induced by trauma as other more extreme forms of dissociative trance are, but instead by intense absorption (a narrowing of one’s attention or concentration), leading one to become unaware of their

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Such absorption can be stimulated by engagement with either external objects or internal mentation. Given that the early modern source material employed in this dissertation tends to only record extreme cases of visionary experience it might not be possible to discern such normative experiences of trance. This does not however mean that the following two chapters will only be concerned with the most intense, pathological, forms of trance. Possession trance for example will not even be considered. This decision is justified by the recent update to the DSM-5, which has made clear that trance and possession trance, given their phenomenological differences, cannot be subsumed within the same category, the latter being more synonymous with dissociative identity disorder.

This shift away from the pathological bias towards dissociative trance mirrors the anthropological discussions of trance. It is commonly agreed upon amongst anthropologists that the ability to generate visionary phenomena while in trances is a universal feature of the mind commonly experienced. Erika Bourguignon in her study *A Cross-Cultural Study of Dissociational Studies* proved for example that 90% of a worldwide sample of 488 societies displayed trance. More recently, the psychiatric anthropologist Richard J. Castillo has asserted that withdrawal of attention from the environment and society need not be considered an example of psychopathology. Most useful to our enquiry is his conclusion that ‘the brain has the ability to create an alternative subjective reality that can include divided consciousness, visions, voices, extreme beliefs, and withdrawal from society by means of profound trance’. Complementing his conclusion that trance can be a valuable human experience is the work of Sheryl C. Wilson and Theodore C. Barber, ‘The Fantasy-Prone Personality’, and that of

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24 Ibid.
26 DSM-5, pp.292-298.
Tanya Marie Luhrmann in her book *When God Talks Back*[^31]. In the former work, a number of individuals (perhaps as many as 4% of the population), are reported to have such strong hallucinatory and hypnotic abilities that they are able to "see", "hear", "smell", "touch" and fully experience whatever they fantasize. By becoming immersed in such hallucinatory fantasies these fantasy-prone people will 'lose either partial or complete awareness of time and place' in an experience that is 'characteristic of hypnosis or trance'.[^32] In a similar vein of enquiry, Luhrmann has successfully shown how evangelicals' use of kataphatic, or 'imagination rich', prayer allows them to experience mental images with such sensorial richness as to completely convince them that they are talking and walking with God.[^34] Such experiences of trance, fuelled by mental imagery cultivation, do not typically involve the more pathological symptoms outlined earlier, a fact which allows us to broaden the scope of our investigation into the way trance was experienced in early modern Scotland.

Thus far in this chapter we have acknowledged that trance exists on a continuum and how on the polarized ends of this pathological/non-pathological spectrum, it can be induced in response to trauma, through the volitional will of a fantasy-prone person and as a result of normative shifts in attention. There are however a multitude of other ways to induce trance. The most exhaustive list of trance inducements has been provided by Michael James Winkleman, who includes:

- hallucinogens, opiates, and other drugs; extensive running or other motor behavior; hunger, thirst and sleep loss; auditory stimulation and other forms of intense sensory stimulation, such as physical torture or temperature extremes; sensory deprivations, sleep states and meditation; and a variety of psychophysiological imbalances or sensitivities resulting from hereditarily

[^33]: Ibid, p.353.
[^34]: Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*. 
transmitted nervous system liabilities... or other trauma to the central nervous system.  

Whilst the majority of early modern reports of visionary experience tend not to explicitly reference trance, let alone include a clinical break down of trance symptoms, it may be possible to confirm in some cases that trance was at the core of a person’s supernatural experience if one of the above trance inducements is explicitly or implicitly mentioned. A prime example of this would be the 18-week fast that was undoubtedly the cause of Jean Crie’s explicitly reported experience of ‘trance’. An example of where this list of trance inducements might help us uncover trance experiences in cases where it is not explicitly reported is the case of Elspeth Reoch. The confessions of Elspeth Reoch are replete with personal suffering and are highly suggestive, as Diane Purkiss has convincingly demonstrated, of traumatic experiences including incest, teenage pregnancy and pre-marital sex. While Purkiss believes that the ‘story’ Elspeth told in her confession reflects a symbolic narrative through which she could cathartically discuss her traumas, the medical, psychiatric and anthropological literature would strongly suggest that the very experience of these traumas encouraged Elspeth to undergo trance and experience visions. This might allow us to suggest that there was more to Elspeth Reoch's report that just a story.

Finally, Winkleman’s mention of sleep-states as a cause of trance will prove profitable to this enquiry. As a ‘betwixt and between’ state that falls in between waking consciousness and REM sleep, trance often involves phases of what neurologist James H. Austin has coined as ‘micro-REM dreaming while

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38 Purkiss, ‘Sounds of Silence’.
39 Ibid. p.82.
This explains why trance-induced visions often take place during that transitional state from wakefulness to sleep known as the hypnagogic state, a phase when the muscles relax, the breath is controlled and internal mentation is uninterrupted. Pertinent to this type of natural trance inducement is the evidence of early modern sleeping patterns reported in Roger Ekirch’s article, ‘Sleep We Have Lost’. Ekirch discusses in this work how early modern Western Europeans on ‘most evenings experienced two major intervals of sleep bridged by up to an hour or more of quiet wakefulness’ that generally took place around midnight. The fact that fairy and witch visits were most popularly known for taking place at midnight might not be a coincidence and thus attention to the time visionary experiences were reported to have taken place may very well reveal likely experiences of trance. Indeed, many pre-industrial conditions would have been conducive to experiencing trance; chronic under-nourishment, physical toil, long working hours, ingestion of hallucinogenic plant toxins like ergot and exposure to high-levels of disease are all things commonly experienced in pre-industrial Scotland that are conducive to experiencing trance. Additionally, we must not lose sight of the fact that early modern Scotland was committed to an animist worldview and, as such, intercessions with occult forces were both believed to be real and valued. As Seligman and Kirmayer have demonstrated, in cultural contexts where spirit communication is valued, there will be ‘increased opportunities to experience dissociative phenomena like trance’. Combining the conviction and value placed on spirit communication

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43 Ibid. p.364.
45 Wilby, The Visions of Isobel Gowdie, p.248.
46 Ibid. pp.248-49.
47 Seligman and Kirmayer, ‘Dissociative Experience and Cultural Neuroscience’, p.50.
with the heightened psychological and physical stresses on early modern man, we can assume that trance-induced visionary experiences would have occurred with greater frequency than they do in present-day Western societies.

This survey of the medical, psychological and anthropological literature has revealed the huge range in the type and depths of trance that can be experienced. The symptoms we have discerned at the more extreme end of the trance spectrum are as follows: derealization and depersonalization, loss of consciousness or stupor, rigidity of body, behaviors beyond one's immediate control and distortion of time perception. Given the fact that there are a number of different trance experiences to be had, it is not however the case that all of these symptoms must be present to indicate that someone was experiencing a trance. Common to all types of trance, the normative everyday trances as well as those that are intentioned and driven by mental imagery cultivation, is a loss of awareness of one's surroundings. Equipped as we are now with a thorough understanding of trance and its most salient characteristics, as well as the likely assurance that early modern conditions and beliefs would have made trance a frequently experienced phenomenon, we can now turn to the early modern sources in search of such experiences.
II. Spotting Trance in Early Modern Scotland

Equipped with a thorough medical, psychiatric and anthropological understanding of trance we now turn to the early modern sources where we will meet with reports of spirit encounters, uncanny prophetic sight and journeys to the witches Sabbath and Fairyland. Whilst it is the view of this dissertation that these experiences were visionary in nature rather than records of empirically real events, this does not take away from the degree to which they were experienced as real. In redefining what is meant by having a real supernatural experience, this chapter hopes to demonstrate how in those cases where trance can be discerned, the visions generated would have been experienced with such vividness as to make the claim that they were nothing more than fictions or dreams nonsensical. In order to prove this, the following chapter will be looking to discern the salient symptoms of trance in reports of supernatural experiences found in the Scottish witch trials and the literature on Scottish seers. Should we be successful in this aim, our secondary objective will be to understand the extent to which early modern trance was experienced on the spectrum that was indicated to us by the present-day medical, psychiatric and anthropological literature.

Trance seems to have been a readily used word in early modern Scotland. In the Dictionary of the Middle Scots Language, ‘trance’ (also ‘traunce’ or ‘trauns’) is defined as any of the three following phenomena: i) An abnormal state of mind, typically of excitement, ecstasy or terror; ii) A state of semi-consciousness between sleeping and waking; and iii) A state of complete unconsciousness.48 We see trance occasionally receiving mention in Middle Scots anthologies, such as in the case of the anonymous Middle Scots poems ‘Christis Kirk on the Green’ and ‘Peblis to the Play’.49 In both poems ‘trance’/‘transs’ seems to be a word that is used to express a feeling of overwhelming ecstasy, as indicated in the following line from the former poem: ‘He playit so schill and

sang so sweit Quhill towsy tuke a trans'.\textsuperscript{50} Whilst this is by no means evidence of a real trance, it does alert us to the fact that trance was a recognized phenomenon in early modern Scotland. This would certainly lend support to our earlier stated assumption that trance would have been experienced with greater frequency in early modern Scotland than in present-day Western societies.

In order to find real trance experiences we now turn to the early modern Scottish witch trial records. Whilst trance is explicitly mentioned in a number of reports, it is unfortunately the case that most lack the details that would indicate to us how the actual individuals experienced their trances. The 1675 Synod of Aberdeen simply mentions that people ‘under the pretence of trance’ were ‘goeing uith these spirits commonlie called the faeries’, a statement which at most makes the connection between trance and visionary experiences.\textsuperscript{51} In the cases of Margaret Wallace and Jean Crie we see examples of trance being connected to some of the trance-inducements Winkleman gave us in Chapter One: the ‘suddane transe’ Margaret Wallace experienced was surely in connection to the ‘diseis that sche had tane the day befoir’, whilst Jean Crie ‘lay in trance for certain days’ certainly as a result of having undertaken a ‘fast for 17 or 18 weeks’.\textsuperscript{52} Other than confirming for us that trance can be induced by severe nourishment deprivation or as a result of illness, these reports give us little insight into how Margaret or Jean experienced their own trances, their voices being drowned out of the records.

The most detailed report that explicitly mentions trance is the indictment of John Feane.\textsuperscript{53} In this case, John Feane’s state of ‘extasies and transis’ is directly linked to his experience of being ‘transportit to mony montanes, as thocht throw all the warld’ and to the more general feeling he describes of ‘his spreit [being] tane’.\textsuperscript{54} Some classic symptoms of trance are present in these descriptions of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{50} Ibid. p.12.
\end{thebibliography}
flight, indicating to us that John Feane was experiencing intense derealization and a degree of depersonalization, as well as likely distortion of time perception and unresponsiveness to external stimuli. In other cases where trance is not explicitly mentioned but descriptions of flight to either the Sabbath or Fairyland are, we can use the similar descriptions of how individuals felt suddenly detached from their bodies and immediate surroundings to suggest that they too were experiencing trance. There are a number of cases where experiences of derealization and depersonalization are strongly suggested: Isobell Elliot in 1678 reported how “she left her bodie in Pencaitland, and went in the shape of a corbie, to Laswade”; Isobel Gowdie in 1662 confessed how ‘ve vold flie away, quhair ve vold, be ewin as strawes wold flie wpon an hie-way’; and Bessie Henderson was reportedly ‘carried by the said green kirtles wherever they pleased’. What is particularly interesting about these descriptions of flight, with the potential exception of Bessie Henderson given that this is not her own description, is the suggestion that these women believed they were flying in spirit rather than in body. This is clearly indicated in Isobell Elliot’s case since it is said that she ‘left her bodie in Pencaitland’, but it is also suggested by Isobel Gowdie, who reported how members of her coven would ‘put boosomes in our bed with our husbandis, till ve return again to them’. If taken literally, this might suggest to us that Isobel Gowdie flew physically, leaving behind a fake magical body with a view to fooling her husband. It is equally feasible to suggest however, as Emma Wilby does, that Isobel was making recourse to subtle body lore, believing there to be a mode of herself which was detached from her physical body and able to roam the world with spirits. If the latter is more reflective of Isobel’s understanding of her own experience then we can suggest that what she was undergoing was catatonic trance, a type of trance that causes muscular rigidity and decreased sensitivity and which results in a conscious awareness of the weight of one’s own body in contrast to the lightness of one’s

spirit. Without the neurobiological understanding of catatonic trance states Isobel Gowdie and perhaps also Isobell Elliot were rationalizing their experiences in the only way available to them: through subtle body lore. A view of what this might actually have looked like from an onlooker’s perspective, which at the very least strengthens the evidence that catatonic trance was experienced in early modern Scotland, is offered in King James VI’s *Daemonologie*; James reports how the bodies of certain magical practitioners would appear ‘senseless’ and ‘as it were a sleepe’, at the times they claimed to have had visions.58

In cases where flight to otherworldly locations do not feature in the record but details of visits from otherworldly beings predominate, it is more difficult to discern trance experiences since we often lack the most obvious symptoms of trance: derealization, depersonalization, unresponsiveness to outside stimuli, rigidity of body and/or distortion of time perception. Deprived of descriptions that would be suggestive of such symptoms and in the face of often completely naturalistic descriptions of spirits, it is not surprising that these visionary encounters have on occasion been confused for empirically real events or people. A prime example of this is Bessie Dunlop’s confession; her detailed description of Thome Reid as ‘ane honest wele elderlie man’ who was ‘gray bairdit’ and dressed in a ‘gray coitt with Lumbard slevis of the auld fassoun’ seemed so real as to make Robert Pitcairn, the first editor of her trial, question whether this was not in fact a real person, ‘some heartless wag, acquainted with the virtues and use of herbs’.59 Whilst lifelike descriptions like this almost convince us of the reality of Bessie’s encounters, the illusion is broken by fantastical anomalies that give us an insight into her dream-like state of consciousness. We see for instance how Thome Reid was able to enter spaces that no ‘erdlie man culd haif gane throw’.60 A similar interplay between realistic

60 Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, i, II, p.52.
descriptions and slips of fantastical detail permeate the confessions of Andrew Man, Elspeth Reoch, Alison Pearson and Janet Boyman.\textsuperscript{61}

In looking to explain what lay behind these encounters, Emma Wilby insists that ‘we can be in no doubt that the experiences described occurred in a dramatically altered state of consciousness’.\textsuperscript{62} Her common sense conclusion is supported by a comparison with anthropological studies of shamanic trance, which in her mind effectively ‘indicate that this lack of reference [to altered states of consciousness] cannot be taken as evidence that visionary experience or trance did not occur’.\textsuperscript{63} There is however more concrete evidence within the trial reports that might allow us to strengthen Wilby’s conclusion. It is at this point that Winkleman’s list of inducements prove helpful in suggesting that trance was occurring, in particular, his mention of sleep states. As a ‘betwixt and between’ state of consciousness, trance states typically involve periods of ‘micro-REM dreaming while awake’, something that would help explain the vivid, disjointed and often nonsensical visionary narratives described by the likes of Bessie Dunlop, Alison Pearson, Elspeth Reoch and Andrew Man.\textsuperscript{64} This hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that these individuals appear to have experienced their visions in hypnagogic states, as suggested in the following descriptions, which show that: i) Bessie Dunlop was visited by Thome Reid while she was ‘lyand in child-bed-lair’; ii) Alison Pearson ‘wald be in hir bed hail and feir’ when she saw the Queen of Elphane; iii) Elspeth Reoch would be tormented by the fairy man who ‘wald never let her sleip’; and iv) Andrew Man, after a night of being with the fairies and Christsonday would ‘find thy self in a moss on the morne’.\textsuperscript{65} This evidence might allow us to hypothesize that what


\textsuperscript{62} Wilby, Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits, p.174.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid. p.173.

\textsuperscript{64} Kripner, ‘Trance and the Trickster’, p.112; Bever, The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe, p.197.

these individuals were experiencing was a heightened and extended version of
the trance states that most people are able to naturally experience in hypnagogic
states.

Pertinent to this evidence of nightly encounters with spirits is A. Roger
Ekirch’s research into early modern sleeping patterns discussed in the previous
chapter.66 Taking this discussion further, it seems particularly germane to this
investigation that according to Ekirch, during the intervening period between
first and second sleep, individuals would experience ‘confused thoughts that
wandered at will’, coupled with ‘feelings of contentment’ in an experience that
Ekirch believes to be similar to the ‘the “altered state of consciousness”
researchers have detected in clinical experiments’.67 The comparison made
between this intervening period of wakefulness and an altered state of
consciousness was made even stronger by Dr. Thomas Wehr, who, after
conducting a controlled experiment where these pre-industrial sleeping patterns
were re-created, concluded that the intervening period of wakefulness possessed
an ‘endocrinology all of its own’, which, owing to the heightened levels of
prolactin (a hormone that allows chickens to sit contentedly atop their eggs for
extended periods of time), was akin ‘to something approaching an altered state
of consciousness not unlike meditation’.68 In light of this evidence and in light of
the fact that it seems very likely that most of the accused witches in question
experienced their vivid hallucinations in periods of intervening wakefulness, it
would not be unfeasible to suggest that their vivid hallucinations took place in
naturally-entered trance states, which subsequently allowed their conscious or
unconscious thoughts to generate vivid and self-propelling illusory narratives.
Such a hypothesis is strongly supported by a reference made to trance in William
Dunbar’s poem Fasternis Evin in Hell: ‘OFF Februar the fyiftene nycht/ Full lang
befoir the dayis lycht/ I lay in till a trance;/ And than I saw baith hevin and
hell’.69 These poetic lines would certainly endorse the connections we have thus

66 Ekirch, ‘Sleep We Have Lost’.
67 Ibid, p.373.
68 Sir Thomas Wehr, quoted in Ekirch, ‘Sleep We Have Lost’, p.41.
69 William Dunbar, Fasternis Evin in Hell, in James Kinsley (ed.), The Poems of
William Dunbar (Oxford, 1979), lines 1-4, p.150.
far been drawing between hypnagogic states, trance and the experience of vivid visions.

The fact that these hallucinations were experienced through a number of senses other than sight and the fact that they were evidently believed to be real by those that reported experiencing them, would refute the possibility that these visionary experiences were dreams that took place in REM sleep states as opposed to in trances. The research conducted by Wilson and Barber into the ability of what they term ‘fantasy-prone personalities’ sheds some useful light on this particular issue; in a similar experience to what occurred amongst our accused witches, Wilson and Barber’s fantasy-prone subjects ‘experience[d] a reduction in orientation to time, place, and person that is characteristic of hypnosis or trance’ and in this state would ‘experience their fantasies at hallucinatory intensities (“as real as real”) in all sense modalities’. Isobel Gowdie is a particularly useful example of how early modern visions could be experienced in all sense modalities: in addition to the obvious visual element of her experience, there was a potential auditory element, as indicated in one example of how she ‘said the forsaidis wordis thryse ower’; a touch element manifested through imagined pain, as evidenced in her reports of how ‘[the Devil] wold be beating and scurgeing ws all wp and downe … and we wold be still cryeing’; and potentially even a taste and smell element, as implied by the references to feasting. In the case of Wilson and Barber’s fantasy-prone subjects, the result of experiencing hallucinations as “as real as real” not only meant that 85% of the subjects would ‘confuse their memories of their fantasies with their memories of actual events’, but even on occasion meant they would put themselves in harms way. One of the fantasy-prone subjects found herself on one occasion in the middle of a traffic-filled street, believing all the while that she had been ‘walking with her imaginary pet lamb through an imaginary meadow’. An almost direct parallel for this individual’s experience was reported in the trial of Andrew Man:

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73 Ibid. p.348
Thou grantis the elphis will mak the appear to be in a fair chalmer, and yit thow will find thy self in a moss on the morne; and that thay will appear to have candlis, and licht, and swordis, quihilk wilbe nothing els bot deed gress and strayes.\(^{74}\)

Alison Pearson and Janet Cowie were reported to have had very similar experiences.\(^{75}\)

Whilst we can certainly count these individuals’ experiences as amongst those shared by as many as 4% of people in our present-day population who are able to generate “real as real” hallucinations while in trance states, we should also consider sleepwalking as a probable cause. This would not mean categorizing the experiences of Andrew Man, Alison Pearson and Janet Cowie as something markedly different from trance, rather it would demonstrate yet another way that trance was experienced in early modern Scotland. Often defined as a half-waking trance, sleepwalking is a combination of sleep and wakefulness that takes place as a result of arousals during slow-wave sleep at the beginning of the night.\(^{76}\) It is the fact that this very particular altered state of consciousness takes place during slow-wave sleep (the deepest sleep within non-rapid eye movement) that ambulation, dream-like visionary narratives and high performance tasks are possible.\(^{77}\) This would contrast with the earlier experiences of trance we isolated which appeared to have taken place in hypnagogic states. Having already observed trances that were induced by sickness and nourishment deprivation, likely examples of catatonic trance and probable instances of fantasy-driven trance taking place in hypnagogic states, we have now potentially fallen upon another type of trance that involved the up-until-now elusive trance symptom, namely, behaviors beyond one’s conscious

\(^{74}\) Spalding Misc., i, pp.121-122.

\(^{75}\) Pitcairn (ed.), Trials, i, II, p.162; Records of Elgin, 1234-1800, II (Aberdeen, 1908), p.357.


control. All of these experiences exhibit the fundamental trance symptoms of derealization and depersonalization whilst also involving a variety of other respective symptoms. This would indicate that there was in fact a variation in the type and depth of trance that was experienced in early modern Scotland.

Finally, it is possible when we turn to the literature on the Scottish seers to observe instances of trance that took place on the more normative end of the spectrum. Although we should be careful not to categorically distinguish between the trance experiences of accused witches and seers, it is possible to observe some general differences between the two. The most distinctive way a seer seems to have experienced trance is spontaneously and in waking sense, the trance being short in duration and the corresponding vision being more akin to a flashing image than a film-like narrative. A representative example of this can be seen in John Frazer's *A Brief Discourse concerning the Second Sight*, where he reports how a certain Duncan Campbel was 'one morning walking in the Fields' when 'he saw a dozen of men carrying a Bier, and knew them all but one, and when he looked again, all was evanished'. The fact that seers' visions seem to have generally taken place during an 'awaking sense', as Kirk reports, and usually lasted only a 'few seconds', as Martin Martin tells us, marks a clear difference with the trance-induced visions we have thus far encountered. In accounting for this difference and also proving that trance was still likely at the core of the seers’ visions of future events we turn to what appears to be inducing these visions, which in most cases seems to be a monotonous focus. As we observed in the first chapter, monotonous focus can effectively destabilize ordinary states of consciousness, inducing trance and the visions they precipitate. Evidence that this process was at the core of seers' visionary experiences comes most clearly from *The Secret Commonwealth*:

The sight is of noe long duration, only continueing so long as they can keep their eye steady without twinkling. The hardy therefor fix their look, that they may see

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79 Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory*, p. 86; Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (c.1695), in Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory*, p.56.
the longer, But the timorous see only glances, their eyes alwayes twinkling at the first sight of the object.\textsuperscript{80}

Kirk’s hypothesis for how seers experienced their visions is highly indicative of trance, reminding us of Richard J. Castillo’s discussion of how trance-induced yogic meditation ‘has its key dynamic in a narrowed focus of attention’.\textsuperscript{81} The type of ‘fixed attention’ Castillo discusses is that which involves ‘holding the attention of the participating self on a certain object’, whether that be ‘a visual image; an image in the mind; a particular sound… or any external object’.\textsuperscript{82} As Castillo and others have explained, such monotonous focus allows the brain to ‘block cognition of external reality and allow a mental image to dominate the conscious awareness of the individual’.\textsuperscript{83} Turning to the literature on the seers we find many descriptions that indicate the use of this trance-inducing technique. In the widely reported case of a servant who, while digging on a hill, received a vision of ‘an armie of English-men leading of horses’ for instance, it is reported how the man ‘look[ed] very attentively at the middle of a very high hill’ which he ‘gazed att so stedfastly’.\textsuperscript{84} In this particular case it would appear that the seer in question unintentionally induced trance by cultivating a monotonous focus, probably assisted by the rhythmic process of digging. What this demonstrates, in clear support of the medical and psychiatric discussions set out in the previous chapter, is that normative experiences of trance similar perhaps to modern-day experiences of ‘highway hypnosis’ were also experienced in early modern Scotland.

Whilst we have not isolated a large enough number of likely instances of trance to endorse the view that this was a widely experienced phenomenon in early modern Scotland, our findings certainly do not refute such a possibility. What we have managed to discern unquestionably is the fact that trances do tend to lie behind early modern reports of supernatural experiences. Descriptions of flight have proven a particularly strong example of this, being

\textsuperscript{80} Hunter, \textit{The Occult Laboratory}, p.91.
\textsuperscript{81} Castillo, ‘Trance, Functional Psychosis, and Culture’, p.12.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. p.12.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. p.13.
\textsuperscript{84} Robert Kirk, \textit{The Secret Commonwealth}, in Hunter, \textit{The Occult Laboratory}, p.92.
highly suggestive of those fundamental trance symptoms: derealization, depersonalization and distortion of time perception. We have also observed how in those cases where trance is not explicitly mentioned or descriptions of supernatural experiences are not so forthcoming of trance symptoms, being able to discern likely trance-inducements such as sleep states can strengthen a diagnosis of what appears to be a likely trance experience. As a result of the approach taken in this chapter, we have been able to isolate a number of different trance experiences: catatonic trance, trances involving unconsciously controlled behavior (sleepwalking), fantasy-driven trances occurring in hypnagogic states and even normative, everyday, trances. Such evidence allows us to endorse the present-day shift in medical and psychiatric discussions of trance, which now emphasize the range in both the type and depth of trance that can be experienced.
III: Were they in control?

Having isolated a number of instances where trance seems to have been at the core of a person’s supernatural experience, we can turn now to question whether any degree of control was exercised over these trances. In asking this question we should hopefully be able to reach a more individualized understanding of the way trance was experienced in early modern Scotland. It is certainly the case that many of the trances we unearthed in the previous chapter were experienced involuntarily, the primary examples being Margaret Wallace and Jean Crie whose trances were brought on by illness and fasting respectively. Whilst this chapter may very well unearth examples of individuals who were able to intentionally induce trance, we should not discount the possibility that a level of control was had even in those cases where trance seems to have been involuntarily induced. In these cases we will pay close attention to the particular visions that were had while in trances, attempting to discern whether these were shaped or conditioned in any way that might indicate a degree of control. Finally, it is the hope of this chapter that in examining what level of control was had over early modern trances we might also be able to understand the extent to which these people would be considered pathological by modern medical standards.

Whilst many of the occurrences of trance this investigation has unearthed appear to have been experienced involuntarily, there are a few cases where an impressive level of control over trance can be discerned. A key example of this is Janet Boyman, an individual of particular importance to this dissertation owing to her position amongst the seely wights, a Scottish shamanic cult whose human members reportedly entered into trances.85 While Janet’s confession of having been ‘subject to fairies’ certainly implies, as Julian Goodare asserts, that ‘she had experienced travelling in spirit with the fairies - probably involuntarily, but evidently in trance’, there is no further accessible evidence that will allow for an additional examination of Boyman’s trance-induced visionary night flights.86

There is nevertheless a myriad of evidence that will allow us to assert that Janet Boyman intentionally induced trance in order to be visited by spirits. In one part of her trial it is reported for instance how she would:

... past thaithwith to ane well under Arthours Saitt thatt rynnis southwert, quhilk ye call ane elrich well and thair maid incanctatiioun and invocatioun of the evill spreitis quhome ye callit upoun for to come to yow and declair quhat wald becum of that man and thair come thaireftir first ane grit blast lyke a quhirll wind and thaireftir thair come the schaip of ane man...87

Whilst we do not get any hint that Janet Boyman used dance, music or drum beating, the standard trance inducing methods employed by ritualistic shamans, her choice of Arthur’s Seat is potentially revealing; in this quiet and wide-open space, we could suggest the possibility that Boyman would sit and focus herself in a meditative state before calling upon the spirits in service of her clients.88 Additionally, as Julian Goodare has shown in a forthcoming paper, there appears to be some sort of ‘formula’ to Boyman’s self-proclaimed ‘craft’, one which involved patterned behaviors including verbal formulae, specific times and even a ritual action: ‘thair maid your prayaris ye haldand evir the thowne of your rycht hand lukkin in your neith’ (‘There you made your prayers, while holding the thumb of your right hand inside your fist’).89 Similar to Janet Boyman’s invocation of the spirits through what appears to be intentionally induced trances is Andrew Man’s ability to ‘rasit’ Christsonday and the Quene of Elphen ‘be the speking of the word *Benedicite*’.90 Andrew Man’s genuine belief that ‘this word *Benedicite* rasil the Dewill, and *Maikpeblis* laid him againe’, would indicate that much like Janet Boyman, Andrew Man was using a personally developed technique that would induce trance.91 It is important however that we do not overstate this level of control since it certainly had its limitations. Janet Boyman

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90 *Spalding Misc.*, i, p.120.
91 *Spalding Misc.*, i, p.124.
for instance could not call upon the spirits on any day of her pleasing, responding for instance to the desperate plea of one of her clients that she could ‘do [her husband] na guid at that tyme Because it was past halow evin’.92

Common to both Janet Boyman and Andrew Man is the length of time they seem to have been experiencing trance-induced visions: Janet Boyman ‘confessit that ye haif sene twentie tymes the evill blast’ [the whirlwind blast that proceeded the appearance of the spirits she communicated with]; and Andrew Man reportedly being first visited by the ‘Quene of Elphen’ when he was ‘bot a young boy’ and since then for ‘about thrette yeris’.93 Perhaps pertinent to Andrew Man’s case is the present-day research into the ability of young children to use dissociative techniques such as trance to conjure up an ‘ideal companion’ for themselves.94 This companion is created to offer the child ‘unconditional love, approval, support, and advise in a world that otherwise was unstable, unsupportive and cruel’.95 Perhaps this is what the Queen of Elphame was to the ‘young boy’ Andrew Man; she appeared to him in his ‘motheris hous’, as a woman that ‘promesit to the, that thow suld knaw all thingis, and suld help and cuir all sort of seikness’.96 Interestingly, the Queen of Elphame seems to have been something of a supporting figure in Alison Pearson’s life as well, Pearson talking of the ‘kynd freindis’ she had at the Court of Elphame and her ‘gude acquentance of the Quene of Elphane’.97 It has been psychologically proven that children who use dissociative techniques, often as self-preservation from stress or trauma, continue this tendency into their adult life, making them more prone to falling into spontaneous or intentionally induced trances.98 This propensity to experience trance is not necessarily pathological but can become so under the strain of further stress or trauma.99 Perhaps Andrew Man and Alison Pearson are good examples of the way in which an innate ability to experience trance and the

95 Ibid. p.347.
96 Spalding Misc., i, p.119
97 Pitcairn (ed.), Trials, i, II, p.162.
98 Seligman and Kirmayer ‘Dissociative Experience and Cultural Neuroscience’, p.50.
choice to employ it as a long-term strategy for managing emotional stress or psychological trauma, can either remain healthy or become psychotic.\textsuperscript{100}

Whilst it might, as Seligman and Kirmayer point out, seem ‘paradoxical to talk of the conscious use of dissociation’, recent attention has been paid in neurobiological studies to the healthy ability of some people to either volitionally or automatically relinquish ordinary states of control and experience dissociative states like trance.\textsuperscript{101} Supporting this and of particular relevance to our study of Andrew Man and Alison Pearson’s likely experiences of trance is Wilson and Barber’s work on fantasy-prone persons and Luhrmann’s investigation into the cognitive consequences of prayer, which revealed how mental imagery cultivation allowed people to ‘experience God as a being who can talk back’.\textsuperscript{102} In her work Luhrmann further emphasized how there was a ‘learning dimension’ to this ability to ‘treat what the mind imagines as more real than the world one knows’, a dimension which makes the experience very different to that of trauma-induced psychosis.\textsuperscript{103} It would certainly seem that Andrew Man had this ability, conjuring up the Queen of Elphame and his ‘engell’ Christsonday whenever he wished and having many a pleasant experience while in ‘cumpanie with thame’.\textsuperscript{104} What we could perhaps hypothesize from this is that following an enjoyable childhood propensity for trance-induced fantasizing, Andrew Man learnt over time how to exert a greater degree of control over when he entered into trances. The same cannot however be said for Alison Pearson. Whilst Pearson’s visionary experiences were initially welcome, allowing her to find ‘guid friendis’ at the fairy court, a healing companion in the form of William Sympson and something of a rescuer in the Queen of Elphame, there seems to be a point in her narrative when these experiences cease to be pleasurable and lose any degree of control.\textsuperscript{105} Not only does Pearson eventually have ‘na will to visseit

\textsuperscript{100} Castillo, ‘Trance, Functional Psychosis, and Culture’, p.13, p.17.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, p.13.
\textsuperscript{103} Luhrmann, Nusbaum and Thisted, “Lord Teach us to Pray”, p.172.
\textsuperscript{104} Spalding Misc., i, p.120, p121.
\textsuperscript{105} Pitcairn (ed.), Trials, i, II, p.162.
thame’, she ends up feeling ‘ tormentit with thame’ and is left without the power of her left side after one of their visits.106 In accounting for this transition we might combine the psychoanalytical interpretations that Diane Purkiss would no doubt employ with the medical knowledge we have gained into how initially non-pathological experiences of trance, if deployed too frequently in response to psychological trauma, can damage neural circuits and subsequently make chronic psychosis more likely.107 The difference between Andrew Man and Alison Pearson’s likely experiences of trance further underlines the fact that trance was experienced in a number of ways whilst also critically showing us that a person’s experience of trance did not necessarily remain static over time.

Further supporting this conclusion is the manner in which a number of seers seem to have learnt to exert nearly complete control over what had likely begun as spontaneous experiences of trance. Whilst the cases we looked at in Chapter Two seem to be indicative of normative everyday trances that were unintentionally experienced, in other descriptions we find examples of seers making intentional use of fixed attention to induce trance. We see in one case for instance how a man ‘used ordinarily by looking to the fire, to foretell what strangers would come to his house’.108 In an even clearer indication of intentionally induced trance, we see in some reports how seers would use a ‘science...called slinnenac’d’: ‘looking into [a] bone they will tell if whoredome be committed in the Ouners house; what money the Master of the sheed had, [and] if any will die out of that house for that moneth’.109 These seers had perhaps realized the potential in cultivating a fixed attention and were using objects to further harness their ability to enter into trances and consequently receive visions which could be of some help to the community. Further supporting this interpretation is the fact that the majority of our authors believed there to be something of a hierarchy of seers. This is strongly indicated in a story that Martin Martin reports, when he describes how ‘the novice mentioned above, is now a

108 Garden’s Letters to John Aubrey; letter 7\(^{1}\), in Hunter, The Occult Laboratory, p.150.
skillful seer'.\textsuperscript{110} What seems to allow the individual to upgrade from the status of novice to ‘skillful seer’ is, as Kirk indicates to us, an ability to better master the fix of one’s gaze: where the ‘hardy therefore fix their look, that they may see the longer’, the ‘timorous only see glances, their eyes always twinkling’.\textsuperscript{111} We can conjecture from this that similarly to the way in which Janet Boyman and Andrew Man learnt over time to intentionally enter into trances through personalized processes, a handful of seers learnt how to intentionally cultivate a fixed attention in order to experience trance-induced visions.

Whilst cases demonstrating conscious trance inducement reflect more the exception than the rule, the majority of the trance-induced visions we have surveyed contained enough coherence, lucidity and self-determination for us to suggest that trances did not just happen to the individuals in question. The plainest manifestation of the agency individuals had within their trances is the near uniform search for healing abilities and answers about the future that are prominent in most reports. We see this in those trial records where trance is explicitly mentioned: Jean Crie, who involuntarily experienced trance, was transported to ‘Heaven and Hell, and hath attained to great skill of all diseases, and of things to come, so that there is great resort of the people to her’; Margaret Wallace, who again involuntarily experienced trance, managed to use the skills she had learnt as a result to both cure a baby and allow a man to walk again; and finally, John Feane, who, as we earlier ascertained, most likely involuntarily fell into trances just before falling to sleep, came back from Satan’s ‘conventiounes’ with the skill to predict when and by what means people would die.\textsuperscript{112} Another very good example is that of Bessie Dunlop, who managed to use her trance-induced visionary experiences, regardless of whether she induced them or not, as a means by which she could access useful information; she would enter into her trances with a pre-prepared list of questions for her spirit guide Thom Reid, as illustrated in the following passage:

\textsuperscript{110} Hunter, \textit{The Occult Laboratory}, p.322.
\textsuperscript{111} Hunter, \textit{Occult Laboratory}, p.91.
...quhen sundrie persounes cam to hir to seik help for thair befit, thair kow or yow [ewe], or for ane barne [baby] that was tane away with ane evill blast of wind, or els-grippit, sche gait [went] and sperit at Thome [Reid], Quhat mycht help thame?^{113}

This would certainly indicate to us that even in those cases where trance was perhaps not voluntarily induced, control could be exerted over the content of trance-induced visions. These vision quests were highly conditioned by both cultural beliefs and societal needs, supporting what Julian Goodare and Margaret Dudley discussed in 'Outside In or Inside Out' about how experiences of sleep paralysis will vary in different cultural contexts, with people interpreting the presence in the room (the symptom common to all sleep paralysis experiences) as 'aliens today, witches or demons in the early modern period'.^{114} Given that early modern minds were impregnated with fairy lore from a young age and anxieties about disease and the future were prevalent, it should come as no surprise that during experiences of trance we find early modern people receiving insights into the future and healing advise from fairy men like Thom Reid. We can once again conclude from this that trance did not just happen to early modern people, but that many managed to wrestle a degree of control within their trances.

Having conducting this investigation into the levels of control exerted over likely cases of trance we are able to further endorse the conclusion reached in the previous chapter, namely, that trance was experienced in a number of different ways in early modern Scotland. At the extreme end of the spectrum we have unearthed some likely examples of individuals who were able to exercise total control over their trances, using this to their benefit by gaining clients and reputation as in the case of Janet Boyman and a handful of seers. We have additionally seen how trance could be volitionally or automatically experienced as a result of what Barber and Wilson describe as fantasy-proneness. Such types of trance were for the most part healthy and controlled, with the exception of

^{113} Pitcairn (ed.), **Trials**, i, II, p.53.
^{114} Dudley and Goodare, 'Outside In Or Inside Out', p.124.
Alison Pearson whose transition over time to more unwelcome and essentially psychotic experiences of trance demonstrated to us how an individual's experience of trance might not necessarily remain static over time. Finally, we have even been able to demonstrate in the greater number of cases where intentional trance inducement could not be discerned, how a degree of control was still exerted over the visions that were had within trances, often with a view to serving community needs. This last point strongly supports Seligman and Kirmayer's belief that 'every complex human experience emerges from an interaction of individual biology and psychology with social context'.

To the extent therefore that most of the trances we have isolated seem to have served a purpose, whether that be providing an individual with work or allowing fantasy escapism, we can strongly endorse the present-day medical shift away from the pathological bias formerly attached to all forms of dissociation.

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Conclusion

In assessing reports of supernatural experiences through the lens of present-day medical, psychiatric and anthropological studies of trance, we have managed to show that trance was a facilitator for many such experiences and also understand the diverse ways that trance could be experienced in early modern Scotland. Navigating its way through the divergent disciplinary discussions of trance and concluding with a list of its salient symptoms and typical inducements this dissertation was able, in Chapter Two, to discern the following types of early modern trance experience: catatonic trance, fantasy-driven trances occurring in hypnagogic states, trances involving behaviors outside of one’s conscious control (sleepwalking) and even normative, everyday, trances, caused by intense absorption.

Taking this investigation further in Chapter Three, we were able to build up a more individualized picture of how trance was experienced in early modern Scotland by examining the extent to which people could exert control over their trances. This brought attention to a number of individuals who seemed to have had conscious control over when they experienced trance whilst also proving how even in the majority of cases where such a level of control could not be discerned, trances did not just happen to individuals, who were at the very least able to exert a degree of control within their trances by shaping what they saw in their visions. In further demonstrating that trance was not only experienced pleasurable in a number of cases, but that it also served important functions in early modern Scotland, providing individuals with a means to service their community or indulge in fantasy escapism, Chapter Three was also able to strongly endorse the present-day medical shift away from the pathological bias formerly attached to all forms of dissociation. Wilson and Barber’s investigation into ‘fantasy proneness’ and Luhrmann’s study of imagination fuelled prayer was critical in allowing this conclusion, encouraging us to reevaluate early modern supernatural experiences in light of their evidence concerning the innate and healthy ability of certain people to experience fantasies ‘as real as real’ by intentionally altering their minds.\[116\] In contrast to this, we were able to

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\[116\] Wilson and Barber, 'The Fantasy-Prone Personality', p.353.
additionally observe how Alison Pearson’s initially healthy experience of trance descended into more unwelcome, essentially psychotic forms of trance, demonstrating to us that someone’s experience of trance need not necessarily remain static over the course of their life.

In preempting the question of what retrospectively diagnosing early modern individuals with trance can actually do for historical understandings, I would first make the point that it gives us a better understanding of why people believed their supernatural experiences were *real*. Using medical, psychiatric and anthropological studies to help us understand the intensity of the trance symptoms that a number of early modern people exhibited means it is no longer tenable to disregard their experiences as superstitious nonsense or even confine ourselves to psychoanalytical interpretations. Additionally, the fact that this dissertation has drawn attention to a number of ways in which trance served an important function in early modern Scottish life, should in itself demonstrate the necessity of understanding who was undergoing the phenomenon and what their particular experience or use of it was. Finally, whilst the application of retrospective diagnosis to early modern supernatural phenomena has been criticized for patronizing such experiences with our supposedly superior medical and psychiatric explanations, this dissertation has hoped to demonstrate how such an approach can in fact bring us closer to the early modern people we study.\(^{117}\)

Whereas cultural historians have tended to use witch trial records to gain an understanding of widely held beliefs in the early modern world for instance, the approach taken in this dissertation has forced a more intense attention on the personal experiences of individuals. In recognizing trance symptoms in the cases of Andrew Man and Alison Pearson for instance, we were able to gain an intimate insight into their mental worlds, acknowledging in the former case how a childhood propensity for dissociation led to a life of vivid fantasizing whereas in the latter, an excess of mental anguish over trauma encouraged what was an initially healthy use of trance to descend into a form of psychosis. This is not to say however that a psychiatric or neurobiological approach is superior to a cultural one, rather a bid to support Edward Bever’s

\(^{117}\) *Webster, ‘(Re)possession of Dispossession’, p.108.*
assertion that such approaches deserve ‘a place at the table’. Indeed the cultural neuroscience approach Bever and others encourage has been particularly germane to this investigation given that trance is a phenomenon that is conditioned by social and cultural context just as much as by neurobiological processes.

Whilst this investigation has successfully unearthed a number of trance experiences in early modern Scotland, in order to more confidently conclude that this was a widely experienced phenomenon we would need to employ more early modern sources. Had space permitted it for example, this dissertation would also have included a study of orthodox Christian visionaries. Margo Todd and Louise Yeoman’s brief assessments of the tendencies of early modern Scottish prophetic visionaries to fall into what certainly seem to be trances – ‘falling dead’, or becoming either ‘speechlesse’ or ‘dumb’ – would surely contribute to this investigation. If employed in a comparative study such evidence might also engender a better understanding of how relationships between cultural worldviews, localized community beliefs and personal anxieties shaped people’s experiences of trance differently. In melding together fairy lore with her mental anguish, Alison Pearson’s trance would for example have been experienced very differently to that of a Christian visionary, this also being the reason that her life ended at the stake. In laying the groundwork for such future research, this dissertation has shown how far from patronizing or dismissing early modern supernatural phenomena, the present-day medical, psychiatric and anthropological studies of trance encourage us to acknowledge the degree to which the ‘invisible polity’ would have been experienced as a very real place, its spiritual populace acting as virtually tangible friends or tormenters to many people in early modern Scotland. Historians have been too quick to dismiss this possibility in their estimations of early modern supernatural phenomena.

118 Bever, ‘Culture Warrior’, p.113.
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