



Davide Verotta

The Retraction of Isobel Gowdie

(2025)

Libretto

COMPOSER'S NOTE

When I started this project, I had a few reasons to write a short opera about witches, but eventually I settled on writing a commentary on witch hunts. Witch hunts go back to early human civilizations, motivated by the fear of evil spells. They are still happening, for example in sub-Saharan Africa, but exploded in Europe, and Northeast America from 1450 to 1750, often in connection with heresy and devil-worshipping charges. They are tragedies but also represent a triumph of irrational thinking and a warning that is worth repeating, especially in our times.

The Retraction takes inspiration from Isobel Gowdie, a peasant woman tried for witchcraft in Auldearn in northeast Scotland in 1662. What is significant about her trial is that she gave four long and detailed confessions, which are documented in the trial transcripts¹. This is very rare; most often no testimony is left from people accused of witchcraft. Made over a period of six weeks, the confessions include details of twenty-seven spells, claims of carnal dealings with the Devil, that she was a member of a coven in his service, that she met with the fairy queen and king, of killing of people, animal sacrifices, and transforming into animals.

Like all witchcraft trials records, the confessions are problematic. After arrest, Isobel was most surely tortured, at a minimum kept in solitary confinement, and under immense pressure to satisfy her prosecutors' expectations. Still, the confessions are a small window into the life of a peasant woman run over by the wheels of what passed for justice. The record of the sentence is lost, but almost certainly she was put to death with Janet Breadhead, and possibly others, including her husband, who she involved in her confession.

The Retraction depicts a fictional version of Gowdie's story. It is divided in seven sections:

- I. *How it will end*
- II. *How one gets there*
- III. *Yes. I met the devil*
- IV. *Where are you love?*
- V. *1662*
- VI. *My spells are not for you*
- VII. *The last hour*

¹ Robert Pitcairn, *Ancient Criminal Trials of Scotland, (3 vols.) Edinburgh 1833. National Library of Scotland.*
<https://digital.nls.uk/publications-by-scottish-clubs/archive/83267143>

The Retraction of Isobel Gowdie²
<i>Prelude (Choir)</i>
Sometimes here, sometimes far away; some by hunger, some by fear, or by meanness, or power's will. Petty reasons or grandiose plans. The result is the same: they will carry your head on a pike.
<i>I. How it will end (Isobel)</i>
<p>They say Death moves light with no clear sound like a footless shoe, like a bodyless suit It will come day or night, with a silent knock [it will come day or night] shouting a silent scream with no mouth, no tongue, no throat taking you with a bony hand [to] [to peace] to peaceful rest</p> <p>But I see a different death it will arrive on the wing of a dirty crowd kicking, and loud and shredding my clothes</p> <p>My death will be black and red and green with the penetrating violence of flame and after my inhuman screaming is silenced the passing will only bring a winter, embittered, to their cold and cruel soul [cold winter ... cruel ... soul]</p>
<i>II. How one gets there (Isobel & Choir)</i>
<p><i>(Isobel)</i> Foolish love came quietly on me that man lit with laughter large and bold and caring not what comes after I stayed for a while in his hands strong and gentle and small Hard work stained and calloused trembling slightly with marvel [marvel] on me Curled in their hollow I rested I the raven-haired fool I who cared mostly of trees I who knew myself able to go alone</p> <p>Curled in his left hand I rested and did not listen or watch or mute that whisper The silent gossip that grew in time</p> <p><i>(Choir)</i> 'We saw them late in the wood her and the traveler She bewitched him with her eyes bluer than sky and took him by his lust for her naked arms sunburned skin like a copper blade'</p>

² Text by Davide Verotta.

(Isobel) In the radiance of the day light
I rested quiet and content
and in that solitary moment
I saw the fiery torch made of trees
I saw the raven-fool betraying him
I saw but cared not because
no
no
no
I wanted to be in the hollow of the radiant
oh so much I wanted to be in the hollow of the radiant
They whispered in the night
silent gossips spreading like slime
(Choir) 'People have eyes so bright
only when touched by devil
skin thin and golden
only when they're taken'
(Isobel) They whispered in the night
the shady tendrils that closed around me
III. Yes, I met the devil (Isobel)

Yes [Yes Yes Yes]
I met the Devil
and the torture tools

They wanted to hear
of dark evil and lust
and so I told them
to ease the brutal pain

Yes [Yes] I met Satan
The devil with cloven feet
the master with a horned head
covered with sickly gray hair
and a goat-like smiling face
It touched me, touched me, it touched me!
So frigid, so unnaturally frigid

(ah, so cold [so cold] is so cold here)

And Sabbath
with witches and wizards
sumptuous meals
with fairy Queen and King
And toads, toads planted in a field
And charming straw, straw made into horse

And fly high with them horses
shooting elf arrows to passersby

Yes, I met Satan the devil

Ah, so cold, is so cold here
ah, my love, my love
where are you love

IV. Where are you love? (Isobel)

Why not a tale more pretty?
Of a black angel other-worldly-sweet
flashing with smile and beauty
dark-ivory-limbed and rainbowed-eyed
It looked at me, strange and remote
and darted in the thicket singing

And I moonstruck with madness
followed the music over groves and pastures
until we rested and looked
into the longing
and marvel
and future [future] regret

Idiots, yes brutal idiots
You and your sick darkness
darkness and coldness, so cold

V. 1662 (Isobel & Choir)

Choir: So, when was all this?

Isobel: It was 1662. And yes, I was a witch, and a peasant. I had a man, and we lived in a carved-out pile of dirt. We worked, starved in winter, and were at the mercy of the powerful. They came. Regularly. To take our labor fruits. To suppress our protests. To enforce their arbitrary laws ... On the positive side ... I did love my herbs, and spells, and singing!

Choir: I see, very different from today.

Isobel: Yes. I hear that now, in some places, things are better. There are buildings with teachers, and doctors with powerful herbs? And food? For everybody?

(Recitativo) You “vote”? You are protected? Nobody ever comes and takes you far away.

Choir: More or less, it depends

Isobel: (spoken) So, they tell me, hard to check around here. It's a very strange place, lot of activity, a bit disconcerting.

(recitative; standing up) But my singing is better, maybe is the resonance in this place, the food?

Choir: Might be time to move on

Isobel: right! (sung) Anyway, I am so glad things changed.
Many were not so lucky

VI. My spells are not for You (Isobel)

In the silence of my cell
water drops fall so slowly
spiders hunt in the unchanging light
specks of dust floating lazy in space
I in the silence of my broken mind
think I will retract

Clean and proper
men and women

Of the songs of my power
You'll know none [You'll know none]

To your tools of persuasion
I sputtered nonsense spells
A little few, to verbal abuse
A few more, to enhanced interrogation
And so many, so many, so many
many to the worst tool: fear

Clean and proper
men and women
well-groomed children
and your pets

None Will Work!
none will work
none better than asking for help
from your useless god

You'll never find
much love or riches
power or safety
or freedom or knowledge
or children or beauty
or immortality
You'll never ever be happy

You, You'll ever never be
a proud and smart raven
or a hare, timid, pretty, so fast
neither, neither one

VII. The last hour (Isobel)

It is like a fair
full of drunken men
and loosened women
and jugglers and tricksters and actors and priests
don't forget the priests
and soldiers all around

It is like a fair
they even bring their kids they do
they bring them for fun
and teach an important lesson:
"don't stray too far or they might come and get you"

And then they see me
and they snap-turn
like a feral beast, smelling a prey

And I walk through the crowd
while they spit
And I climb the pyre
while they curse
And I, I in fury and tears
I in painful disbelief
I retract all!

I retract
the devil
and sabbath
the horses
and elves
the spells

and I, I, I
I scream my spell of liberation [my spell of liberation]
and take flight high in the sky
the blue sky
while they burn my body

And I watched them, with my raven eyes
as they climbed down the hill
lightly shaken but barely touched
as the rain washed out
that ash mound from sight

Postlude (Choir)

1662, nearly half a millennium ago. Not to be hopeless, or too despairing, but it seems that the way we treat each other is unlikely to change.