“To smile with disdain”: Confessions of a Justified Sinner

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The existence of the devil as a being at once palpable and simultaneously able to enter into human minds was not generally questioned in seventeenth-century England; for both John Bunyan and John Milton—respectively the leading prose writer and leading poet of the time—Satan bore a physical reality. In this they would not have differed significantly from many, if not most, of their contemporaries.

News accounts of the period contain descriptions of Satanic apparitions said to have been witnessed by respected citizens. On 22 March 1658, for example, according to “The Snare of the Devil Discovered,” the devil appeared to one Lydia Rogers in man’s shape, and made a contract with her in return for money which she needed. Mrs. Rogers, known to be a God-fearing woman, was examined by Mr. Johnson, the minister of Wapping. “The Just Devil of Woodstock, or a True Narrative of the Special Apparitions, the Frights and Punishments, inflicted upon the Rumpish Commissioners sent thither to Survey the Mannors and Houses belonging to His Magestie,” published on 10 January 1660, includes a list of respected citizens who witnessed the said apparitions.

On 12 February 1661, moreover, an account was published detailing “A Wonder in Staffordshire... Of a strange and horrible apparition of the Divell” which had appeared to James Fisher, a “phrenatic,” in the shape of one of his church brethren. The latter text is followed by a humorous poem about a phrenatic who, in a conversation with the devil, notices that the latter has cloven feet and asks
him who his shoemaker is; the devil then replies that his feet are misshapen as a result of the gout. This humor, however, should not lead us to doubt the seriousness with which reports of conversations between devils and humans were generally taken.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century the credibility of claims of direct contact between humans and Satan was openly questioned. “A Full and Impartial Account of the Discovery of Sorcery and Witchcraft, Practis’d by Jane Wenham of Walkerne in Hertfordshire, upon the bodies of Anne Thorn, Anne Street, &c.,” written by one A. N., is notable for a comment found in the Preface. The events described, including Wenham’s trial, which took place in March 1711-12, drew a great deal of attention. Therefore:

[It was thought proper to draw up [an account of the trial], both for the Information of the World, and the Vindication of the Persons more immediately concerned in this Prosecution; especially since some People have thought fit, in a Public Manner, to express their Wonder, that two Divines should concern themselves in a Thing of this Nature, as if detecting the most Abstruse, and Hidden Works of the Devil, and his Spiteful and Malicious Vassal, were a Business wholly foreign to, and inconsistent with, the Duty of a Minister of Christ.

Yet despite the severe philippics against those who ridiculed such reports (“methinks the lady protests too much”), the above expresses a sense of the mysterious ways in which the devil was thought to work.

For the Puritan justification was one of the clearly-defined stages of regeneration—victory over Satan and his minions by the achievement of a saving faith through God’s grace. Monica Furlong points out how important it became for believers to be certain of their regeneration: “a whole body of teaching, almost an industry, grew up which told people how they could know whether they were saved or not” (32). The need to watch oneself constantly for signs of salvation or its opposite led Puritans to fall into “the habit of, as it were, totting up their
spiritual balance at the end of each day. They kept painful diaries of their [spiritual] struggles and mishaps” (34). John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* served the dual purpose of such texts. As a personal autobiography it aided the author in the quest for signs of justification so important to the believer. As a published book it could also be circulated among Bunyan’s followers, thus enabling the imprisoned preacher to continue his ministry.

In *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, first published in 1824 but situated in rural Scotland of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, James Hogg tells of a fanatically religious young man whose body and mind is taken over by Satan. Under the influence of the Arch-Fiend, the protagonist uses the Calvinist doctrine of predestination to justify the murder of his despised elder brother.

The muddling of boundaries between fantasy and reality is as disturbing to twenty-first century readers as it was to Hogg’s public, and as it was to seventeenth-century believers as well. Yet the evil which suffuses *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is in part attenuated by humor. While drawing comparisons with Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*, this paper focuses on Hogg’s use of humor to lend a much-needed sense of playfulness to his representation of demonic possession.

**Suggested Reading**


Simony Diamond is a revelation freed here from gonzo to give a fine acting performance as the title character, seen in Catholic church confession telling of her sexual behavior. All is not what it seems, with fine clues provided by the director, and the narrative is presented visually and with her voiceover narration, rather than time out for dialog or exposition scenes. So the public’s current desire for "all sex" rather than a traditional movie in their XXX entertainment is satisfied, but director Roma stages the show with consistent artistry. Lighting is always dramatic and MARGOT LIVESEY was born and grew up on the edge of the Scottish Highlands and now lives in the US. She is the author of a collection of stories and four novels: Homework, Criminals, The Missing World, and Eva Moves the Furniture. The private memoirs and confessions of a justified sinner. James hogg. Introduction by.Â Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Hogg, James, 1770â€“1835. The private memoirs and confessions of a justified sinner / James Hogg; introduction by Margot Livesey. p. cm. ISBN 1-59017-025-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Scotland—Fiction. Confessions of a justified sinner/James Hogg. p. cm.â€”(Everymanâ€™s library). ISBN 0-679-41732-X.Â The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner thus filters through to us and is introduced as a combination of chanced-upon manuscript and scholarly apparatus â€” anything to push it back into the past. The first edition of 1824 even omitted Hoggâ€™s name on the title page. Ten years later he explained, â€” it being a story replete with horrors, after I had written it I durst not venture to put my name to itâ€™. What constitutes the horrors is devil-worship. Study Guide for Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner study guide contains a biography of James Hogg, literature essays, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. About Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner Summary. Character List. Glossary. Themes. Read the Study Guide for Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner study guide contains a biography of James Hogg, literature essays, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. About Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner: Written by Himself: With a detail of curious traditionary facts and other evidence by the editor is a novel by the Scottish author James Hogg, published anonymously in 1824. The plot concerns Robert Wringhim, a staunch Calvinist who believes he is guaranteed Salvation and justified in killing those he believes are already damned by God. The novel has been classified among many genres, including gothic novel, psychological mystery, metafiction.