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“Murder Will Out”: James Hogg’s Use of the Bier-Right in His Minor
Works and *Confessions*

Tanya A. Terry

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Nicholas Mason, Chair
Matthew Wickman
Paul Westover

Department of English
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

“Murder Will Out”: James Hogg’s Use of the Bier-Right in His Minor

Works and *Confessions*

Tanya A. Terry

Department of English

Master of Arts

In *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), James Hogg uses the uncanny trope of the bier-right, a medieval superstitious belief of Christian origin that a murdered corpse will bleed in the presence or at the touch of the actual murderer, to negotiate his struggle with fading belief in local superstitions and religious faith in the Scottish Borders. Examining the origins of the bier-right, court cases involving the bier-right, and Hogg’s minor works using the bier-right I offer a comparison of how Hogg manipulates and morphs this trope in *Confessions*. I also argue that the main character, the sinner Robert Wringhim, becomes a living-dead embodiment of the bier-right corpse.

Keywords: James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, bier-right, corpse, supernatural, superstition

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“Murder Will Out”: James Hogg’s Use of the Bier-Right in His Minor Works and Confessions

Known as his masterpiece, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is James Hogg’s most complex Gothic text. Critics generally consider it his darkest and most unique literary accomplishment, praising its complex treatment of madness, religious fanaticism, superstition, and evil. Robert Wringhim, the justified sinner and murderer in the novel, has the physical appearance of the living-dead. He is a murderous monster who also resembles a bleeding corpse—both murderer and victim. What Hogg calls Robert’s “system of defence,” and what sets the sinner apart as a monster and murderer, is blood—his own (*Confessions* 37). Robert uses his blood as a defense mechanism to elicit sympathy and to show his victim status and innocence as the justified elect of God. Although he receives some pity, his bloody appearance evokes horror and repulsion in those around him. Hogg uses the bleeding corpse trope in *Confessions* in two specific scenes and also transforms Wringhim’s character and body into the bleeding corpse figure.

The central murder of the novel, the fratricide of George Colwan by his half-brother, Robert Wringhim, is surrounded with uncertain witness accounts and evasive, slippery evidence. After George’s murder, two of the main female characters in the novel witness him, or his double, walking with his suspected murderer, Robert. Bell Calvert, a prostitute, and her new friend Mrs. Logan, Colwan’s surrogate mother, team up as unlikely detectives who attempt to collect evidence and to spy on Robert. No longer trusting her senses, especially after witnessing the dead coming back to life when doppelgänger Gil-Martin takes on the living appearance of George, Calvert inquires whether Colwan’s corpse was indeed properly prepared and buried. Logan responds that, although she washed and dressed George’s body, the corpse bled again

“like one newly murdered” (*Confessions* 71). In addition to the scene of Logan witnessing George’s corpse bleeding after she washed and prepared the body, later, in the sinner’s portion of the story, Robert’s servant Samuel warns him that the townsfolk are coming to perform a ritual with the murdered corpses of Robert’s mother and another woman he supposedly assaulted and murdered: “They are bringing the corpse here, to gar ye touch them baith afore witnesses, an’ plenty o’ witnesses there will be!” (*Confessions* 170). The threat and warning of this ritual propels Robert (even though he claims not to believe in the “experiment”) to flee his home to avoid enduring such a test, which in turn points to his guilt (*Confessions* 170).

The scenes here describe, in essence, variations on what Hogg would have known as the “bier-right.” Of medieval origins, the bier-right is the ordeal that calls upon supernatural or divine powers to bring justice by condemning the true murderer or bringing a secret murder to light. The basics of the bier-right ritual involve the corpse bleeding from the death wounds, the nose, or the mouth in the presence or at the touch of the actual murderer. Not only does Hogg use bier-right language in scenes involving the corpses of the murdered, but he creates a living-dead corpse figure in the character of Robert Wringhim. In his encounters and violent scrapes with George, Robert is transformed into a bloody victim-monster. Much like the bier-right corpse, Robert’s face easily bleeds, and he refuses to clean himself.

Because Gothic scholarship on Hogg remains somewhat fragmented and underdeveloped, and many of the collected shorter works have only recently come out of obscurity (largely through the Stirling/ South Carolina editions), deeper analyses are needed. No single book-length text on Hogg’s Gothic exists, nor has anyone offered sustained consideration of his use of the horrific symbol of the bier-right. Hogg’s use of the bier-right, as one of his many uncanny tropes, deserves close analysis to show how the past haunts the present because

we can never emerge from history with a full understanding of events and people; we therefore lose sight of an aspect of our cultural identity. We are left with multiple viewpoints, all valid to some degree, which culminate to produce cultural identity which breaks down and is lost if modernity discredits superstition.

Murray Pittock understands the concept of the uncanny as “the past that refuses to be lost,” and the bier-right helps to preserve a distorted and unknowable Scottish cultural past (*Scottish and Irish Romanticism* 212). When Hugh Trevor-Roper states in *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* that all of Scottish history is a myth, he assumes Scotland had a true historical account, and yet he acknowledges that belief in myth is “a force” (Introduction xiv). In the wake of modern progress, Hogg refuses to kill Scottish supernatural and superstitious traditions. He takes advantage of this fissure in belief by using the “force” of a damaged cultural psyche to show the unexplainable nature of Scottish history and identity. He attempts to maintain and preserve that fading moment before belief in local superstitions gives way to rational explanation but also does not offer closure or answers to tradition and mystery. As stated by Penny Fielding, Hogg indeed “invites his readers into a hall of mirrors from which they have little chance of escaping” – mirrors reflecting confused identities at every turn and no clear path for cultural justice (*Writing and Orality* 130).

Although Ian Duncan, in *Scott's Shadow* (2007), discusses Hogg's unique strain of Gothic writing by revealing tropes such as cannibalism and the upright corpse figure as avenues wherein Hogg resists “the ideology of Enlightenment progress and the cultural historiography of loss and salvage,” Duncan never mentions the significance of the bleeding corpse (Preface xvi). Duncan uses Freud's concept of the uncanny to frame Hogg's odd Gothic tropes within Scottish

cultural identity—an identity steeped in the supernatural superstitions of the Border and rural communities.

In my analysis of *Confessions* I will show how the bier-right reflects a cultural history that is not fixed, and where the supernatural is not debunked or demystified. I first set out to describe and explain the general definition and procedures of the bier-right, as well as to touch on points from Hogg's life which illuminate his use and morphing of the bleeding corpse trope and theme. I will then discuss his use of the bier-right in his minor works and will conclude with an in-depth examination of this trope in *Confessions*. Expanding on Duncan's exploration of the tropes of cannibalism and the upright corpse, as they symbolize resistance to progress or modernity, I will perform a close reading of the bier-right used in *Confessions* to show how it serves as a symbol for the trial and judgment of the murder-suicide of Scottish cultural history. The bier-right also represents the overlap and conflicting belief systems of the Scottish Border communities, as they believed in Christianity and the supernatural. The bier-right speaks to Christian and supernatural convictions, as well as encompassing a quasi-legal element. By reading the novel from this viewpoint, we gain insight into Hogg's negotiations of the disintegration of traditional beliefs; doubt, however, is the only certainty regarding a Scottish cultural past.

Bier-Right History

My aim is not to catalogue and provide a complete history and reference list of the bier-right phenomenon but to provide enough information and insight regarding definition and the procedures. Summarizing two court examples will create clearer understanding of how Hogg manipulates this superstitious belief. Robert P. Brittain, in "Cruentation in Legal Medicine and in Literature," describes the bier-right using the French term *cruentation*: "Between the stage of

simple inspection and that of the full autopsy there is a by-way of some historical interest, the practice of cruentation” (82). What were the exact procedures of the bier-right, or this practice of cruentation? Brittain offers a brief history and definition:

Cruentation (*cruentare*: to make bloody, to spot with blood), or the Ordeal of the Bier, was a test used to find a murderer. Of Germanic origin, dating from the period after the overthrow of the Roman Empire, it continued until at least as late as the seventeenth century. It was considered as a “Judgment of God” manifested by the “indignation” of the corpse when the murderer passed before it. (82)

In John Graham Dalyell’s *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (1835) he suggests that the “origin of this superstition” stems from the Bible story of Cain slaying his brother Abel, and “the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground” (42). Dalyell also quotes *Dæmonology* by King James VI/I (written in the king’s paranoid quest to crush the practice of witchcraft) to show the connection between the supernatural and Christian belief systems regarding the bier-right: “as in a secret murther, if the dead carkasse bee at any time thereafter handled by the murtherer, it will gush out blood; as if the blood were crying to the heaven for revenge of the murtherer, God having appointed that secret supernaturall trial of that secret unnaturall crime” (40-41).

Expanding on the events of a typical bier-right, Brittain explains the following procedures:

the suspect was placed at a certain distance from the victim who had been laid naked on his back. He approached the body, repeatedly calling on it by name, then walked round it two or three times. He next lightly stroked the wounds with his hand. If during this time fresh bleeding occurred, or if the body moved, or if foam

appeared at the mouth, the suspect was considered to be guilty of murder; if not, further evidence was sought. Sometimes the whole local population was made to pass in front of the corpse. A positive result was considered as evidence of divine intervention. (82)

Certainly slight variations of the bier-right procedures and definition exist. Not all cases of the bier-right specify that the body had to be naked, and most accounts mention bleeding “afresh” from the common areas of the death wound(s), nose, and mouth. Movement of the corpse in the presence or at the touch of the murderer was another commonly recorded occurrence in these trials. In David Atkinson’s folkloric study on ballad collecting and the theme of discovering murder, he emphasizes such references to the bier-right as calling on the divine to bring murder “to light” and “the idea that *murder will out*” (“Magical Corpses” 13). Additionally, Brittain attributes the bleeding of a corpse to “that primitive state of mind which has not yet realized the full effect of death, but regards the body as still able to hear and act”—a living-dead figure (82).

Two of the most commonly cited legal cases involving the bier-right are the Scottish 1688 parricide-treason trial in Edinburgh of Philip Standsfield and the 1824 John Johnson murder trial in New York City. The Standsfield case provides an account of the exhumation, autopsy, and bleeding of Philip’s father’s corpse. Dalyell provides a brief summation of the detailed Scottish murder trial and how surgeons performed an early version of an autopsy. Dalyell describes the following scene after the father’s body was found:

He was interred precipitately. On exhumation, after resting two days in the grave, his body was laid open, in order to ascertain the cause of death. After being well cleansed, blood burst from that side supported by his son Philip, on returning the body to the coffin for a second sepulture—no unlikely consequence of straining

the incisions;—and it deeply stained his hand. He was arraigned for parricide.

(40)

Although his words and physical reaction point to his guilt, Philip's lawyers felt the use of the bier-right as evidence was grounded in neither "law" nor "reason" (83).

Sir Walter Scott was intrigued by the Standsfield case, and it is possible that Hogg may have read or heard about this famous Scottish trial as well. In one of Scott's notebook entries from 1797 he shares his thoughts on the last recorded bier-right case of Scotland: "the conviction appears very doubtful indeed. Surely no one could seriously believe, in 1688, that the body of the murdered bleeds at the touch of the murderer, and I see little else that directly touches Philip Standfield [sic] ... I see nothing inconsistent with the old gentleman's having committed suicide" (Brittain 84). Although Scott did not feel that anyone in 1688 could still believe in bier-right rituals as divine or supernatural intervention for justice, he employed the bleeding corpse trope and bier-right in his own fiction. For example, in the poem "Earl Richard" he includes notes on the bier-right, he uses the trial of Muir of Auchindrane from 1611 in his adapted "Achindrane, or the Ayrshire Tragedy," and he alludes to the bier-right in his novel *The Fair Maid of Perth*. Regardless of Scott's condemnation of the bier-right as a credulous and backward belief, he was interested in the actual Scottish legal cases of the experiment of bleeding corpses and used the trope to decorate his fiction with cultural artifacts from the past. Scott suggests that cruentation as a means of exposing guilty murderers "survived as long as it did" due to "the reactions" of guilty parties and how witnesses observed such reactions (Brittain 85). Brittain and Scott view the bier-right as a form of polygraph, as a means to gauge the "emotional reactions of a person with guilty knowledge, especially as compared with those of others in a similar situation, but without that knowledge" (Brittain 85). The surgeons assigned to examine the wounds of Philip's

father were shocked over the wounds bleeding afresh, “an indication that, in Scotland too, cruentation was passing from being accepted ‘fact’ into folk-lore” (Brittain 83).

Long after the seventeenth-century cases that fascinated Scott and others, the bier-right factored prominently in the murder trial of John Johnson in early nineteenth-century New York City. Robert A. Emery explains that the murdered body of James Murray of New York City was found on 24 November 1823 behind the house of John Johnson, during the year Hogg most likely wrote the bulk of *Confessions*. The famous High Constable Jacob Hays took Johnson “to see the dead body [in the hospital], and requested him to touch it” (473). Johnson was tried by a Supreme Court Circuit Judge, four clergymen, and a jury, while the District Attorney prosecuted (473). Although Johnson confessed to the murder as well as acted “agitated,” his “lawyer later claimed that Johnson was ‘taken to the hospital to gratify some absurd theory to see if by his touch, the dead body will not bleed afresh!’” (473). Touching the victim’s body was, a defense lawyer argued, “a species of mental torture more powerful than promises of favour or threats and menaces” (473). The only hint at belief in this supernatural “test” from Emery’s article is when he mentions how the “New York police of the time came from the humbler walks of life and presumably shared the superstitions of their peers” (474). Regardless of the superstitions of the New York police, supernatural beliefs influenced the law and served as an alternative interrogative method for convicting killers.

The practice of touching corpses in front of witnesses did not end in 1824. To dispute Scott’s claim that people in 1688 could not possibly still believe in the bier-right as an actual supernatural sign to detect murderers, E. and M. A. Radford in the *Encyclopædia of Superstition* (1949) show that a simpler version of the ritual was recorded in the twentieth century. The Radfords explain that “a correspondent in Newcastle-on-Tyne” in 1946 informed the authors of a

custom where “When any person . . . dies, nearly all the neighbours visit to have a last look at the dead person, and all touch his or her brow before leaving” (88). The touching of the corpse was seen as a sign of “good-will” toward the deceased (86). Regardless of Scott’s complaints regarding cruentation as an illegitimate form of evidence in court cases from Scottish history, he used the trope to enhance and establish Scottish cultural authenticity in his historical fiction.

Hogg’s Personal Connection with Superstition

Whether or not Hogg knew of the specific murder cases of Standsfield and Johnson, it is evident from his collected works that he was well acquainted with the procedures and language of the quasi-legal bier-right rituals. His maternal and paternal lineages were steeped in local superstition and folklore. In Edith Batho’s 1927 biography, she mentions that Hogg’s “father, Robert Hogg, could claim descent from the Hoggs of Fauldshope” and that “several of the wives of Fauldshope were supposed to be rank witches” (*The Ettrick Shepherd* 3). Hogg’s most personal and direct connection to the supernatural is the storytelling and ballad singing of his mother, Margaret Laidlaw, as well as the reputation of his maternal grandfather, William—reportedly “the last man of this wild, who heard, saw, and conversed with the fairies” (Batho 3). On a personal level, he also received a heavy supply of religious instruction from his mother. Margaret used superstitions, folk-legends, and religious teachings to instruct her children. Gillian Hughes relates, regarding Margaret, “If her children grew too boisterous and over-excited she would also sober them by fearful tales and songs of the supernatural” (*James Hogg: A Life* 8). From an early age, Hogg found himself in a rural culture where belief in superstitions and the supernatural was still accepted and respected.

Karl Miller, in his biography of Hogg, *Electric Shepherd* (2003), quotes a letter Hogg wrote for the *Scots Magazine* for February 1803 which describes Hogg's journey to the Highlands and offers insight into the blend of superstition and religious beliefs in rural Scotland:

The spirits of the glen had given way to the light of the Gospel. But only up to a point, and only very recently. They were not forgotten, and were indeed not gone, for ghosts, brownies and bogles, "awful, terrible bogles," were "as plenty as ever," while some still alive "have had intercourse with fairies, and the stories of their pranks and gambols are listened to with more attention, and as much faith annexed, as the gospel according to Matthew." (17)

The aging portion of Scotland's population still held to their beliefs in the supernatural, and this cultural and personal influence on Hogg "colors all his work: his literary training, his style, his techniques, and usually his successes come from the ballads, folk-tales, and religion of the Border peasantry" (Smith 16).

Although Hogg biographies do not specifically mention the bier-right, they do discuss, at length, his interactions and experiences with the superstitious folk culture of his rural Borderlands. However, during a time of body snatching and "resurrectionist" activities in Scotland in the name of medical and scientific research, Hogg had a personal experience with the discovery of a murdered man's corpse. According to Gillian Hughes, "in 1798 or 1799, Hogg" had "the terrifying experience of stumbling across the body of a murdered man named Hector Kennedy. Travelling at night through a wood on the way to Tomantoul, Hogg's horse refused to go on" (35). Hughes also points out that exhumations were something "Scots were preoccupied with," as the corpses of Robert I, the Bruce and Robert Burns were dug up during Hogg's lifetime (159-60). The Edinburgh murder and confession of Nicol Muschet of Boghall is viewed

as a major influence on events of Hogg's *Confessions*, as is the murder trial and execution of the prostitute Mary McKinnon (Miller 231).

By connecting Hogg's cultural background to his attitudes and opinions regarding belief and disbelief in the supernatural and Christianity, I will show that he was genuinely and intently invested in resisting Enlightenment progress as it devalued and disrespected personal belief systems and turned a cultural past into the ridiculous. Even though many analyses and interpretations of *Confessions* focus on identity in crisis as it pertains to Hogg's involvement and experiences with the Edinburgh literati and publishing world, I offer a re-illumination of the theme of identity with Enlightenment "progress" helping to crush the belief systems of the working and rural classes.

Hogg's Use of the Bier-Right in His Minor Works

Hogg uses the bier-right in such minor works as his short story "The Barber of Duncow" and the poems "The Pedlar" and "Superstition." "The Barber of Duncow" is a murder story where the test of the bier-right is performed to ascertain the true murderer of the barber's wife, "The Pedlar" describes something similar to a bier-right when an accused killer is confronted with the heel-bone of the victim (long after the murder). When the murderer, the miller, touches the bone, it "streams" with blood, resulting in a confession. The bier-right in "Superstition," unlike in the "The Barber of Duncow" and "The Pedlar," laments the passing of the supernatural and, at the same time, personifies these beliefs as a living force. The poem devotes a stanza to the bier-right to question if the bleeding at the murderer's touch was not caused by Superstition, and if it was not Superstition, then what explains the phenomenon? What is the rational explanation for the bleeding corpse at the murderer's touch? Another difference amongst the three minor examples is the connection between religion and the supernatural—that when belief

“waned” in one area, it diminishes in the other as well. Where “The Barber of Duncow” and “Supernatural” discuss the crossover of religious and supernatural belief, “The Pedlar” tends to focus on the superstitions over the religious.

In “The Barber of Duncow,” the frame story involves a country family listening to a murder-ghost oral tale as narrated by the grandmother, Raighel. Smith calls the story a “warning against disbelief” because Raighel tells her family that if the story is told correctly, but still they do not believe, they will cause the ghost to appear (*Selected Stories and Sketches* 140). Penny Fielding, in *Writing and Orality* (1996), describes the threat of the ghost’s appearance as based on “rational disbelief” instead of “superstitious belief”; in other words, the audience is safe from haunting as long as they believe (79). The narrator offers another similar warning at the end of the story to reinforce the dangers of rationalizing away the supernatural features of the story.

The actual bier-right scene of the story comes after the ghost (Grizel, the murder victim and wife of the barber, Rodger M’Fun) appears to her Aunt Janet—a woman described as witch-like in that she was as religious as she was superstitious (*Selected Stories and Sketches* 174). The ghost of Grizel tells her aunt the location of her murdered corpse and suggests that her aunt gather the local elders to share the information about the murder and murderers. Janet is skeptical of the elders, in that she feels they will only “laugh” at her account (175). Like the narrator, Grizel tells Janet to warn the elders that if they “disbelieve” her account, she will appear to them to force belief (175).

When Janet shares the story of her murdered niece’s appearance with the elders, the men are disappointed that the message does not concern “the overthrow of the profligate government of this realm, and the destruction of the covenant-breakers . . . For they are rulers, not constituted by God, but denied by him, as he is by them. But since it is only a story of a ghost, a dream of

dotage and superannuation, it would not become us, as men and Christians, to pay any regard to it” (176). Even though these men believe in Christianity, they feel that the belief in ghosts is out of date—a thing of the past—that time has killed superstition but not religious convictions. Janet chides the men and declares that she will “move heaven and earth” in order to “have justice on the murderers” (176). Gavin, one of the elders, tells Janet to “calm” herself and to “speak like a rational being and a covenanted Christian,” as he feels she has gone mad obsessing over the murder of her niece, and the more she tries to convince them of what she experienced, the more they are convinced of her derangement (176-77). The village elders equate rationality with being devoted and committed Christians, but, as forewarned, the ghost appears to the men, and they cannot rationalize away what they witness (177). The ghost “in an audible voice, that seemed to issue from the breast or the wound” used a religious register to convey her warning about disbelief in the supernatural: “He that believeth not Moses and the prophets, neither will he believe if one return to him from the dead” (177). The local citizens “were all resolved, if their minister would not believe the message, that they would leave him and the ghost to settle it between themselves two; convinced from experience, that she would appear” (177). Hogg shows here that the local people believe because of “experience” with the supernatural, but the clergy need an extra dose of fear and threat in order to accept the superstitious warning in addition to the more conventionally religious one.

After the ghost convinces the elders of her murder and location of her corpse, the people of the village locate the body; however, the body alone does not offer exact evidence directly tying the murderers to the crime, so the bier-right is used to assist in finding an alternative form of evidence:

there being no human evidence against the perpetrators, that original and acute divine devised an old experiment, of most powerful effect and decisive consequences, which was no other than to summon a great number of people to come in and touch the body of the murdered woman, which was acquiesced in by every one, as at least furnishing some presumptive evidence that might assist in a further research. (178)

Rodger M'Fun (husband and murderer of Grizel) and May Fiddes (his accomplice) react with "great reluctance" to participating in the bier-right, which "seemed to confirm, in part, the ghost's evidence" (178). The minister proceeded to touch everyone's hand to the chest of the corpse, but the body did not bleed (178). Observing that the body was not bleeding, the barber stopped taking the experiment seriously:

[B]ut when he came forward, it took the minister's whole force to press down his hand, so as but slightly to touch the body. In a moment the white sheet was bathed in a flood of purple blood that streamed from the wound, as if it had been newly inflicted. The whole assembly then pronounced him the murderer, but he denied it with blustering and oaths, swearing it was the old malicious Whig minister that had pressed his hand too hard down on the chest of the deceased, which had caused the flow of blood.

This made the sheriff and the parson look at one another, for they still perceived they had no hold of the villain in law, though all were convinced of his atrocious guilt. Mr. Fairly lectured him very hard to confess, telling him that the eye of the Almighty beheld him, that his divine agency had been manifest, not

only in bringing the crime to light, but in bringing it home to the guilty; and it would never stop short till due vengeance was executed. (178-79)

Rodger does not confess, so the sheriff throws him in prison. May, on the other hand, suffering emotional trauma, gives a half then full confession after making a deal with the sheriff to preserve her life. The barber, Rodger, never confesses yet is executed (179). The bier-right here serves to bring about confession from May and to contribute an element of the supernatural to the warning on disbelief.

We learn from Edith Batho and, more recently, Suzanne Gilbert that the bier-right type scene did not appear in the original 1804 *Scots Magazine* printing of “The Pedlar.” The *Mountain Bard* 1807 version of the “The Pedlar” includes a scene where a mason takes the ankle bone of the murdered pedlar to the miller (the suspected murderer) to see if it will bleed at his touch. Hogg also uses extensive footnoting in the 1807 version, including lengthy explanations of the superstition regarding finding bones of murder victims to set ghosts free and to put the locals at ease. Although Hogg uses excessive footnotes for this poem, he does not discuss the bier-right.

Finally, of the minor works, “Superstition” is a poem that qualifies superstitious beliefs while lamenting their passing into disbelief. Douglas S. Mack, in his 1995 article “Aspects of the Supernatural in the Shorter Fiction of James Hogg,” comments that the poem “‘Superstition’ looks back with regret to the old Ettrick belief in the supernatural, which has faded under the advance of modern rationalism. ...The Ettrick tradition was a Christian one, but it contained elements surviving from pre-Christian times” (133-34). Hogg’s poem does not specify if he is questioning a Christian God or a supernatural being, and perhaps this is his way of incorporating pre-Christian beliefs. Whether or not Hogg’s “inquisitor” refers to a Christian God or a

supernatural being, his poem specifically mentions the phenomena of the bier-right as seen here when Hogg seeks to discover who or what it was that really caused corpses to bleed:

But ah! thou filled'st the guilty heart with dread,
 And brought the deeds of darkness to the day!
 Who was it made the livid corse to bleed
 At murderer's touch, and cause the gelid clay
 By fancied movement all the truth betray?
 Even from dry bones the drops of blood have sprung!
 'Twas thou, Inquisitor!—whose mystic sway
 A shade of terror over nature hung;
 A feeling more sublime than poet ever sung. (*The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd: Poems and Ballads*, lines 154-62)

As for this “Inquisitor” of “mystic sway,” Hogg answers in the next line that “In the eye of reason” the powers of Providence “wears into decline” (line 179). The rational or reasoning gaze kills this being along with superstitious belief.

The Bier-Right in *Confessions*: George's Corpse

Confessions offers a more detailed and varied use of the bier-right than these minor works. Hogg alludes to, mentions directly (although without using the term “bier-right” or “cruentation”), and morphs the ritual and corpse trope. In this section I will first discuss the allusion to the bier-right scenes concerning George's corpse. I will follow this by a discussion of Robert and his servant Samuel's warning of a bier-right. Finally I will show Robert himself as a form of bier-right or victim-monster figure and the novel itself as an abstract version of the bier-right.

The first scene in *Confessions* dealing with a dead body surrounds George's corpse: however, Hogg does not immediately allude to the bier-right. After hearing the report announcing George's murder, his friends go directly to the "dead-room in the old Guard-House, where the corpse had been deposited, and soon discovered the body to be that of their friend and late entertainer" (45). The first encounter with George's corpse does not mention bleeding or the use of bier-right terms to describe the scene; however, George Sr. is described as "weeping over the body of his son, kissing his wound, his lips, and his cold brow alternately; denouncing vengeance on his murderers, and lamenting that he himself had not met the cruel doom, so that the hope of his race might have been preserved" (45). George Sr. touches the corpse several times (without it bleeding) and swears vengeance on his son's murderers. When Mrs. Logan discussed "the circumstance of Thomas Drummond having been the murderer of his son, he shook his head, and once made the remark, that 'It was all a mistake, a gross and fatal error; but that God, who had permitted such a flagrant deed, would bring it to light in his own time and way'" (47). George Sr. swears vengeance, but he trusts that God will carry out justice and bring the murderer "to light" (47). When considering the bier-right as an act evoking the divine to reveal or bring a murderer to light, George Sr. places his faith in unseen powers, but no bier-right ritual is called for, and the corpse does not bleed at this point.

As Malcolm Gaskill states regarding murder victims, "In modern trials forensic evidence speaks for the dead; in early modern England, the dead had to speak for themselves" (25). Yet, George's body communicates in blood regarding his murder and the need for divine vengeance. George's corpse finally speaks for itself in an eerie, atmospheric scene described by Mrs. Logan, the caretaker and only witness to the burial preparations of the body:

O, yes, from the moment that his fair but mangled corpse was brought home, I attended it till that when it was screwed in the coffin. I washed the long stripes of blood from his lifeless form, on both sides of the body – I bathed the livid wound that passed through his generous and gentle heart. There was one through the flesh of his left side too, which had bled most outwardly of them all. I bathed them, and bandaged them up with wax and perfumed ointment, but still the blood oozed through all, so that when he was laid in the coffin he was like one newly murdered. (*Confessions* 71)

Although Mrs. Logan bound up the wounds of the corpse, it still bled again as “one newly murdered,” so the language of the bier-right is present in the scene, even though the authority figures and murder suspect are not. Hogg’s strange alteration of the bier-right in this scene is the gushing of blood without the presence of the murderer. As Mrs. Logan was not the murderer, the corpse should not bleed again as “one newly murdered,” so perhaps she has not properly prepared the body and sealed the wounds, or Providence is speaking out through the body’s blood that vengeance will come.

Here Hogg uses an allusion to the bier-right with blood oozing from the death wounds. But perhaps because this scene is described in the Editor’s narrative of the novel, the supposedly rational or “enlightened” segment of the text, the intention is to remain elusive regarding the supernatural nature of the bleeding. Hogg leaves his readers to decide whether or not something supernatural is transpiring, but ultimately the morphing of the bier-right contributes to the sense of chaos and mystery. George’s blood, which cried for vengeance, is noticed only by Mrs. Logan. The legal system fails to convict the true murderer, Robert, and now the only trusted

avenue for justice is a local citizen—Logan. She takes on the role of detective to sleuth out for herself if she actually did see a “living” George, who is keeping company with Robert.

George’s left side wound bleeds more than his other wound, a fact explained by Peter Garside in the Stirling/South Carolina edition of *Confessions* thus: “his left side contrasting with the conventional presentation of Christ on the cross wounded through his right side. More generally, the left side of anything is traditionally associated with evil or ill luck, the right with the reverse” (226). Though Hogg’s theme of doubling is often discussed in reference to Robert’s character, multiple and deformed identities are created throughout the novel on various levels, and George’s left side wound and distorted Christ allusion are turned on their head. We cannot view George as a hero, martyr, or Christ-like figure from the past, and his death’s significance seems hollow, meaningless. After all, he is intoxicated and spending time at a brothel the night of his murder—hardly a saintly figure. Perhaps the divine will not answer justice on his murderer because George is not free from sin himself, yet George receiving his comeuppance does not fit the general tone of the Editor’s narrative.

In conjunction with George Sr.’s prophecy that God will bring the murderer to light, during the scene when Bell and Mrs. Logan physically attack Robert, Bell exclaims, “Murder will out, though the Almighty should lend hearing to the ears of the willow, and speech to the seven tongues of the woodruff” (74-75). Where George Sr. puts general faith in God to bring justice, Bell feels that the murderer will be exposed even if it means that God must make even the plant world hear and testify of Robert’s guilt. When all earthly or ordered systems fail to bring justice to the people, when human senses can no longer be trusted, all that is left is faith that God will seek vengeance in his own way, by his own means, and on his own time. As for

Robert's (the sinner's) section of the novel, nothing is mentioned regarding George's corpse in connection to the bier-right or bier-right language.

Robert's Servant Samuel and the Bier-Right

In Robert's narrative the bier-right ritual is mentioned directly by Robert's servant Samuel. Samuel warns Robert to "either hide or flee" because Robert's mother's body and the corpse of another woman he is accused of murdering are found (170). Because Robert has no memory of murdering his mother and this other woman (one he supposedly sexually assaulted), he asks Samuel where his mother has been all this time. Samuel responds,

Why, she has been where ye pat her, it seems – lying buried in the sands o' the linn. I can tell you, ye will see her a frightsome figure, sic as I never wish to see again. An' the young lady is found too, sir: an' it is said the devil – I beg your pardon sir, *your friend*, I mean – it is said your *friend* has made the discovery, an' the folk are away to raise officers, an' they will be here in an hour or two at the farthest, sir; an' sae you hae not a minute to lose, for there's proof, sir, strong proof, an' sworn proof, that ye were last seen wi' them baith; sae, unless ye can gie a' the better an account o' baith yoursel an' them, either hide, or flee for your bare life. (170)

Robert believes that he is "guiltless of the blood" of the women, but Samuel explains that "The country disna think sae, master; an' I can assure you, that should evidence fail, you run a risk o' being torn limb frae limb. They are bringing the corpse here, to gar ye touch them baith afore witnesses, an' plenty o' witnesses there will be!" (170).

Although he does not name the ritual, his explanation of bringing corpses for Robert to touch in front of witnesses clearly alludes to the bier-right. The country people believe that

Robert is guilty of the two murders, and they will physically punish and destroy Robert if “evidence” fails. The evidence here most likely refers to the locals and authorities witnessing Robert’s reaction to seeing the corpses and if the corpses bleed and he confesses. Robert, whether from fear due to a belief in the superstition of the bier-right or from the impending viewing of grotesque corpses, tells Samuel not to allow the people to bring the bodies to his house. Robert, “shocked beyond measure at the experiment about to be made,” cries to Samuel to “debar them from entering ... with their bloated and mangled carcasses” (170). Whether the bier-right functions by supernatural power or is a mere superstition, Robert is terrified of being confronted with two murdered corpses. Robert’s reaction to the bier-right threat is extremely suspect.

Once Robert flees from his home to avoid the bier-right, Gil-Martin also warns him: “There is a mob coming towards you with two dead bodies, which will place you in circumstances disagreeable enough: but that is not the worst, for of that you may be able to clear yourself. At this moment there is a party of officers, with a Justiciary warrant from Edinburgh, surrounding the house, and about to begin the search of it, for you” (171). Gil-Martin feels Robert could talk himself out of a conviction based on a bier-right trial most likely because the bier-right does not hold up in a court of law; but, in addition to the corpses scene placing Robert in “circumstances disagreeable enough,” actual officers with a warrant are searching for him.

After putting on Gil-Martin’s clothes as a disguise, Robert sees the mob of people approaching with the corpses. Although he is curious enough to want to look under the white sheets at the bodies, he is frightened by the “fury in the looks of the men” and decides not to look (172). He then describes a feeling of “strange and unwonted delight in viewing this scene, and a certain pride of heart in being supposed the perpetrator of the unnatural crimes laid to my

charge” (172). He decides to mix in with the crowd, and because they do not recognize him in disguise, he listens to their verbal assaults on his character and accusations of him being the murderer. One person called him “a monster of nature; another an incarnate devil” (172). Robert escapes subjection to the bier-right and punishment and execution from the people and authorities; however, he cannot escape from mental and physical torment.

Robert as a Bier-Right Corpse

To show Robert’s self as a bier-right corpse, it is important to establish how he is viewed as a physically repulsive monster. Robert as a living-dead monster serves to further complicate or to push the dichotomy of being a murderer (including a self-murderer) and victim as being both living and dead. He therefore comes to represent and incorporate several elements and characters within the bier-right ritual. Throughout *Confessions*, Robert is portrayed as a disgusting wretch to look upon; his physical condition and appearance decay along with his mental stability. But, whereas most Hogg scholarship focuses on psychological implications and mental illness, little notice is given to physical or corporeal distortion. While under the influence of Gil-Martin, Robert’s body as well as his psyche deteriorate and decay. Both the Editor’s and his own narrative describe him as the living-dead: something evil yet victimized.

Before Robert describes his version of the tennis match scenes, we receive an account of his first meeting with Gil-Martin, and the first account of his physically altered state as one that is living yet touched by death. When Robert returns home to his mother and Reverend Wringhim, his mother is horrified by his shocking physical transformation. With a “smothered scream” she asks Robert what is wrong with him, but he has no concept of there being any problem with his health or wellbeing and returns the questioning back on his mother. She believes he must be “very ill” and “quite changed,” and that his “voice and manner” were also

transformed (99). Robert becomes angrier with his mother and her questioning and reactions to his appearance, as she screams again and runs to block his leaving the house. Rev. Wringhim enters, and Robert recounts that he will never forget how the reverend looked upon him. His mother then shouts out, “our dear boy, Mr. Wringhim! Look at him, and speak to him: he is either dying or translated, sir!” (100). Mr. Wringhim both looks at Robert and feels his pulse and exclaims that “Something has indeed befallen you, either in body or mind, boy, for you are transformed, since the morning, that I could not have known you for the same person” (100). Mr. Wringhim continues to question Robert and then deduces that he must have had interactions with Satan for this physical change to have come over him. The reactions to Robert’s appearance from those closest to him reveal that not only is his mind altered, but that his actual physical being is changed, and changed in a way related to death because his mother thinks he is either dying or has been translated. Robert himself later acknowledges his physical change when he admits that he “was an altered youth, changed in” his “appearance,” “manners,” and “whole conduct” (105).

Mrs. Logan and Mrs. Calvert also describe Robert in terms of death, decay, and monstrosity. In the Editor’s portion of the story, Mrs. Calvert describes Robert in the following manner:

“I never in my life saw any human being,” said Mrs. Calvert, “whom I thought so like a fiend. If a demon could inherit flesh and blood, that youth is precisely such a being as I could conceive that demon to be. The depth and the malignity of his eye is hideous. His breath is like the airs from a charnel house, and his flesh seems fading from his bones, as if the worm that never dies were gnawing it away already.” (75)

Mrs. Logan agrees and adds, "He was always repulsive, and every way repulsive ... but he is now indeed altered greatly to the worse. While we were hand-fasting him, I felt his body to be feeble and emaciated" (75-76). In this instance, we learn that Robert not only appears physically repulsive in terms of death and decay, but he actually feels to the touch like he is the living-dead, weak and fading away.

In the Editor's narrative of the tennis match where Robert interrupts the game, the sinner is described as "hellish-looking ... with a face as demure as death" (20). During Robert's attempts to disrupt George's game, the brothers collide and get into a scrape. Robert tries to kick George, most violently, but misses his mark. George, realizing that Robert's blow would have caused him serious harm or even death, hits Robert "slightly, but so that his mouth and nose gushed out blood" (21). Before Robert gushes with blood, he is introduced to the scene as both demonic looking and death-like. Although George causes Robert's face to bleed (from the typical bier-right sites of the nose and mouth) after a violent attack is attempted on his life, Robert plays the victim in way of appearance and blood.

The narrative continues with the description of Robert's bloody appearance in detail: "young Wringhim was an object to all of the uttermost disgust. The blood flowing from his mouth and nose he took no pains to stem, neither did he so much as wipe it away; so that it spread over all his cheeks, and breast, even off at his toes" (21). He uses his blood to play the victim and the monster because he continues to run around the players to stop the play of the ball, and as he is "covered with blood" the group does not have "the heart to kick him" (22).

After the game is prematurely finished, the group of young men go to wash their hands. Some of them attempt to get Robert to clean himself off, "but he mocked at them, and said, he was much better as he was" (22). Robert prefers to wear his blood as a witness to the assault on

him. When George tries to make up with Robert and asks for his hand in friendship, Robert kicks his hand away. Robert, “bloody and disgusting,” follows the group to the Black Bull inn and is described as an “unaccountable monster” who tries to enter the establishment with the tennis players (22). The Editor portrays Robert as not only mentally deranged but one whose countenance is altered, evoking repulsion. Robert is shown as using his blood against his enemies to disrupt order.

As for Robert’s version of the tennis match incidents, specifically when he and George collide and he receives a blow to the face with the racket, he recounts, “he arose in wrath, and struck me with the mall which he held in his hand, until my blood flowed copiously” (123). Gil-Martin later uses the same term, “flowed,” to describe how “the blood of the just and the good hath long flowed in Scotland” (126). Gil-Martin also refers to Robert as “the avenger of blood,” so Robert is flowing with blood as a victim and is brain-washed into believing he is also the one to seek vengeance on the guilty.

The next scene where Robert bleeds, as a bier-right living-dead figure, takes place on Arthur’s Seat, a peak on the edge of Edinburgh. George goes to the hills to seek solace, but in turn receives another violent encounter with his brother. From the Editor’s narrative, we learn that George sees a formation of clouds that resemble a large version of his brother’s repulsive face glaring down on him: “George started, and his hair stood up in bristles as he gazed on this horrible monster” (36). George tries to run from the cloud’s evil watch, but he ends up running into “a *real* body of flesh and blood, and that with such violence that both went down among some scragged rocks, and George rolled over the other. The being called out ‘Murder’; and, rising, fled precipitately” (37). In this scene, George literally runs into his brother while fleeing the top of Arthur’s Seat, and it is Robert who continues to call out “Murder! murder!” (37).

George demands to know from Robert why he is yelling about murder and asks, “Who the devil is murdering you, or offering to murder you?” (37). Again Robert yells out, “Eh! Egh! murder! murder!” (37). George becomes so wroth with his brother that he:

seized him by the mouth and nose with his left hand, so strenuously, that he sunk his fingers into his cheeks. But the poltroon still attempting to bray out, George gave him such a stunning blow with his fist on the left temple, that he crumbled, as it were, to the ground, but more from the effects of terror than those of the blow. His nose, however, again gushed out bloody, a system of defence which seemed as natural to him as that resorted to by the race of stinkards. He then raised himself on his knees and hams, and raising up his ghastly face, while the blood streamed over both ears, he besought his life of his brother, in the most abject whining manner, gaping and blubbering most piteously. (37)

The second violent encounter between George and Robert mirrors the tennis match in that the nose is gushing with blood, but this time the Editor describes the bleeding as Robert’s “system of defence,” the living-dead figure speaking for himself with the flow of his blood as a defense for himself and to accuse the guilty.

After this encounter with George, Robert makes his way back to Rev. Wringhim “without washing the blood from his face and neck,” and, as a result, George is “apprehended, and lodged in jail, on a criminal charge of an assault and battery, to the shedding of blood, with the intent of committing fratricide” (41). This time, Robert’s flow of blood leads to the conviction and arrest of George, his would-be “murderer” or attacker. From Robert’s narrative viewpoint on the scene, he went to Arthur’s Seat with the intent to kill George, but loses his nerve and ends up the victim once again. He explains that once his father saw him “bleeding a second time by the hand of a

brother, he was moved to the highest point of displeasure; and, relying on his high interest and the justice of his cause, he brought the matter at once before the courts” (134). Robert’s blood ultimately leads to conviction of “intent” to murder, yet he calls George’s account a “mere romance” and his own “not the truth” (135). Regardless, the anger invoked by the sight of his blood prompts a religious and authoritative power to seek vengeance and legal justice for Robert the victim monster.

Robert’s confessions offer further evidence of his corpse-like monstrosity when he flees from the mob of locals who wish to persecute him with an actual bier-right trial. When he seeks refuge with a weaver and his wife, Robert notes that “he and his wife were alarmed at my looks. The latter thought I was angry, and chided her husband gently for his rudeness; but the weaver himself rather seemed to be confirmed in his opinion that I was the devil, for he looked round like a startled roe-buck, and immediately betook him to the family Bible” (175). Robert’s mere presence evokes the fear of the weaver. Even Robert is frightened of his own body when he shares, “I dared not look at my face in a glass, for I shuddered at my own image and likeness” (188). Robert again acknowledges his corpse-like features when he is reunited with Gil-Martin after staying at an inn, but the following description also relates Gil-Martin’s physical appearance’s effects on Robert: “My immortal spirit, blood, and bones, were all withered at the blasting sight; and I arose and withdrew, with groanings which the pangs of death shall never wring from me” (194).

Finally, even in death, Robert, or the suicide’s corpse, is discussed in terms similar to the bier-right ritual. During one of the exhumation scenes of the suicide’s grave, the Editor explains that the

mossy mortar, which impeded us exceedingly ... entirely prevented a proper investigation of the fore parts of the body. I will describe every thing as I saw it before four respectable witnesses, whose names I shall publish at large if permitted. A number of bones came up separately; for with the constant flow of liquid stuff into the deep grave, we could not see to preserve them in their places.

(205)

Here we receive a framing of an event with witnesses before a grave with “the constant flow of liquid stuff.” Even though this is not a murder trial, we have all the necessary characters or players in addition to an act of liquid flow in relation to a corpse to mimic a bier-right ritual.

Within these examples of Robert as a bleeding corpse who is a living-dead victim and murderer, we see Hogg’s most complex use and alteration of the bier-right. First, to examine Robert as the living-dead is to see him as one who is in a state of decay, not completely passed out of existence and wavering between two worlds. If, as Duncan suggests, Hogg routinely resists “the ideology of Enlightenment progress and cultural loss and salvage,” then the living-dead Robert comes to represent both of these figures in a much more sophisticated way (xvi). He is like the up-right corpse, and although not dead for the most part of the story, is indeed up-right, walking, moving, and participating in living affairs. He is also corpse-like in the descriptions of his physical state and appearance. Finally, he is like an aspect of cannibalism in that his body, mind, and autonomy are being consumed by the devil, madness, or some unspecified illness.

Robert’s existence as a living-dead, zombie figure takes on this “shadowy half-life” as Hogg attempts to preserve these cultural beliefs from being condemned by his society. Hogg keeps the Borderers’ cultural and traditional past in a zombie zone, where Robert, even in death,

pops up and requires those that exhume his corpse to stomp down his skull to fit back into the coffin and grave.

As for these textual examples of Robert as a bleeding victim and murderer, Hogg's reversal of the bier-right, we can consider George's response to Robert on Arthur's Seat when Robert repeatedly cries out murder. George presses Robert, "Who the devil is murdering you, or offering to murder you?" (37). Indeed, who is murdering Robert? Why are there so many instances of Robert's corpse-like body bleeding as his "system of defence"? Is George Robert's attempted murderer? Perhaps the devil or superstition itself is a murdering entity in way of robbing Robert of his autonomy as his character becomes more fragile, ridiculous, and decayed with the passing of time.

As a self-murderer, Robert as suicide, we also see how Hogg shows him as a fading figure of a religious and cultural past, connected to supernatural or superstitious beliefs intermingled with this Christian extremism. As post-Enlightenment progress or modernity views these cultural figures and beliefs as in decay or in fact passed or dead, Hogg keeps Robert in a state of limbo between life and death. Even after Robert's suicide (which is assumed in the novel to have been supported by demons or a supernatural force), he still creates a sense of doubt surrounding the supernatural in that his corpse jolts upward, his clothing is well preserved, and his written account is found intact.

The supernatural hold on a Scottish cultural past is weakening and dying, as Robert weakens and eventually self-destructs. And instead of asserting Robert as one or the other, victim or murderer, he blurs and distorts these roles, allowing his readers to decide whether or not to sympathize with or condemn Robert and his confessions. Does disbelief and "waning" belief in the supernatural and religious murder Robert? Does he haunt a cultural psyche filled with

supernatural and superstitious belief systems creating doubt, a doubt validated when religious beliefs are also in question? How can we explain away Robert's physical transformation in a living-dead figure? Hogg manipulates and experiments with these crossovers of belief with Robert as a bier-right, on trial, convicted by blood and defended by blood: a system of defense.

Perhaps the Editor in *Confessions* offers us the best example of the complexity of Hogg's *Confessions*. Warning "enlightened" critics that reason cannot be applied to Robert's story, he suggests:

With regard to the work itself, I dare not venture a judgment, for I do not understand it. I believe no person, man or woman, will ever peruse it with the same attention that I have done, and yet I confess that I do not comprehend the writer's drift. It is certainly impossible that these scenes could ever have occurred, that he describes as having himself transacted. I think it *may be* possible that he had some hand in the death of his brother, and yet I am disposed greatly to doubt it; and the numerous distorted traditions, &c. which remain of that event, may be attributable to the work having been printed and burnt, and of course the story known to all the printers, with their families and gossips. . . . I account all the rest either dreaming or madness; or, as he says to Mr. Watson, a religious parable, on purpose to illustrate something scarcely tangible, but to which he seems to have attached great weight. Were the relation at all consistent with reason, it corresponds so minutely with traditionary facts, that it could scarcely have missed to have been received as authentic; but in this day, and with the present generation, it will not go down." (209-10)

The bier-right is indeed one of these “distorted traditions.” Cultural traditions and beliefs are preserved by Hogg through distortion, mystery, confusion, and chaos surrounding the bier-right. By forming a victim-monster entity from bier-right features, Robert becomes a resistant force from history that is still capable of haunting the present as the suicide corpse. Perhaps Hogg keeps mystery alive, albeit in a different dimension or space “to evoke as not even Scott or Stevenson could the sense of another haunting world next to our own” (Gifford 7).

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