

Bessie Dunlop

by John Hodgart

Act One, Scene 6

- NARR.1 In the Scotland of Bessie's time, charms, spells and superstitions were a natural part of rural life.
- NARR.2 Many of them far older than Christianity.
- NARR.3 They played an important part in curing illness or protecting people from various evils.
- NARR.4 Folk medicine relied on the popular belief in such charms as in the use of herbs.
- NARR.2 Thus Bessie Dunlop, the local midwife, soon became known as a skeelywife who had the reputation of being able to treat and cure a variety of human and animal ailments.
- NARR.1 The more she helped others, the more her fame spread, the more was expected of her.
- NARR.4 People soon started seeking her help for all sorts of things.
- NARR.2 And it was not long before her reputation reached the ears of the local gentry.
- NARR.3 "The Lady Johnstoun, elder, sent to her a servant of the said Lady's, callit Catherine Dunlop, to help ane young gentlewoman, her dochter."

Act One: Scene 7 - Lady Johnstoun's House

(Catherine Dunlop enters with Bessie.)

CATH. If you'll just wait here, I'll inform my lady that I hev brung you fur to see her.

BESSIE That's awfully obleeing of you, Catherine Dunlop! An whaur did ye learn tae talk wi bools in yer mooth? I've mind o ye when ye were a clarty wean, wi snotters blinnin ye!

CATH. I beg your perdon.

BESSIE Ach never mind, awa an tell Lady Johnstoun that I'm here wi the medicine for her dochter.

CATH. *(as she exits)* Will you jist keep mind that you're in Lady Johnstoun's house, an behive as befoots yer place.

BESSIE I ken ma place fine. Dae you ken yours?

(Catherine returns with Lady J. and daughter Grizell, plus the Laird of Stainlie.)

LADY J. Just sit doon here Grizell dear, an tak the weight from aff your feet. How are ye feelin? That was a terrible attack ye had jist noo. Wasn't it dear? Oh hallo Mrs ... Jessie ... it's awfully guid o ye tae come. Isn't it dear? Oh, this is the Laird o Stainlie. Grizell an the Laird are aboot to be married. Aren't ye Laird?

LAIRD *(dead slow and not very enthusiastic)* Ay.

LADY J. Ay, well, it's an awfully worryin time for all of us. Have ye found oot what's troubling poor Grizell?

BESSIE Well I think it's mibbie...

LADY J. She's fair wastin away to a shadow, so she is.

BESSIE A cauld...

LADY J. Oh ay she gets awfully cauld, don't ye dear?

BESSIE Cauld bluid...

LADY J. No, no blood, but terrible wind she's been heving.

BESSIE Cauld bluid!

LADY J. Oh, awfully cold blood, sure ye have dear?

- BESSIE Lady Johnstoun, I'm trying tae tell ye whit I think's wrang wi her.
- LADY J. Oh, I'm maist sorry, Mrs ... eh..It's jist that I'm that worried about Grizell.
- LAIRD *(slowly)* Whit is it?
- BESSIE It's ... *(waits)* ... cauld bluid that goes about the hert.
- LADY J. Cauld blood about the hert?
- LAIRD *(dead slow)* Cauld bluid about the hert!
- LADY J. Oh my! That sounds jist awful. Whit can ye do for it?
- BESSIE Weel, I've got a mixture here that ye could try, but I'm warnin ye it's awfu strong an she can only tak a wee drap at a time. It's in this jaur, but I'll need some ale an some sugar tae mix it wi.
- LADY J. Catherine, run ben tae the kitchen and bring a big jug o ale and the sugar bool. *(Catherine exits)* Whit's in the mixture, eh Mrs ... eh?
- BESSIE Bessie, ma Lady
- LADY J. Oh ay, Jessie.
- BESSIE Weel, there's cloves an ginger, an there's aniseed an liquorice aw mixed thegither in a wee drap o ale, an it's strained intae this wee jaur, an I jist add some mair ale tae thin it doon a bit, an a wee drap o sugar, jist tae sweeten it a bit, for it's an awfu strong mixture.

(Enter Catherine with sugar and ale.)

- LADY J. Thank you Catherine.
- BESSIE Noo, it's jist the teeniest wee drap at a time.
(Pours a small amount into the ale and scatters sugar over it.)
Here ye are, hen, jist try a wee sip of this.
(Grizell sips very warily)
Noo, mind she's only tae hae a wee drap at a time, an it'll dae her mair guid if she taks it first thing in the mornin.
- LADY J. Oh, that's awfy guid of ye, Jessie. I'm really most obleeged tae ye. Weel, if ye'll jist step this way, the Laird here'll fetch ye the cheese an the peck o meal I promised.

(Grizell is beginning to look a bit happier.)

Noo just you sit here, Grizell dear, an tak your medicine, just like Jessie told you, and we'll be back in a meenit.

(They start to go, but the Laird is still gawping at Grizell who is now clearly beginning to like the mixture. He mistakes her smile for a sign of affection, which he attempts to follow up, without success.)

LADY J. Laird ... Laird!

LAIRD Eh? Oh ay ... aw richt, *(slowly)* I'm jist comin, *(pause)* but I think she's a bit better the day.

(Grizell crosses to the table, pours more of the mixture into the cup and take some more ale and sugar, which she drinks with glowing pleasure. She returns for a refill and gulps it down.)

(Lady J. and Catherine return and immediately notice a difference.)

CATH. Oh Lady Johnstoun, whit's come over Miss Grizell?

GRIZELL Shut yer face ya nebbie wee besom ye! nosy

LADY J. Grizell! Really! It must be the medicine!

(Crosses to examine the jug.)

There's no a drap left! Oh Grizell, ye're not yerself!

GRIZELL I've never felt better in all my whole life!

(She rises and starts moving around the room.)

I'm totally scunnert o this place an everything about it, an I'll be leavin at the earliest opptun ... oppertance ... operchance, an as soon as possible! *(hiccups)*

One day soon, a handsome horse on a big white prince will come along, an take me in his arms, an ...

(She spins around and is caught by the Laird, who is just returning.)

... Och, well, never mind ... I suppose you'll huv tae dae. Gie's a ki

LAIRD Whit?

LADY J. Grizell, really! Have ye nae propriety?

GRIZELL Gie's peace, mither! Gie's a kiss, Laird!

- LADY J. Grizell, whatever will the Laird think of ye?
- LAIRD Och, I don't really mind ...
- CATH. That medicine must've blootered her brains!
- GRIZELL That's good stuff ... an let me tell you, it's done a lot for me an ...
(She stops speaking as a look of discomfort comes across her face. She moves slowly and uncomfortably towards the exit, and then suddenly dashes off as fast as her legs will take her.)
- CATH. I don't think we should gie her ony mair o that stuff!
- LADY J. Whit will the neighbours say?
- LAIRD I think she's a lot better the day!
- NARR.1 Having established her reputation as a skeelywife, Bessie soon found that people expected her to have powers that went beyond the natural.
- NARR.2 Such as an ability to resolve certain human problems.
- NARR.3 Or to be able to find the whereabouts of things that were lost or stolen.
- NARR.4 For many a poor woman it could even be quite profitable to be regarded as a spaewife or witchwife as wealthier people sometimes payed well for information about their stolen goods.
- NARR.1 "The Lady Thirdpairt in the Barony of Renfrew sent to her and speired at her wha it was that had stolen fae her twa horns o gowd an a croun o the same, oot o her purse."
- NARR.2 "And efter she had spoken wi Tam, within twinty days, she sent her word wha had them and she got them again."

(Tam Reid, her "familiar spirit", who was supposed to have been killed at the battle of Pinkie in 1957. Bessie "confessed" to receiving all her knowledge from him. His son, Thom, at this time was Baron officer to the Blair estate.)

Act One: Scene 9 - Lady Blair's Castle

NARR.1 "The Lady Blair (in the parish o Dalry) sundry times had spoken wi her about some claithes that were stolen fae her."

NARR.2 "For the whilk she dang and wrackit her ain servants.

(Lady Blair enters followed by Bessie.)

LADY B. The Laird is gey pleased wi the horses ye cured last time Bessie, an Thom Reid wid like ye tae hae a leuk at some o his yowes up at the Pencot. I wantit tae speir at ye first if ye kent ony mair about this ither maitter that I asked ye about the last time.

BESSIE Weel ma Lady I cannae prove onythin, but ... hae ye checked everythin?

LADY B. But I've been owre aw this sae mony times afore. If I've tellt the servants yince , I've tellt them a hunner times. I've speired at them, warned them, I've flytit an skytit them, but the claithes still disappear lik a boggle's braith.

BESSIE Whit's missin noo ma Lady?

LADY B. Leuk, here's the list. An mair things since yestreen : a pair o sheets, pillowcases, twa pair o stockings, a when o linen an serviettes, an fower sarks , ma best yins tae.

BESSIE Wha hae ye speired at ma Lady? who have you questioned

LADY B. Them aw: Janet, Nancy, Mary, Madge, young Robert, an even auld Wull.

BESSIE Is there onybody else ever in the hoose, ma Lady?

LADY B. Apart fae young Thom Reid, the Laird's officer, only ma ain faimily, oh an Margaret, but ...

BESSIE Margaret ye say?

LADY B. Margaret Symple. She's kin o relatit, an she's been in ma service for a year or twa noo.

BESSIE Oh ay that Margaret. Hae ye asked her about the things?

LADY B. Naw, for she's ma kinswoman's lassie. Shairly ye dinnae think...she widnae..?

BESSIE Weel ma Lady, I ken she has some gey fancy washins tae hing oot, an there's a when o folk hae their doots about her.

LADY B. I'm beginning tae hae ane or two masel.

BESSIE I dinnae like speakin ill o onybody ma Lady, but she can be a gey ill-willed thrawn wee lassie.

LADY B. Ay an noo that I think aboot it, she wis askin Thom Reid for mair money a while back, but she hasnae been sae bothered aboot it since... Richt, I'll suin get tae the bottom o this! Thank ye Bessie. Noo, efter ye've seen tae Thom's yowes, come doon tae the side door, an I'll hae some bits o claites ready for yer weans.

(exeunt)

NARR.1 Thus Bessie's reputation for finding stolen goods soon spread into neighbouring parishes.

NARR.2 And her "powers" were much sought after by people in authority.

Learning Resources

Reading

1. Explain what a 'Skeelywife' was and how she relied on both medical knowledge and superstition.
2. Why would she have been an important person in her community?
3. Explain how Bessie's magic brew affects Grizell Johnstoun and how this brings about a few surprises for everyone.
4. What do you think was really wrong with Grizell? Who would be most/least pleased about the change that comes over her and why?
5. Why do people soon start to think Bessie possesses supernatural powers and why do the gentry send for her?
6. Why do you think the Blairs originally sent for Bessie and do you think there is anything dangerous in what Lady Blair asks of her?
7. Can you think of anything in these earlier scenes that might bring trouble to Bessie later?
8. What do we learn from the introductory information about witchcraft persecution and the part played in it by the Church?
9. Why did the authorities make such a big issue of Bessie's case?

Writing

Choose one of the following tasks:

Write a serious or comic confession to something you have done, in the form of a letter, blog or diary entry.

Write a sequel to either the Lady Johnstoun or the Blair scene.

Listening and Talking

Discuss cases where innocent people have been blamed or found guilty, or confessed. Why did this happen?

Discuss bullying or racism or sexism in your school/area. Is it a big issue? Why? What form does it take? What do you think needs to be done?

What sorts of people or groups are often blamed today for problems in our society? Why is this? How are they victimised?

Do you believe in the supernatural or do you think it is all just nonsense? Discuss some different views on this subject.

Further reading

Poetry: Anon ballads eg 'The Wife o Usher's Well', 'Thomas the Rhymer', 'Tam Lin', 'Alison Gross', 'The Twa Corbies', 'Bonny Kilmeny' by James Hogg, 'The Rowan' by Violet Jacob, 'The Fox's Skin' by Marion Angus, 'Witchgirl' by Douglas Dunn

Fiction: 'Wandering Willie's Tale' by Sir Walter Scott, 'Black Andie's Tale of Tad Lapraik' and 'Thrawn Janet' by R.L. Stevenson, 'The Book of Black Arts' by George Mackay Brown, 'The Thirteenth Member' by Mollie Hunter, 'Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales' edited by Gordon Jarvie.