

Impatient Griseldas: Women and the Perpetration of Violence in Sixteenth-Century Glasgow

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Popular stories and sermons suggest that one of the most obvious characteristics of the city woman was her ability to quarrel with those around her. Patient Griselda seems to have been as rare in the daily life of the Middle Ages as in that of other centuries, and feminine outspokenness can be found at all social levels.

– Margaret Wade Labarge

In her 1986 overview of medieval women's lives, Margaret Wade Labarge drew attention to women's verbal assertiveness.¹ Since then, there have been many innovative studies of medieval and early modern women's 'disorderly speech,' studies which have greatly advanced our understanding of premodern gender relations, dynamics of household and community, and gendered expectations of behaviour.² However, women made use of their fists as well as their tongues: insults could all too easily lead to blows. Until recently, less attention has been paid to women's physical assaults on their opponents, perhaps because the ratio of women to men involved in physical violence has historically been lower than that involved in verbal violence. As Garthine Walker has pointed out, the quantification common in historical studies of crime can result in a tendency to ignore women's experience: "What tends to happen is that

1 The epigraph is taken from Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 155.

2 For example, Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*; Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*; Dean, "Gender and Insult"; Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue*; Harrison, "Women and the Branks in Stirling."

women are counted, and being a minority of offenders, are subsequently *discounted* as unimportant.³ Most studies of violence in medieval and early modern Europe have focused on men's actions, with women appearing primarily as victims of violence rather than as perpetrators.⁴ Moreover, examinations of women and crime have tended to focus on actions which have been characterized by modern historians as particularly 'feminine': crimes such as infanticide, scolding, and witchcraft.⁵

In the last decade, however, historians interested in women's agency have begun to examine women as perpetrators of physical violence, not only as victims. Walker looked at the gendered nature of interpersonal assault in her 2003 study of early modern Cheshire, while Karen Jones included female physical violence in her examination of the local courts in Kent from 1460 to 1560.⁶ Recently there have been two more extensive studies of women's aggressive physical actions: Jennine Hurl-Eamon's 2005 work on petty violence in London from 1680 to 1720 and Anne-Marie Kilday's examination of women and violent crime in late eighteenth-century Scotland, although the latter work focuses largely on lethal rather than non-lethal violence.⁷ This article contributes to the growing discussion by examining cases involving women as perpetrators of interpersonal assaults in the Scottish town of Glasgow in the late sixteenth century, comparing them to cases involving male perpetrators, and arguing that women's active involvement in violence was more common than is often assumed. Because women appear relatively frequently, these cases shed light not only on crime but also, more broadly, on the gendered nature of men's and women's lives in a late sixteenth-century community.

One day in the mid-1580s, Bessie Miller appeared before the Glasgow town court with a complaint.⁸ On her way home a few days earlier, she had seen a man who had

3 Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 4, 75. See also Spierenburg, "How Violent Were Women."

4 This approach is taken by, for example, Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe*. For women as victims of violence and as aggressors, see Greenshields, *An Economy of Violence*, 100-12. For studies focusing on women as perpetrators of crime, see D'Cruze and Jackson, *Women, Crime and Justice in England since 1660*; and Brown and Ferguson, eds., *Twisted Sisters*.

5 On infanticide, scolding, and witchcraft, respectively, see Symonds, *Weep Not for Me*; Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*; and Lerner, *Enemies of God*. Rublack discusses the less gender-specific crime of theft in *The Crimes of Women in Early Modern Germany*, chap. 3.

6 Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*; Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*. For an earlier study, see Finch, "Women and Violence."

7 Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*; Kilday, *Women and Violent Crime*.

8 Renwick, ed., *Abstracts of the Protocols*, vol. 9, no. 3022. In most of the quotations given in this article, the original Scots has been translated into modern English.

been involved in her son's murder walking "most boldly" on the street. She, "with good cause," as she argued, went to strike him. But she did not reach her intended victim. Bessie Black, wife of John Allan, "moved by an evil spirit," according to Miller, attacked her most cruelly, striking her in the face with her fists, thumping her upon the heart with her feet, scratching her with her nails, and spilling so much of her blood that Miller could no longer earn her living. Moreover, Black asserted, "I will defend that man's servants in despite of all of Glasgow or of any that will take thy part." Miller had asked the magistrates to convict Black for assault. The next morning, when Miller came with an officer to summon a witness to appear in the case, Black's daughter cruelly attacked her and struck her in the face with her fists in the presence of the officer. Miller asked the magistrates to punish Black's daughter as well.

This is just one of over 1500 cases of verbal and physical violence heard by the town court of Glasgow between 1574 and 1600.⁹ Unfortunately, it is also one of only two court cases reported in such detail; they were preserved among the papers of a notary. Most court entries are only a few lines long, recording the charge and the verdict; however, they clearly show both women and men assaulting each other. Until recently, little use has been made of town court books for evidence of interpersonal assault in sixteenth-century Scotland.¹⁰ There has, however, been some study of violence as it appears in the Kirk session (local Church courts) records in larger studies of the working of reformed Church discipline after the Reformation of 1560,¹¹ though for a fuller picture, more research on both Church and secular courts is needed.

Of course, the case which was presented to the court was framed by the pursuer (and/or her legal counsel). Historians must be wary of taking such reports at face value as the teller of the tale wanted to present herself in the best possible light.¹² For example, Miller's claim that she could no longer work for a living may well have been an exaggeration aimed at eliciting more sympathy from the court or to lay the groundwork for a demand for financial recompense. However, the story had to be

9 GCA, C1/1/1-5. Some extracts are printed in Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, and in Marwick, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow*. Eight years are missing, including the year in which this case was heard; thus, the verdict is unknown.

10 Among recent studies, see Falconer, "Mony Utheris Divars Odious Crymes"; Falconer, "A Family Affair"; and Ewan, "Disorderly Damsels."

11 For example, Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, chap. 5; and Graham, *The Uses of Reform*, 194-99, 290-98.

12 For the ways in which female litigants might shape their narratives, see Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 87-104.

believable; moreover, since the incident took place in a public arena, witnesses could be called to corroborate the assertions of both parties. Even if Miller misrepresented some of the motivations of the participants, the basic facts of her case are secure enough to shed light on aspects of female and male interpersonal violence in the period.

The case involved both physical and verbal violence, some of it threatened, some of it actual. Threats could also be unspoken, involving gestures or deportment which would rarely be made explicit in court testimony. Miller's initial approach to her intended victim was menacing enough that Black intervened to stop her. Black herself, after her initial physical attack on Miller, threatened future violence, not only against Miller but also against anyone who might take up Miller's cause. Most work on gender and crime has argued that women's participation in verbal violence was much greater than their participation in physical violence.¹³ This was also a common perception by contemporaries. A witness to a quarrel between two Glasgow men commented that "thai flait lyk twa wyfes" (they scold like two women).¹⁴ However, as Jones has pointed out, the proportion of women's verbal and physical violence varies in different courts.¹⁵ Many studies showing the high incidence of women's verbal violence both in England and in Scotland are based on Church courts, which were more concerned with defamation, blasphemy, and scolding than with physical violence, unless that violence involved domestic disputes, attacks on the minister, or violence in the kirk or kirkyard. In the Glasgow Kirk session court, both women and men appeared much more frequently for verbal than physical assault, with women being ordered to pay fines about twice as often as men for insults aimed at specific victims and being sentenced about six times as often for general 'flyting,' or scolding.¹⁶ In the Glasgow burgh court, in contrast, men's recorded insults outnumbered those of women. Whereas the use of insults is recorded in 12% of cases involving women while only 7% of men's cases involve words, the cases concerning male offenders are far more numerous, and thus in total more men than women were charged by the burgh authorities with verbal offences in these years.¹⁷ Indeed, the burgh court

13 For example, Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 188. For Kirk session cases of verbal violence, see Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, 235-49.

14 GCA, CH2/171/33, Glasgow Presbytery Records transcript, p. 111 (14 March 1597). See also Ewan, "Many Injurious Words," 177-78.

15 Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 75.

16 GCA, CH2/550/1, St Mungo's Kirk Session, 1583-93.

17 Jones's study of Kent found similar numbers of men and women charged with verbal violence, but with women's cases making up a much larger proportion of the total; see Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 75, 94, 101-102, 104.

seems to have been more concerned with physical than verbal assault, as only 10% of the total cases of assault included insults.

Often, words and deeds went together, as can be seen in Bessie Miller's case. It is likely that many assault cases involved hurling insults as well, even when these were not recorded. Indeed, some men were quite talented at flyting (and alliteration). In October 1598, Duncan Lennox said to Walter Buchanan, "I heir ane liar making ane loud lesing that he leit lyke ane lousie limmar" (I hear a liar telling a lie that he lied like a louse-ridden scoundrel).¹⁸ Walter's response was more prosaic — merely that Duncan lied. Perhaps Duncan was disappointed in the reply: he drew his sword and threatened to strike Walter; his stepson then made good on his threat.

In the 1158 cases involving physical violence that came before the burgh court (with 31 cases involving both female and male perpetrators), women were assailants in roughly 22% (258 cases) and men in roughly 80% (931 cases). Women were more likely to be victims (in 32% of all cases) than assailants, while men were more likely to be assailants (in 70% of all cases) than victims. A study of later sixteenth-century Aberdeen found women involved in about a quarter of the cases, although the findings are complicated in this town by the category of 'strublanche,' or disturbance of the peace — it is not clear in most of the records whether the strublanche was verbal, physical, or both.¹⁹ The figures for Glasgow and Aberdeen compare interestingly with those for late medieval and early modern England and Continental Europe, where women were involved in between 3% and 20% of physical assaults, with most totals being below 16%, although a recent study of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London has found rates ranging from 25% to 36%.²⁰

In Glasgow, both sexes were about four times more likely to attack their own sex than the other sex. A similar pattern was found in contemporary Aberdeen.²¹ In early modern Cheshire, both women and men were more likely to attack men, although in London between 1680 and 1720, as in Glasgow a century earlier, women were about four times as likely to assault their own sex, whereas men were only twice as likely

18 GCA, CH2/171/33, p. 283 (17 Oct. 1598). For flyting, see Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, 235-49; and Ewan, "Many Injurious Words."

19 Falconer, "'Mony Utheris Divars Odious Crymes,'" 33.

20 Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 64; Finch, "Women and Violence," 27-28; Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 68. For Amsterdam in the period from 1650 to 1810, see Spierenburg, "How Violent Were Women," 16-17.

21 Falconer, "'Mony Utheris Divars Odious Crymes,'" 29.

to attack other men as they were to attack women.²² Of course, all of these figures reflect only those cases which came before the courts and thus do not give an accurate picture of all occurrences of violence.²³ Indeed, some historians have argued that court records probably underrepresent female violence, as such incidents would not have been recorded unless the level of violence was fairly serious.²⁴ But the cases can reveal what types of actions were viewed by the court as serious assaults and whether the courts treated them differently depending on the sex of the assailant.

The majority of cases before the Glasgow burgh court involved a single assailant (80% of women's assaults and 88% of men's assaults).²⁵ Two-thirds of the attacks by women on men involved women acting alone. Indeed, Bessie Miller's case resulted from an intended female attack on a male victim. Where assailants acted with accomplices, there were some differences between the sexes. Women were more likely to act with men than with other women, whereas men were more likely to act with their own sex.²⁶ Women most commonly acted with relatives or household members — about three-quarters of the multi-person assaults involving women included kin or servants. Sometimes these incidents turned into family brawls. As mentioned above, Black's daughter did not hesitate to assault Miller when the latter came to summon a witness in the case against Black. In 1574, Marion Jameson and her three daughters attacked Marion Stene, who, in return, assaulted one of Jameson's daughters while Stene's husband, James Anderson, attacked a second daughter and was himself attacked by that daughter's husband.²⁷

A woman's most common accomplice was her spouse. Alexander Curry and his wife, Marion Smyt, attacked Margaret Hunter at her washing by first tearing down her clothes and trampling them in the gutter and then striking her.²⁸ Such assaults were often the result of previous grievances between households and frequently involved

22 Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 79-80; Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 71.

23 For discussion of the problems of relating court records to actual crime rates, see Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 24-33.

24 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 218.

25 The figures are 208 of 258 cases for women and 821 of 931 cases for men. See also Ewan, "Disorderly Damsels," 159.

26 Among women's accomplices, 14 were other women and 33 were men; among men's accomplices, 77 were other men and only 33 were women.

27 Marwick, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow*, 7 (2 April 1574).

28 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 7 (9 April 1574).

two couples. In 1577, Patrick McQuhirrie, a skipper, and his wife, Margaret Ross, assaulted the fisher Andrew Thomson and his wife on the high street after Thomson had reproved McQuhirrie earlier in the day for raising stones from the road at the fishmarket.²⁹ Walker and others have stressed the importance of examining women's interpersonal violence within the larger context of household concerns, and Falconer points out the centrality of household concerns to interpersonal violence in a community, although such concerns may have been less dominant (or at least less likely to be expressed openly) in male than in female violence.³⁰ Miller's justification for her initial aggressive action was that she was acting as a mother would be expected to do in avenging the death of her son. That she expected the court to understand this suggests that an all-encompassing love for one's offspring, including a desire for blood revenge, was seen by society as a crucial aspect of motherhood.

Men acted with non-kin half of the time, perhaps because they were more likely than women to belong to associational groups such as guilds. Some multiple-male assaults speak to the existence of a male youth culture that could embrace violence and disorder.³¹ If there was an equivalent female youth culture, it did not attract the attention of the authorities. Studies elsewhere have emphasized that fighting was a way in which young men tried to assert their masculine identity.³² Keith Brown has examined such a culture among noble youths in this period.³³ There has been less study of it further down the social scale, although work by John McGavin and Margo Todd on popular culture and the survival of pre-Reformation traditional festivities has shown that such a youth culture did exist; in particular, McGavin has examined an incident in Haddington in 1589 which brought the youth of that town into conflict with the Church.³⁴ In Glasgow, just before Christmas 1586, a group of young men, including Adam Elphinstone, were charged with causing "misrule, clamours and tumult" by parading through the town on St. Thomas's Eve with a piper, as in pre-Reformation celebrations of Yule, and then tossing a horse's head

29 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 68 (26 April 1577).

30 Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 9-13, 75-77. Falconer, "A Family Affair," 143-49. Ewan, "Disorderly Damsels," 159-61.

31 Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 65; and Griffiths, *Youth and Authority*, esp. chap. 3. See also Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 20-21.

32 Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 2.

33 Brown, "Honour, Honours and Nobility," 52-60.

34 Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, 187-88; and McGavin, "The Kirk, the Burgh, and Fun," 16-22.

around the marketplace.³⁵ In this case, town and Kirk came together to punish the youths, who were imprisoned in the tolbooth overnight. That night, someone (later revealed to be Adam's father, the glazier George Elphinstone) left the horse's head at the minister's door, suggesting that the earlier fears of town and Kirk were not completely unfounded.³⁶ Indeed, only two months later, Adam Elphinstone, one of the ringleaders and a perpetual troublemaker, perhaps humiliated by being forced to do public penance for his earlier infractions, gathered together a group of young men and assaulted the minister, casting stones at his servant and attacking the gate of his house with his sword.³⁷

Challenges could play a role in provoking violence. Indeed, one defence against a charge of violence was that the victim had provoked the attack — hence Bessie Miller's assertion that her son's murder gave her a good reason to attack her victim. She wanted the court to know that she had acted only because she had been provoked by her target's arrogance. Bessie Black's challenge to anyone who would hurt Miller's intended victim is unusual for a woman; in contrast, Bessie Miller's attack on her victim without any warning follows what tended to be the general pattern for assaults by women. Men were more likely than women to issue challenges or utter threats (or at least their challenges were taken seriously enough that they ended up in court). It has been argued that gestures and taunts were used by men as proof of their strength and status as men, a way of defending their territory and dominance.³⁸ In 1580, when George Herbertson taunted the bailie George Elphinstone, calling him a knave, a loun (a worthless person, low fellow), and other insulting names and saying that he was gentler-born than Elphinstone, he had his hand on his already half-drawn whinger (a short stabbing sword). The expected male response was to fight the challenger. Apparently, the bailie resisted the challenge, preferring instead to haul him before the town court for verbal assault, where Herbertson was temporarily deprived of his freedom. Herbertson did not learn his lesson: a year later he insulted another bailie and lost his citizenship permanently.³⁹ In September 1585, Andrew Downy and

35 GCA, CH2/550/1, pp. 115-16 (22 Dec. 1586). See discussion of such "profane pastimes" in Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, chap. 4. Yuletide celebrations were a problem for many Reformed towns in Scotland in the late sixteenth century.

36 GCA, CH2/550/1, pp. 124, 126, 128 (26 Jan.-16 Feb. 1587).

37 GCA, CH2/550/1, p. 126 (9 Feb. 1587).

38 Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 150; Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 66-67.

39 Marwick, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow*, 77; GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 8r (11 June 1581).

his two brothers gathered at John Gilleane's gate, calling to him to "come forth upon pain of hanging, false knave"; when this failed to provoke him to leave his house, they broke down his gate and discharged their pistols at his forestair, shooting at him and his household.⁴⁰ In contrast, there are only a few references to women menacing or threatening their opponents. In June 1574, Margaret Andrew, wife of Thomas Downy, was convicted of "manassing and boisting" (menacing and threatening) Katherine Mayne and then attacking her with a piece of wood.⁴¹ "Manassing" was, however, a common part of indictments against men, too. In 1582, James Newing was convicted of insulting other men and was warned that because he had earlier been found guilty of "manassing" other honest neighbours, he would be banished if he were found guilty again; meanwhile, he was to find surety that "he shall be better mannered in time coming."⁴² Many of the incidents identified as assaults by men wielding "a drawn whinger" may have consisted merely of threatening gestures rather than actual physical assaults.⁴³ Other challenges had a more ritual aspect and seem to have been invitations to a duel, although duelling was not as common in Scotland as in other countries such as France and Italy. When William Sutherland came to Robert Gibson's house and provoked him to fight, Robert responded by casting his bonnet at William, thus challenging him to "the singular combat."⁴⁴ Such actions may also have been influenced by the medieval tradition of trial by combat, although Scottish towns had from an early stage moved away from such forms of justice.

Insults and challenges were intended to humiliate their targets and often to provoke physical violence, but physical assaults themselves could also embarrass the victim. Many assaults seem to have caused less hurt than humiliation, although both were frequently the result.⁴⁵ Indeed, any assault on the body was an assault on a person's honour.⁴⁶

40 Renwick, ed., *Abstracts of the Protocols*, vol. 9, no. 3015.

41 GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 17v (11 June 1574).

42 GCA, C1/1/2, fols. 58v, 59r (28 Dec. 1582).

43 Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 63.

44 Marwick, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow*, 141 (5 Aug. 1589). For duelling, see Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 25.

45 For the wide range of actions that courts in Kent might include in the category of assault, see Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 62-63. The Glasgow court seems to have taken a similarly broad view of assault.

46 Greenshields, *An Economy of Violence*, 101. See also Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 43-44, 90-91; and Ewan, "Disorderly Damsels," 167-68.

One form of assault for which only men were convicted was ear-pulling. James Bessate's attack on James Ingrame, which included striking him with a whinger and pulling his ear, was described as dishonouring him.⁴⁷ Since striking an opponent with a whinger was not seen as dishonourable in any other case, it was presumably the ear-pulling which humiliated the victim. Nailing an offender's ear to the 'tron,' the public weighbeam, so that he was forced to tear it to free himself⁴⁸ was a punishment for notorious thieves, and perhaps pulling the ear was a symbolic indication of the victim's lack of honesty. John Buntene may have intended to cut off his victim's ear when he struck James Forthite with a whinger "behind his lug [ear] to the effusion of his blood."⁴⁹ The punishment of nailing the ear to the tron was used only for men, which may explain why women's ears were not targets (although there was also the practical point that their ears were less exposed, being hidden under their headgear or their hair). The relationship between official forms of violence, sanctioned and used by the authorities, and the types of violence used in individual assaults is one which needs to be explored further.⁵⁰

Attacks on hair were very common. Pulling a man's beard was especially insulting: a beard was a visible sign of a man's masculinity, and it has been argued that to pull it was to symbolically emasculate him or to imply that he was merely a youth, not an adult male.⁵¹ John Knox, recalling an affray in Glasgow Cathedral in 1545 between the clergy of the rival archbishops of Glasgow and St Andrews, regretted that many of the men lacked beards and therefore could not "bukkill other by the bearse [grab each other by the beard] as bold men wold have doune."⁵² While Knox was perhaps emphasizing the effeminacy of the beardless clergy as part of his criticism of the medieval Church, the passage also suggests that beard-pulling was a recognized and accepted part of male assaults on other men. On 5 September 1580, Andrew Anderson assaulted John Wylie, throwing him down, striking him with his hands and feet, and pulling his beard.⁵³ Here, the beard-pulling seems to have been a final humiliation in a very physical attack.

47 GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 201r (18 Oct. 1585).

48 Mackay and Boyd, eds., *Records of Inverness*, 1:31, 120. For similar meanings ascribed to torn ears in England, see Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 91-92.

49 GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 99v (15 May 1576).

50 For violence used by women as a form of discipline, see Ewan, "Disorderly Damsels," 170-71.

51 Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 146; Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 78.

52 Laing, ed., *Works of John Knox*, 1:146-47, cited in Dawson, *Scotland Re-formed*, 165 n. 5.

53 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 125 (6 Sept. 1580). See also Ewan, "Disorderly Damsels," 168.

Much more common were cases of hair-pulling, which was almost always aimed at women although carried out by both sexes. Hair-pulling could serve two purposes. First, it could inflict pain — Elizabeth Brown, for instance, was recorded as pulling Elizabeth Boswell’s hair out of her head in great quantity.⁵⁴ Secondly, such an assault also attacked a principal marker of respectability for the adult woman, whose hair was bound up under her headcovering, known in Scotland as her ‘*curche*.’ Disordering her hair carried implications of a loss of respectability, associating the victim with either youthful immaturity or, more commonly, prostitution.⁵⁵ In most such cases, however, the hair-pulling was accompanied by other types of actions, suggesting that it was intended as part of an attack rather than as a complete assault in itself.

Pulling a woman’s hair also meant that her *curche*, the symbol of her respectable status, would usually be torn off and thrown down. Abusing the headwear seems to have been even more insulting than pulling hair.⁵⁶ When Janet Boyd insulted John Clerk, he retaliated by pulling off her *curche*.⁵⁷ When Marion Stein and Effie Lindsay fought, Marion pulled off Effie’s *curche* and trampled it.⁵⁸ Attacks on men’s headgear were less commonly reported, although failure to remove one’s hat in the presence of someone of superior status could be seen as an insult. In 1599, Richard Wardrop, whose father opposed his intended marriage, was in trouble with the Glasgow presbytery for having “come by his father and his bonnet on his head, not saluting his father”; he was judged to be “a stubborn and disobedient son to his father.”⁵⁹ Being bareheaded may not have carried quite the same shame for men as it did for women, although those undergoing public penance in the kirk were often commanded to come “bareheaded.”⁶⁰

Being a sign of status and economic standing, clothing played a role in the violence.⁶¹ As McGavin points out, men (and probably women as well) “performed their

54 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 36 (8 Feb. 1575).

55 See Ewan, “Disorderly Damsels,” 168–69.

56 Spierenburg, “How Violent Were Women,” 9 n. 3.

57 GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 62v (15 Feb. 1583).

58 GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 116v (3 Dec. 1583).

59 GCA, CH2/171/33, p. 304 (6 Feb. 1594).

60 Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, 147–48.

61 Sumptuary laws passed in fifteenth-century Scotland, as in many other countries, attempted to regulate people’s dress according to social status; see Shaw, “Sumptuary Legislation in Scotland.”

identity publicly through the clothes that they wore, and were anxious about the readings which witnesses might make of this display.⁶² To tear someone's clothes was to suggest that the person did not deserve his or her status;⁶³ moreover, clothing was expensive, and such an attack thus inflicted real economic damage on the victim, too. John Sillar was convicted not only of striking and wounding Murdo Dunstan but also of "ryving of his sark" (tearing his shirt).⁶⁴ In 1599, Walter Bowey attacked James Lockey by hitting him with a sword and cutting his cloak.⁶⁵ Taking a man's cloak also seems to have been a form of humiliation. When three men assaulted the town watch in 1595, they not only broke the halbert of one of the watchmen but also took away the other men's cloaks.⁶⁶

Tearing a woman's clothes could also shame the victim as it exposed parts of her body normally hidden from public view, rather as did being forced to go barefoot and barelegged when doing penance before the kirk; torn clothes could also carry connotations of "disorderly, consensual sex."⁶⁷ Both men and women tore the clothes of their female victims: Thomas Syare elder struck Jonet Wilson, threw her in the gutter, and cut her clothes with a little knife, while Margaret Broun struck Jonet Law, pulled her hair, threw her to the ground, and tore her clothes.⁶⁸

Another way to humiliate someone was to dirty him or her. Casting of muck and filth was especially effective. Being pelted with dirt was associated with the public shaming of those found guilty of sexual transgressions, who were carted or processed through the town; it was also inflicted on offenders against public order who were sentenced to a period in the stocks or the pillory. This association of filth and misbehaviour had a long history: in Aberdeen in 1405, offenders placed on the cuckstool were expected to be pelted with dung and dirt.⁶⁹ Agnes Gillies was twice

62 McGavin, *Theatricality and Narrative*, 19.

63 Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 145.

64 GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 81v (31 May 1583).

65 GCA, C1/1/5, fol. 23v (3 April 1599).

66 GCA, C1/1/4, fol. 38r (25 March 1595).

67 Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, 147-48. For penance rituals in the post-Reformation Church, see Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, chap. 3; in the town courts, see Ewan, "Tongue, You Lied." For the sexual implications of torn clothes, see Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 59.

68 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 19-20 (20 Aug. 1574) and 21 (24 Aug. 1574). In London between 1680 and 1720, it was mainly women whose clothes were torn; see Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 75-77.

69 For the frequent association of prostitution and pollution, see Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 66-67; and Dean, "Gender and Insult," 219. For Aberdeen, see Dickinson, ed., *Early Records of the Burgh of Aberdeen*, 217.

the victim of such attacks and was later sentenced to be carted through the town as a troublemaker and adulterer.⁷⁰ Katherine Mayne cast muck and dirt in Isobel Stobo's face,⁷¹ while John Murheid younger threw "smiddy cowme" (ashes from a smith's forge) at William Anderson.⁷² Dirt was also cast at victims' possessions. Jonet Dunlop threw dirt at Agnes Martin's window, spoiling the bread, cheese, and butter which had been placed there; Agnes retaliated by hurling the spoiled food at Jonet.⁷³

Although neither Miller nor Black used weapons in their dispute, many men and women did so. In about 33% (85 of 258) of cases with female assailants, and in about 38% (355 of 931) of cases with male assailants, weapons were used,⁷⁴ though the choice of weapon varied, reflecting the different lives of men and women. As was the case in most other countries, men's most common weapon was the whinger, with which most adult men were armed. Just over half of the assaults by men involved whingers.⁷⁵ Many men also had access to pistols and swords, since men were expected to be armed or to have weapons in readiness in order to assist the officers of the town or to spring to the town's defence if it was attacked. In July 1574, repeating earlier statutes, the town council ordered that every booth holder have in readiness a halbert, jack, and steel bonnet "for eschewing of such inconveniences that may happen."⁷⁶ Women, on the other hand, were not expected to be armed. It has been argued that women were less likely to be involved in physical assaults because they did not habitually carry potentially lethal weapons,⁷⁷ although they might use a nearby man's weapons. In a joint attack with her spouse on Elizabeth Chalmers in 1575, Florence Cunningham hit her victim with the stock of a pistol, probably belonging to her husband, who

70 GCA, C1/1/1, fols. 240v (22 Sept. 1579) and 253v (12 April 1580). Agnes Gillies was carted on 14 July 1586 (GCA, CH2/550/1, p. 87) and threatened with banishment on 3 August 1592 (GCA, CH2/550/1, p. 355).

71 GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 78v (8 Nov. 1575).

72 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 22 (17 Sept. 1574).

73 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 10-11 (18 May 1574). Dirt-throwing was also common in England; see Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 79-80.

74 Walker found that both men and women were armed in about 40% of assault cases before the Cheshire courts; see Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 78. Finch found that about 25% of men and women used weapons; see Finch, "Women and Violence," 29. For pre-Reformation examples from eight other Scottish towns, see Ewan, "Disorderly Damsels," 165-67.

75 In Kent, swords, knives, and daggers were the most common weapons used by men; see Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 68-69. For other objects used by female assailants, see also Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 72-74.

76 GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 21v (6 July 1574).

77 Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 70-71.

used the hilt of his sword; similarly, Katherine Scot struck Margaret Hamilton with her fists and then used Michael Broke's whinger to strike her on the head.⁷⁸ The fact that the court recorded the owner of the whinger suggests that it did not associate women with the ownership of such weapons. However, the case also showed a potential vulnerability which could arise from being armed: an assailant could always try to use a man's weapon against its owner. Robert Fleming pulled out John Burne's whinger and threatened to strike him with it.⁷⁹

However, while they might not bear arms, women did not lack weapons. Like men, they used a wide variety of implements, whose nature suggests that their use in assaults was spontaneous rather than planned: most men and women used whatever lay near at hand. Both sexes favoured sticks of various types — staffs, wands, batons, rungs, poles, pieces of wood. Other weapons reflected the gendered tasks of men and women. Iron tongs, probably lying beside the fire, were a common weapon for women, as were keys, which hung at the waist of the mistress of the household. Both men and women also used worktools. Men used a variety of knives from their workplaces. Reflecting the dominance of women in the brewing trade, two women made use of 'maskruthers,' the sticks used to stir malt in brewing.⁸⁰

House furnishings provided an array of potential weapons. Tableware was useful in assaults, especially those that took place in alehouses or taverns. Drinking cups and sometimes their contents were thrown at opponents by both sexes, evidence that women as well as men participated in the common drinking culture of the community. Jonet Morrison called Archibald Haxhill "ane mensuorne thief" (a perjured thief) and then cast a pint stoup full of ale at him, hurting him above his left eye "to the great effusion of his blood."⁸¹ One woman used a pitcher as a weapon, while James Kirkwode and Barbara Lowry contented themselves with throwing ale at each other.⁸² Dishes and plates were effective projectiles or useful for breaking over an opponent's head. Sieves could also be used. Stools seem to have been favoured by women. When Agnes Steil hit Malie Blackwood with a wand, Malie retaliated by throwing a stool at her.⁸³ One woman took up her distaff and used it to strike her opponent. Among

78 GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 41v (18 Jan. 1575); GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 27v (3 Sept. 1574).

79 C1/1/3, fol. 123r (9 Dec. 1589).

80 GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 184v (14 May 1585); C1/1/4, fol. 127v (31 Aug. 1596).

81 GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 154v (27 Aug. 1577).

82 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 74 (4 June 1577). For assaults in taverns in England, see Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 65-67.

83 GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 131r (1 May 1584).

other weapons associated with the household, door and window bars were used only by men, perhaps because of the greater strength required to remove them.

A number of altercations took place in the market place, and some of the impromptu weapons used in this meeting and working place for both sexes were items associated with market activities. Both men and women made use of the ellwand, a stick for measuring cloth; being roughly a yard long, it made a useful weapon.⁸⁴ Even foodstuffs could be brought into play, as when John Kar hit Katherine Hart on the mouth with a salmon.⁸⁵ The hearing of this case may have struck some of the court as particularly amusing, given that proceedings probably took place in a building with the city's coat of arms, which included a salmon as a symbol of wisdom and as an attribute of Glasgow's patron saint.

The most common weapons, apart from whingers for men, were stones. Both sexes cast stones at each other, although women were more likely than men to use them (in 33 cases compared to 25 cases for men).⁸⁶ As was the case for assaults in general, assailants of both sexes were four times more likely to cast stones at their own sex than at the other sex. Throwing stones had the advantage that the assailant could be at some distance from the intended target, although there was always the disadvantage of the opponent throwing the stone back. Stones might also be thrown at the victim's house; casting stones or dirt at a victim's house had symbolic meaning in many cultures, although it is not yet clear if this was the case in Scotland.⁸⁷ Indeed, stone throwing seems often to have been intended as a provocation to fight, as it was frequently followed by further assaults.

Physical harm could also be inflicted by using one's body against the victim's body. Bessie Miller described Black's use of her fists, feet, and nails to attack her. Both sexes commonly pushed, struck, and/or kicked their opponents. All parts of the body were attacked, although the face was a favoured target for assailants' fists. Sometimes victims were thrown into a stream, over a wall, or over a market stall. Throwing one's victim to the ground could give added satisfaction, as it symbolized that he or she was of lower status than the assailant. Both sexes engaged in this, sometimes adding to the insult and harm by trampling or kicking the victim. This form of attack also

84 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 111 (17 April 1579); GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 246r (8 Dec. 1579).

85 GCA, C1/1/1, fol. 102v (29 May 1576).

86 Stones were not as commonly used in London; see Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 74. Perhaps the rougher streets of Scottish towns ensured a steadier supply.

87 Dean, "Gender and Insult," 227.

had the additional effect of dirtying the victim. A woman servant was the subject of a particularly humiliating attack in 1589, when Alexander Galbraith struck her with his fists and then threw her in a midden.⁸⁸

When Bessie Black attacked Bessie Miller, she scratched her with her nails. Only women in Glasgow were convicted for scratching and biting, although such attacks were also carried out by men elsewhere. A man in Perth, for example, bit his mother-in-law.⁸⁹ In 1574, Margaret Broun pushed and hit Margaret Craig and scratched her mouth and nose.⁹⁰ Such an attack may have brought additional humiliation to the victim, as in many countries a disfigured nose was seen as a marker of sexual transgression.⁹¹ Scratching could also be aimed at men. Margaret Pollock scratched an officer, as well as tearing a baillie's tunic.⁹² Most harmful, however, was biting. In 1581, Marion Snodgrass was found guilty of biting Robert Bar's servant on the eye, "cruelly, to the effusion of his blood."⁹³ Perhaps the most malicious attack occurred in May 1590, when Elspeth Clogy cast stones at Christian Sauchie and then bit a piece of flesh out of her arm and let it fall in the water.⁹⁴

It has been argued that because men were more likely to be armed, the danger of lethal violence was more present than it was in female attacks, although it is noteworthy that men often used swords and whingers to hit opponents rather than to stab them, thus attempting to avoid mortal injury.⁹⁵ Certainly, the few fatal or nearly fatal assaults which appear in the records were caused by male assailants,⁹⁶ though women were perfectly capable of inflicting serious wounds, too. If blood was shed, the punishment for the offence was more severe. This is why Miller reported that when Bessie Black attacked her, it was "to the effusion of her blood."⁹⁷ Only 17% of assault cases involved shedding of blood, with the proportion of female and male

88 GCA, C1/1/3, fol. 110v (28 Oct. 1589).

89 Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism*, 299. Scratching was used by both men and women in England; see Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order*, 27; and Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 72.

90 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 19 (13 Aug. 1574).

91 For attacks on the nose, see Gowing, "Language, Power and the Law," 32; Groebner, "Losing Face"; Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 80-81.

92 GCA, C1/1/4, fol. 48r (28 May 1595).

93 Smith, ed., *Burgh Records of the City of Glasgow*, 128 (17 March 1581).

94 Marwick, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow*, 151 (29 May 1590).

95 Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime*, 63.

96 GCA, C1/1/2, fol. 51r (8 Oct. 1582).

97 See Meyerson, Thiery, and Falk, Introduction to 'A Great Effusion of Blood,' 3-4.

attackers being roughly even.⁹⁸ As mentioned above with regard to violence in general, assailants of either sex were most likely to attack their own sex (in 39 of 45 assaults by women, and in 123 of 152 by men).

Where did assaults take place? To a certain extent, the sites of violence reflected gendered patterns of daily activity and authority, with assaults in the tolbooth more likely to involve men, as they made up the council and court. Attacks in the market place involved both women and men, as did incidents on the high street. Women were not backward about attacking officials discharging their duties, especially if these involved confiscating the women's goods. Both women and men attacked their victims in their own houses and in their yards; men were more often attacked at places identified as their workplace, but this description reflects the gendered pattern of work as much of women's work took place in or near the home and was not identified in the records as employment. That women themselves, however, viewed their home as a place of work is implied in Bessie Miller's complaint that the attack on her meant that she was no longer able to work to earn her living.

Bessie Black's assault on Bessie Miller demonstrates that Scottish women, like Scottish men, could be quick to anger and were not afraid to use physical violence, both against women and against men. It also serves as a reminder that women were not passive victims of violence but were prepared and able to use the legal system to defend themselves.⁹⁹ Moreover, this case, along with the thousands of other cases of assault appearing in the late medieval and early modern town records of Scotland, helps shed light on women's lived experiences and the gendered expectations which shaped them. Margaret Wade Labarge's call for research on medieval women has inspired historians to search out new sources of evidence for their lives. Witch-hunt records have proven to be a valuable source,¹⁰⁰ and the more voluminous records of everyday petty human violence should take their place among these sources of evidence, too.

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98 Hurl-Eamon found 10% of female assault cases and 14% of male assault cases described as "violent"; see Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 68-69.

99 Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 4-5, 22-31.

100 See, for example, Martin, "The Devil and the Domestic."

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