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Cavalier Treatment: Once More Round the Cauldron

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Abstract

Continues his discussion from *Mythlore* #21 on the witches in *Macbeth*, adding evidence from *Henry IV* 1&2

Additional Keywords

Shakespeare, William—Characters—Witches (*Macbeth*); Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI* 1 &2; Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*; John Pivovarnick

CAVALIER TREATMENT

ONCE MORE ROUND THE CAULDRON

LEE SPETH

Faithful readers of this column (both of you) will recall that in *Mythlore* 21 I presented the thesis that, contrary to everything we have learned in school, the witches in *Macbeth* are best understood as figures of fantasy, that they were so understood by Shakespeare, and that they were never meant to illustrate the literal Jacobean conception of the witch. That thesis has been questioned, you will be shocked to learn, and I rise here to my own defense, partly out of zeal for the truth, partly because I hate to leave an argument unwon. This thesis happens to be a pet conviction of mine; I've been polishing it for years. Challenged, I refuse to strike my colors. And I'm in the advantageous position of being right.

We may distinguish beings of supernatural origin interfering in the affairs of man from people who have acquired supernatural powers through bargaining with the forces of darkness, but who remain human. The latter were believed in and feared in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, the former, I argued, were used as literary convention only, but were still considered a valid element in high tragedy. Why this matters at all I explained in that piece in *Mythlore* 21 and won't reiterate here.

In that column I wrote:

... I've yet to read of anyone in those times fearing three chanting hags, dancing on a blasted heath far from the habitations of men. It was the eruption of evil from the everyday that our ancestors feared.

The question has been raised by a friend whether this is a germane argument for the supernatural origin of the Weird Sisters. "People back then believed that witches travelled to the Sabbath out of the body," I was told or words to that effect. "So such figures might present themselves visually as dancing or speaking in a remote place while their mortal bodies remained at home."

I am not, I must own, sure of all that. My own scholarship is no doubt superficial and I am open to correction, but I don't recall, nor can I currently document, any Renaissance belief that witches sped to and fro "out of the body". Bi-location may have been attributed to them, but bi-location is, I believe, a magical or miraculous twinning of the body, not a separate appearance of the unhusked soul. Certainly accounts of the Sabbath that refer to carnal relations with the evil one are not meant symbolically. On that point, questions and testimony in the old records are quite explicit: the relations were thought to be carnal in the exact sense of the word. Witches were believed to travel invisibly, but invisibility is not the same as immateriality. It was also, I know, believed that a shape-taking demon might remain in one's place, but that is the very opposite of "going out of the body". In any case, when *Macbeth* takes the initiative and goes to make a house call on the sisters, he ventures to a cave in the wilds, not to a prosaic hut near Inverness. Of course, we are never told whether the cave is home or merely a business address; I think that the impression is pretty strong that it's all the home they have or need.

The criticisms by Ian Slater carried in the Letters column of *Mythlore* 22 appear more trenchant, but on inspection they become rather blurred and I am unsure to what extent they even constitute criticism. Mr. Slater is a well-known aficionado of the archaic, and one to whose opinions I would ordinarily defer. When people ask me, in day-to-day conversation, "Who slew Einar Tambarskelve?" or "How widespread was the cult of Byanu in pre-Roman Iberia?" my standing policy is to bow my head humbly and reply, "Ask Ian Slater."

But I'm not quite sure of the purpose of the letter in *Mythlore* 22, which looks suspiciously like a troop of footnotes that have ventured out without a thesis. And I must point out one clear fallacy.

It quotes Holinshed:

And suerlie hereupon had he put Makduffe to death but that a certaine witch, whome hee had in great trust, had told that he should never be slaine with man borne of anie woman, nor vanquished till the wood of Bernane came to the castell of Dunsinane.

To which Mr. Slater adds, "Shakespeare has clearly identified 'a certaine witch' with the Three Sisters."

The process Shakespeare has employed here is quite well-known and "identification" is not its proper name.

Most drama based on narrative source is forced to simplify. The writer limits locales, excludes events, eliminates characters and, in doing so, reassigns lines. His producer wishes to get out of it cheaply, so he himself must not confuse his audience, and so he will perform these compressions even when his sources are historical (in a modern example, Bolt's *Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More seems to have only one child). To bring a single witch on to prophesy about Macduff would have been an uneconomical redundancy, given that the Weird Sisters were already in the dramatis personae. So the lines from Holinshed were made over to them in a process which is called "assimilation", not "identification".

I think the distinction is obvious. If I, as dramatist, take a line which in my source occurs in the mouth of the king's chaplain and reassign it to the queen, while leaving the chaplain out of my story, that does not mean that I have "identified" the queen as the king's chaplain.

This is not only the one clear fallacy in the letter, it is also Mr. Slater's one precise disagreement with me, so we may coast quickly through the rest.

I thank him for the fairmindedness with which he quoted Simon Forman on my behalf, but he might also have mentioned that Forman was a prominent astrologer and a man who might be expected to be exact on occult categories.

That the Weird Sisters are "practitioners of witchcraft, hence ... witches" is an acceptable emendation of my text. That they might be considered "witches" in some sense of the word does not interfere with my thesis which is, in

the terms of Charles Williams, that they are citizens of Broceliande, not of Scotland. What they *do* is their own business; my concern is what they *are*. The only statement in the play as to their nature is Banquo's "The earth hath hubbles as the water has / And these are of them..." Of course we can't be sure that Banquo knows; still there it is.

Frankly it is the whole atmosphere of their scenes that must convince. Shakespeare has simply refused to give them anything of earth. They never appear, in the play, between man-made walls; they are offered no money for their foretellings and they ask none. Their malice toward the rulers of Scotland is malice pure, with no traceable motive of revenge or political interest. They are not met walking in a field, hobbling up a lane or seated before a hovel; the dramatist introduces them by materializing them out of a thunderstorm.

Fortunately the same author has given us two other witchcraft presentations elsewhere in his works and it is in *Henry VI, Part One* and *Part Two* that we may study at our leisure what the English Renaissance believed about Satanism.

In obedience to that smug sense of insular superiority which historians continue to mistake for a virtue in the Elizabethans, Shakespeare portrayed Joan of Arc, Britannia's foe, as an actual witch. In the first *Henry VI* play she appears at first as merely a bold and adventurous woman, inspiring the French, swapping vaunts and insults with Talbot and the other English officers, persuading Burgundy to renounce the Plantagenets. Then, as Bedford's army closes in on her, she cries out for escape, calls up the spirits of darkness who - aha! - have all along been helping her, only to find that they will now desert her. Joan is dragged away to her burning railing and cursing; she, at least, cannot dissolve into air.

In *Henry VI, Part Two*, the Duchess of Gloucester hires a rogue monk called Roger Bolingbroke to conjure up a spirit who will prophesy upon her husband's future and that of his enemies. Bolingbroke is assisted by a witch called Mother Jourdain and a couple of conjuring acolytes. The spirit comes, it prognosticates, but Cardinal Beaufort's soldiers catch the guilty parties in the act and the Duchess must do public penance while her hirelings go to death.

These witches, Joan and the Bolingbroke circle, come and go like other people. They strike no dread at their first appearance. They can be taken by soldiers and confined; imagine a man-at-arms in *Macbeth* laying hands on the Weird Sisters! Nor do the mundane witches of the *Henry VI* plays carry another world in their speech. Of course Shakespeare was a great poet when he wrote *Macbeth* and a fledgling one when he turned out *Henry VI*, but if one wants the tone of the Weird Sisters in those early plays, one will hear it best in the voice of the spirit conjured by Bolingbroke. The wizard can only question; it is the spirit who must answer:

BOLINGBROKE

What fates await the Duke of Suffolk?

SPIRIT

By water shall he die and take his end.

(Suffolk is at last decapitated by a pirate called Walter Whitmore; get it? - Walter - water.) The Weird Sisters are from that spirit's world, not from Bolingbroke's, Shakespeare's or ours.

MYTH IN THE MEDIA

Glen GoodKnight



In a relatively recent span of time, those of us who admire the works of Tolkien and Lewis, as well as the general public, have witnessed four different adaptations for television and the motion pictures. They are: *The Hobbit* produced by Rankin and Bass; *The Lord of the Rings (Part I)* produced by Ralph Bakshi; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* produced by the Children's Television Workshop; and *The Return of the King* produced by Rankin and Bass. All four adaptations arouse mixed reaction and all suffer in varying degrees from abridging to fit the Procrustean Bed of time limitations.

The Hobbit appeared first and has been shown twice on national television. It attempted to follow the story, but was flawed by unjustified exaggeration or interpretation of the goblins, woodelves, and other characters. The original music was well intended but gave the production a kind of cellophane feeling of over-packaging to fit a commercialized view of what would create broad appeal. An eleven-year-old, who had the story previously read aloud to her, told me she basically liked it, "but they left out all the good parts".

Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings (Part I)* has certainly been the most ambitious of the productions. My own review of Bakshi's *Wizards* in a previous issue of *Mythlore* stirred up a fair amount of controversy, predicting a poor production of *LoTR*. In hindsight, the movie was not quite as bad as I anticipated, due in large part to less of the Bakshi personal stamp than was expected. Much imagination and technical talent went into the film, but there were a fair amount of technical errors as well. I suppose one should take a charitable attitude, due to the obvious effort expended. I have heard through the grapevine that because of contractual stipulations, Bakshi won't make much money out of the film, unless and until he produces *LoTR 2*. But he has gone into other films, such as *American Pop*, and *Variety* has reported

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