Cavalier Treatment: Those Shakespearean Hags

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Abstract
Examines the usual critical reaction to the witches in Macbeth (that the Elizabethans believed sincerely in witches) by going back to Shakespeare’s source in Holinshed’s Chronicles.

Additional Keywords
Shakespeare, William. Macbeth
Cavalier Treatment

by Lee Speth

Those Shakespearean Hags

Shakespeare distilled his story from Holinshed's Chronicles and there, at last, is the real account of the Weird Sisters and their origin. I quote from Shakespeare's Holinshed, ed. by W. G. Boswell-Stone (New York, Benjamin Blom, prepared 1896, ed. of 1966):

Shortlie after happened a strange and uncouth wonder, which afterward was the cause of much trouble in the realm of Scotland, as ye shall after heare. It fortuned as Makketh and Banquo jouernied towards Forres...there met them three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world, whom when they attentufully beheld, wondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said: "All halle, Makbeth, thane of Glammis!" (for he had latelie entered into that dignite and office by the death of his father Sineill). The second of them said: "Haille, Makketh, thane of Coward!" But the third said: "All halle, Makketh, that hereafter shalt be king of Scotland!"

Then Banquo: "What manner of women" (saith he) are ye, that seeme so little favorable vnto me, whereas to my fellow heere, besides high offices, ye assigne also the kinnonge, appointing forth nothin for me at all?" "Yes," (saith the first of them) "we promise greater benefits vnto thee, than vnto him, for he shall reigne indeed, but with an unluckie end: neither shall he leave anie issue behind him to succeed in his place, where contrarilie thou in deed shalt not reigne at all, but of thee those shall be borne which shall governe the Scottish kinnonge by long order of continual descent." Herewith the foresaid women vanished immediately out of their sight....afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinte, or else some nymphs or feyrie, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromantical science, because euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken.

That, I think, settles the matter. "Weird," of course, originally meant "Fate"; according to the OED it didn't acquire its modern meaning of "eerie" and "unnatural" until recently (one suspects under the impulse of Shakespeare's use of the word in Macbeth). That the author used "witches" in the stage directions doesn't mean that he was defining the Sisters by what a Jacobean usually meant: euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken.

Well, and so what? Only this. The cliche about Macbeth always, I think, involved a covert value judgment. What the professor was saying in his heart was this: "Fairies and other follies were the amusement - and a quite proper amusement - of Our Greatest Poet's lighter hours. He was capable of loosing Puck to bedevil wandering lovers and of shipwrecking a clutch of dour Italian politicians on a sorcerer's isle. This was the romantic Shakespeare and who would part with him? But the tragedies are built solidly upon real life. They are intended to plumb the human condition to the very bottom of its truth. It is no fault of Shakespeare that he lived before the Royal Society before Hooke. The ghosts of Banquo, Castr and Hamlet's father come from the belief system in which he was bred, so also the witches who tempt Macbeth. We smile at these things but we no more berate them than we berate..."
AN INKLINGS BIBLIOGRAPHY (10)
Compiled by Joe R. Christopher

The Lady of La Salette

For Alice in a Nearby World

The lady wept.
Upon the arid window-swept slopes
Those crystal raindrops fell; and deep in earth
A healing spring arose and flowed.

The star-blue windows of the heavens opened;
Glory streaming swept my firmament till
I was drowned, and love was born.

The lady smiled!
And I was set upon a narrow pathway
Crossing worlds of worlds to find Love's center;
I shall not return as I.

----Gracia Fay Ellwood

Fantasiae, 5:11-12/56-57 (November-December 1977), 1-24
Edited by Ian M. Slater for the Fantasy Association

Inkling-related contents: (a) Paula Marmor, "In a Hole in
the Ground there lived a Hobbit", pp. 1, 3. (Illustrated
with a drawing of a dragon by Joe Pearson, p. 1.) A six-
paragraph review of the Abrams edition of The Hobbit with
illustrations from the film by Arthur Rankin, Jr., and
Jules Bass. Marmor compares the illustrations in the
book to those in the film, noting some variations in color
and a change in Gollum's appearance; some of the new draw-
ings she finds to be improvements on the film. She also
finds the book's art book poorly designed. (b) "A Short
4-8. Three short essays. (b2) Christopher Gilson,
"Language and Lore: The Silmarillion as Trivium", pp. 4-6.
Gilson translates the five brief sentences in Elvish which
appear in The Silmarillion, and comments on the new forms
which appear. He then traces several words in Elvish and
in Old English which demonstrate some aspects of Tolkien's
creativity: aìya and eìad, and Earendil and Eärendil; he
finds the latter word to probably contain a personification
of the morning star in Old English (in its use in a poem
by CynesÆf) as well as in Elvish, and he traces Eärendil
(as a personage) through Germanic myth and legend, mixing
in his father and his uncle, to arrive at a reference to a
boat called Gungeling — and hence to Earendil's Vinge-
lot. From Christopher Tolkien's appendix on "Elements in Quenya and Sindarin Names", Gilson discusses neldor, sug-
gesting its probable roots; he discusses the color signifi-
cances of the lamps of the Valar, Illuin (silver blue) and
Ormal (golden yellow). He concludes with the implicit
images of three other terms, the roots -ëin, -ëas, and
-ëael.

(b2) Ian M. Slater, "Why?", pp. 6-8. Slater asks why
Tolkien felt it necessary to invent a new mythology for
England. He answers his question by a process of elimina-
tion: the Arthurian myths is British, not English; the
major English epics — The Faerie Queene and Paradise
Lost — are, respectively, Arthurian and Protestant, and
more universal (when not Protestant) than English; classical
mythology is not English; and Beowulf celebrates a Geatish
hero, not an Angle or a Saxon. Slater discusses some
allusive connections between Germanic myths and Tolkien's
works — Vingilot is the specific example — but concludes
that Tolkien's work is at least not as open to political
misuse as culturally developed national mythologies. (b3)
Donald G. Keller, "Tolkien's Music: Preliminary
Remarks on Style in The Silmarillion", p. 8 (reference to
Lewis, col. 2). Keller defends Tolkien's high style as
"his natural style", believing the low style of The Hobbit
and parts of The Lord of the Rings was adopted only for
marketability. He points to late Victorian flaws in the
low style. The high style, on the other hand, is that of
the best part of The Lord of the Rings — the Nösa and
Lothlorien episodes are Keller's examples —
and there it is that of "a medieval
style romance, a secondary epic". (In Lewis' use in
A Preface to "Paradise Lost", the secondary epic could
hardly be a medieval romance; Keller is mixing genres.)
"The Silmarillion is primary epic." The thesis Keller
uses to defend this defense of the high style is Tolkien's
successful literary creation of a mythology, rephrasing
Lewis' definition of a myth in An Experiment in Criticism
— "basic archetypes and narrative kernels" — as his basis.
We get...the tale of creation in the Ainulindalë, animated
by the controlling metaphor of music; the pantheon-cata-
logue in the Valaquenta, with a redundancy and complexity
far more convincing than the neat logical packages of many
would-be mythologers; the Eäden and Atalantis myths in
the Akallabêth, rejuvenated by their juxtaposition". Keller's
examples of the styles actually mix styles and substances:
The Ainulindalë...permeated by the style of the King
James Bible, but there are also hints of Dunsany...and of
the cosmic vision of Olaf Stapledon....The Akallabêth
exhibits the more Haldan flow of William Morris. The
Quenta Silmarillion is told in a...idom...familiar to
every reader of medieval romances (and their emulators
from Malory on), overlaid with...the more somber idom of the
Icelandic sagas".