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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 SPETS 

THOSE SHAKESPEAREAN HAGS

I rise at this time to reprimand my teachers. They meant well, no doubt, but they spoke they knew not what. Millions of schoolchildren like myself went misled through their Shakespeare classes and one, I regret to say, was J.R.R. Tolkien. For him, rectification comes too late; no matter, it is a small enough thing of itself. But there is a fairly serious implication in the mistake about *Macbeth* and I seize this opportunity to rewrite countless lecture notes in the interest of truth and critical standards.

"The witches in *Macbeth*," the cliché runs, "are not a fantasy element. Shakespeare's world believed in witchcraft; we, by and large, do not. They seem like fantasy to us; they were viewed by the Jacobean as a literal possibility, along with the soldiers and the gatekeeper and the three hireling murderers."

It is quite neat; it is also untrue. Tolkien, who might have seen through it, did not. He lazily lets the cliché pass in his major essay "On Fairy-Stories."

"They (the witches) are almost intolerable in the play...I am told that I should feel differently if I had the mind of the period, with its witch-hunts and witch-trials. But that is to say: if I regarded the witches as possible, indeed likely, in the Primary World..." The passage, I will inform the untrusting who would rush to double-check me, occurs on p. 69 of the Eerdmans *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (paperback) and on p. 50 of the Ballantine *Tolkien Reader*.

Tolkien may be forgiven for this minor failure to scrutinize cant. It occurs in a digression in his essay and it is, I believe, well-known that he was not enthusiastic for Shakespeare - indeed he seems to have cared little for any post-war literature (I refer to the Wars of the Roses). But the Shakespearean scholars who perpetuate the misconception are clearly culpable. We pay them adequately if not handsomely to know better.

The proof is in Holinshed, the notorious Shakespearean Source. But even before I looked into his chronicles I sensed that there was something wrong with the standard interpretation. There's Hecate for instance. She enters at the invocation of the witches (Act IV, Sc. 1) and she has some encouraging lines for the sisters. But what are we to say of her? Witches maybe, but did the benighted subjects of the first Stuart believe in Hecate? It seems improbable, and nothing much is helped by positing, as some scholars have done, that the Hecate scene was an interpolation by another hand, that thesis being unprovable.

Hecate is not the main test, however; history is. The heart of the Renaissance witch scare lay in *fearing one's neighbor*. If we leaf through the witch trial records of the day we are struck by the ordinariness of the defendants. Guilty or innocent, the alleged Satanist might be a farmer, a "goodwife," a carter, a student. Mme. Mallet - Joris, in her excellent triptych *The Witches*, fictionalized three actual French cases: they concern, respectively, an orphan girl, a village physician, and one exotic, an old gypsy woman.

But 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 dreaded.

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 woonder, which afterward was the cause of much trouble in the realme of Scotland, as ye shall after heare. It fortun'd as Makbeth and Banquo iourn'd towards Fores...there met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world, whom when they attentiuely beheld, woondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said: "All haile, Makbeth, thane of Glamis!" (for he had latelie entered into that dignitie and office by the death of his father Sinell). The second of them said: "Haile, Macbeth, thane of Cawder!" But the third said: "All haile, Makbeth, that heereafter shalt be king of Scotland!"

Then Banquo: "What manner of women" (saith he) "are you, that seeme so little favorable vnto me, whereas to my fellow heere, besides high offices, ye assigne also the kingdome, appointing foorth nothing 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 kingdome by long order of continuall descent." Herewith the foresaid women vanished immediatlie 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 destinie, or else some nymphs or feeries, 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 by the noun. The use is probably generic rather than specific, meaning only a practitioner of evil magic.

Well, and so what? Only this. The cliché 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 Hume. The ghosts of Banquo, Caesar 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

THE LADY OF LA SALETTE

For Alice in a Nearby World

My Lady wept.
High upon the arid windswept slopes
Those crystal raindrops fell; and deep in earth
A healing spring awoke and flowed.

My Lady wept.
Above my spirit's baked September hillside
Laden, gold-edged thunderclouds were driven
By the damp and gusty March.

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

My 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

Cont'd from page 18

Tiresias in the *Oedipus Rex* or Lucifer in Dante. But let us remember steadily that Our Greatest Tragedian was a dramatist of the Real." In other words, fantasy is OK in its place but is not to intrude in the big leagues.

But I do not believe that Shakespeare believed in the Three Fates, nor that he had any starchy notions as to the features of tragedy. I believe that he was quarrying his source for the dramatic.

People who read *Mythlore* ought to appreciate this. Fantasy elements we should maintain, are legitimate elements; the only significant question is whether they operate organically with the entire work. For us, it is not permissible to keep the light of our knowledge beneath a bushel. For fantasy, respectability is just around the corner; let us keep plugging away. The next time you hear the cliché about *Macbeth*, wave this essay.



AN INKLINGS BIBLIOGRAPHY (10)

Compiled by Joe R. Christopher

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 drawings she finds to be improvements on the film. She also finds the book qua art book poorly designed. (b) "A Long and Secret Labour: The Forging of *The Silmarillion*", pp. 4-8. Three short essays. (b¹) 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: *aiya* and *eála*, and *Earendil* and *earendel*; he finds the latter word to probably contain a personification of the morning star in Old English (in its use in a poem by Cynewulf) as well as in Elvish, and he traces *Earendel* (as a personage) through Germanic myth and legend, mixing in his father and his uncle, to arrive at a reference to a boat called *Guingelot* -- and hence to *Earendil's Vingelot*. From Christopher Tolkien's appendix on "Elements in Quenya and Sindarin Names", Gilson discusses *neidor*, suggesting its probable roots; he discusses the color significances 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 *-fin*, *-ras*, and *-fael*.

(b²) I[an] M. S[later], "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 elimination: the Arthurian mythos 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) D[onald] G. K[eller], "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 adapted 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 *Moria* 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-catalogue in the *Valaquenta*, with a redundancy and complexity far more convincing than the neat logical packages of many would-be mythologers; the Eden and Atlantis myths in *The Akallabêth*, rejuvenated by their juxtaposition". Keller's examples of the styles actually mix styles and substances: "*The Ainulindalë* is...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 limpid flow of William Morris. *The Quenta Silmarillion* is told in a[n]...idiom...familiar to every reader of medieval romances (and their emulators from Malory on), overlaid with...the more somber idiom of the Icelandic sagas".