

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SHAKESPEARE'S USE
OF WITCHES IN MACBETH

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By

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Preface

In this study I have aimed primarily toward a keener appreciation of Shakespeare's art and philosophy in his dramatization of a universal problem: the relationship between man's conduct and the evil influences brought to bear upon him. To that end, I have made a critical study of the gradual deterioration of Macbeth's character and have sought to determine the extent to which the Witches are responsible for this moral decay.

As less important, yet very interesting in itself and really necessary for an understanding of Shakespeare's use of the Witches, I have pointed out the political expediency of using them and have shown how they reflect the popular superstition of the Renaissance.

It is with deep gratitude and sincere appreciation that I acknowledge my indebtedness to Professors N. P. Lawrence and George H. White for valuable aid and advice in the preparation of this thesis.

G. W. M.

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CHAPTER I.

THE POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY OF
SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF THE WITCHES

It seems highly probable that Macbeth was originally designed for presentation at Court. The occasion was the visit, in 1606, which King Christian of Denmark paid to his brother-in-law, King James.¹ Thus we have reason to believe that Shakespeare was especially desirous of winning the approval of his sovereign. Several allusions and references in the play support this belief.

James I, formerly James VI of Scotland, was not well known to many of his new subjects when he became King of England in 1603. Neither was his family history which he proudly traced back to the Scottish Banquo. In searching for the plot of a play which would pay tribute to his sovereign, Shakespeare turned to "The History of Scotland" in Holinshed's Chronicles, and there he found a verified narrative, in which, however, Macbeth, and not Banquo, was the chief personage.² In order to base his play upon the Holinshed story, Shakespeare was forced to use Macbeth as the main character, but Banquo is endowed with noble qualities and enjoys the high esteem of his associates. Macbeth says:

Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature

1

Capell and Fleay in Howard Furness, Variorum Edition of Macbeth, pp. 353 and 361; also E. K. Chambers, William Shakespeare, Vol. I, p. 76.

2

Brooke, Cunliffe, and MacCracken, Shakespeare's Principal Plays, p. 669.

- ✓ Reigns that which would be feared.
- ✓ 'Tis much he dares,
- ✓ And, to that dauntless temper of his mind,
- ✓ He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
- ✓ To act in safety.³

- ✓ Moreover, the noble character of Banquo is intensified by Macbeth's villainy and is stressed by the suppression of Banquo's complicity in the assassination of Duncan, which is recorded by Holinshed:

At length, therefore, communicating his purposed intent with his trusty friends amongst whom Banquo was the chiefest, upon confidence of their promised aid, he (Macbeth) slew the King at Enverns, or (as some say) at Botgosuane, in the sixth year of his reign.⁴

- ✓ For further compliment to his royal master, the dramatist introduces the show of the eight Stuart kings, the last being James, and the Gunpowder Plot, which was the attempt of certain Catholics to blow up the Protestant King and Parliament, is satisfactorily referred to as that "never-enough-wondered-at and abhorred treason".⁵

- ✓ King James also possessed certain faculties which the dramatist alludes to. He was very vain of his "touch" for the king's evil, or scrofula. Soon after his ascension to the English throne, he revived the custom of the royal "touch" and devised for it a specific ritual, consisting of readings from the Gospels, passing the royal hand over the sores, and tying about the neck of the sufferer a gold coin, known as the "angel". King James was also

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✓ III, 1, 49-54.

4

Chronicles, as quoted by Joseph Quincy Adams in his edition of Macbeth, p. 284.

5

Arthur L. Cross, A Shorter History of England and Greater Britain, pp. 288-289; also Adams, op. cit., p. 237.

proud of the special powers of prophecy and peculiar insight into matters of religion which he claimed to possess.⁶ Graceful compliments are made to these gifts:

A most miraculous work of this good king,
Which often, since my here-remain in England,
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven
Himself best knows; but strangely visited people,
All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures.

.....
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
And sundry blessings hang about his throne
That speak him full of grace.⁷

But the witch machinery is the most obvious feature by which Shakespeare tried to compliment his King. James firmly believed in witches and their machinations.⁸ In the first Parliament of James, the English law against witchcraft was made more severe. The punishment was increased to death on the first conviction,⁹ and the principal things prohibited were: to move or conjure an evil spirit, to consult, covenant with, or feed one; to take up the body of a dead person for use in magic; to hurt life or limb; to seek for treasure or lost or stolen goods; to procure love or to injure cattle by means of charms.¹⁰ For forty years a violent witch-hunt had been carried on in Scotland with the result that 8000 persons were estimated to have been burned from 1560 to 1600; and for the last ten years

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A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 470.

7

IV, iii, 147-152, 157-159.

8

King James, Daemonologie, p. 27.

9

Edwin Goadby, The England of Shakespeare, p. 127.

10

R. Steele, "Magic and Alchemy" in Henry Duff Traill, Social England, p. 86.

✓ King James had been the chief instigator of the hunt.

In 1589 he was engaged to be married to the Dano-Norwegian princess, Anne, daughter of Frederick II. The princess sailed for Scotland with twelve ships, which were soon encompassed by huge waves of the sea and were blown about by hurricanes of the worst kind. For fifty-two days, they battled the stormy sea and at last were forced to return to Oslo. King James could stand the suspense no longer and set sail for the Continent to find out the trouble. He actually arrived at Oslo before the princess returned. They were married and soon set sail for Scotland, but "mists" and "contrary winds" beset their ship and rendered their voyage difficult. The royal interpretation was: "The witches--confound them!--had dared interfere with a king's intentions; surely they should be made to pay the penalty".¹¹ A witch-hunt was immediately started in Oslo, with the result that several persons were burned; then the round-up was transferred to Scotland in general and to Berwick in particular. Among other alleged witches was Agnes Sampson, who was tortured by a cord twisted round her temples for an hour till she confessed and convinced King James that she was a witch by repeating in his ear a conversation he had held with the queen on their marriage night. Another suspect who was arrested and cruelly tortured was John Fian. His nails were torn off, and pins run into their places; his legs and hands were crushed to pieces in the king's presence till he confessed to a meeting where the witches went around a church "withershins" (against the sun, counter-clockwise) until the door flew open and all were admitted for

11

J. W. Wickwar, Witchcraft and the Black Art, p. 45.

a revel. Among the twenty indictments against Fian were that with others he had entered into a compact with Satan to wreck the King's ship on its way to Oslo; that, while the King was on his journey, he, with a whole company of other witches, did by arrangement with Satan meet on the sea and throw an enchanted cat into the water with the intention of drowning the King in a tempest that was caused thereby; and that, upon the King's return to Scotland, he, with other witches, got permission from Satan to create such a mist as would wreck the King's ship on the English coast. (The reason James completed his journey safely was that he, being a man of God, could not be harmed by the perils and devilry of the witches.) Another victim admitted that she and about two hundred other witches had gone to sea, each in a sieve, in order to sink the king's ship as he was returning from Denmark. Scores of other supposed witches were brought to trial at which King James, we are told, was delighted to be present.¹² Virtually everyone accused confessed after having been tortured. (No one was ever sentenced till the crime had been "voluntarily" confessed.) After sentence was passed, the poor victims were taken to Castel-hill in the burgh of Edinburgh where they were strangled until dead and then burned.¹³

These sensational witch trials under the auspices of King James alarmed the people of both Scotland and England. In London an account of the whole affair was published under the title, Newes out of Scotland, 1591, and the fact that three editions of this work were called

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"Newes from Scotland in The Bodley Head Quartos, IX, p. 14.

13

George Lyman Kittredge, Witchcraft in Old and New England, p. 278; also Traill, op. cit., pp. 85-86.

for before the end of the year indicates the deep interest of the English people in witchcraft and in the harm the "servants of the devil" might do the man who even then seemed destined to be King of Great Britain. Crude wood cuts were also made which showed King James' attendance at the examination of the witches, his storm-tossed ship at sea, and some witches standing around a boiling cauldron.¹⁴

A few years later, in 1597, (James gave a full testimony of his belief in witchcraft in his Daemonologie which was also an attack upon Reginald Scot's The Discoverie of Witchcraft and upon Wierus, a continental writer who had taken a fairly sensible view.) Although Scot did not absolutely deny the existence of witches, he maintained that they were merely malignant, poor, unfortunate old women for whom sympathy rather than harsh treatment, was appropriate. James refuted this idea by declaring:

The fearful abounding at this time, in this country, of these detestable slaves of the Devil, the witches or enchanters, hath moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in post this following treatise of mine moved of conscience thereby, so far as I can, to resolve the doubting hearts of many; both that such assaults of Satan are, most certainly, practised, and that the instruments thereof merit most severely to be punished: against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, whereof the one, called Scot, an Englishman, is not ashamed, in public print, to deny that there can be such a thing as witchcraft.¹⁵

No doubt whatever was left in the minds of Englishmen as to their future sovereign's strong feeling concerning witchcraft. He quoted much Scripture and many authorities in support of his views. He also ordered Scot's book burned publicly by the common hangman.) Sir John

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Adams, op. cit., p. 239.

15

King James, op. cit., p. xi.

Harington, after his first interview with King James in 1605, records:

"His Majestie did much press for my opinion touching the powers of Satan in matter of witchcraft." 16

It is only a matter of conjecture as to what extent thoughtful people accepted their royal master's opinions. We may surmise that many courtiers and others seeking royal favor were adroit in condemning the "detestable art of witchcraft".

We may be reasonably sure that the use of the witch element in Macbeth brought special court favor to Shakespeare, who, with his Globe troupe, was under the direct patronage of King James when the play was written. Perhaps there is some proof of the king's pleasure. As late as 1709, the Duke of Buckingham saw an "amicable" letter from James to the poet himself. This letter is unfortunately lost now but for sometime was in the hands of Shakespeare's godson, Sir William Davenant. Commentators have surmised that this "amicable letter" expressed the King's pleasure at certain features in Macbeth, especially the witch element.¹⁷ The fulfilment of the Witches' prophecies certainly must have flattered the King's vanity and reassured him in his superstitious beliefs.

16

Ibid., p. vii.

17

Chambers, loc. cit.

CHAPTER II.

THE WITCHES' APPEAL TO
SHAKESPEARE'S AUDIENCE

Besides making a strong appeal to the King, the use of witchcraft in the play tremendously aroused the interest of the entire audience. To people of the Renaissance, witches and their wicked deeds were terribly real and constantly feared. Only an examination of the records can give us an adequate idea of the extent of this belief and of the horror with which witchcraft was regarded. (The delusion touched all classes of people, from the humble farmer to Queen Elizabeth.) Erasmus, who was in many ways too wise for the follies of his day, believed implicitly in witchcraft. Bacon gives a scientific explanation of its powers. Even Queen Elizabeth, who was intellectually superior to so many men of her day, consulted Dee on Alchemy, saw the spirits in his speculum, sent him large gifts of money, and gave him her protection.¹ Practically all the bishops were firm believers in witches and their powers. After a seven-hundred-mile tour of western and southern England, Bishop Jewell, in a sermon before Queen Elizabeth, made pointed references to the need of more strenuous laws against witchcraft. "Your Grace's subjects," he said, "pine away even unto the death; their color fadeth, their flesh rotteth, their speech is benumbed, their senses are bereft. I pray God they never practise further than upon the subject."² Theologians published numerous pamphlets against those

1

Traill, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

2

Edwin Goadby, *The England of Shakespeare*, p. 125.

"slaves of the devil" and their "wicked dealings". Sir Thomas Hale, Coke, and the other judges accepted the monstrous tales of children and neglected all the laws of evidence to convict a witch. Burghley listened to and preserved the rigmarole of convicted alchemists. The greatest nobles of England and their wives patronized the astrologers and charlatans of the day.³ Moreover, the populace--the folk itself--believed most tenaciously in witchcraft. Their belief was perhaps the most important influence in witch-prosecution. The so-called governing classes cannot prosecute with success if the common people do not approve. It is to them that the law enforcers have to look for testimony, and it is they who furnish the juries that render the verdicts.

Englishmen were reassured in their belief in witchcraft by the extent and seriousness of the superstition in Europe. On this point, E. T. Withington writes:

Nicholas Remy, Inquisitor of Lorraine, burned nearly 900 witches and sorcerers in fifteen years, 1575-90. A worthy comrade of Remy was Peter Binsfeld, suffragan Bishop of Treves and foremost opponent of John Weyer. He is said to have burnt no fewer than 6500 persons, and to have so desolated his diocese that in many villages round Treves there was scarcely a woman left. Anything might start a witch-hunting, and once started it increased like an avalanche. The prolonged winter of 1586 in Savoy, for instance, resulted in the burning of 113 women and two men, who confessed, after torture, that it was due to their incantations. It is thus not difficult to understand how, in the diocese of Como, witches were burnt for many years at an average rate of 100 per annum; how in that of Strassburg 5000 were burnt in twenty years, 1615-35; how in the small diocese of Neisse 1000 suffered between 1640-50, insomuch that they gave up the stake and pile as being too costly, and roasted them in a specially prepared oven; and how the Protestant jurist Benedict Carpzov could boast not only of having read the Bible through fifty-three times, but also of having passed 20,000 death sentences, chiefly on witches and sorcerers.⁴

³ Traill, loc. cit., et passim.

⁴ Studies in the History and Method of Science, as quoted by Adams, op. cit., p. 117.

In considering the tenacity and the extent of the belief in witchcraft during the Renaissance, we should not overlook the essential element. The real essence of the whole superstition is "maleficium," which is "the working of harm to the bodies and goods of one's neighbors by means of evil spirits or of strange powers derived from intercourse with such spirits."⁵ People hated and feared a witch because she (or he, for a witch was of either sex) was willing and able to injure them bodily. Such things as compacts with the Devil, the suckling of imps, robbing of corpses, and the abominations of the Witches' Sabbath are only "the clothes" of the art. Of course, they aggravated the offense, and, if a woman was proved to have participated in such horrors, she was probably condemned to death. But, essentially, a witch was prosecuted, not because she had ridden through the air on a broomstick or had taken a fiend for a lover, but because she was an enemy to mankind. Her heart was full of evil. For unkind word or denial of food, she often worked a revenge out of all proportion to the offense she had received. Witch trials were not prompted by any system of devil-lore or by the preachers' expounding sermons on the text, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,"⁶ for these came after the fact. It was fear of bodily harm and the instinct of self-protection that incited the accuser of a witch. Even Joan of Arc was burned because the English feared her.⁷ Such an instinct of self-preservation is, in itself,

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George Lyman Kittredge, Witchcraft in Old and New England, p. 24.

6

Exodus XXII, 18

7

"Joan of Arc" in The World Book Encyclopedia, 1934 edition.

no more cruel or blameworthy than the impulse to kill a murderer. Indeed, the witch was a murderer, or might become one on the slightest provocation. People lived in constant fear of her and thought there could be no safety for their lives or bodies until she was put out of the world.

The man of the Renaissance did not originate this witch creed or learn it from some spiritual adviser; he inherited it from his primeval ancestors. In its earliest history, witchcraft was a kind of pseudo-religious organization. As such, it was crude, but it had principles and a belief that called for adoration, sacrifice, and service. It was presided over by a priestly craft, which supposedly had certain mystical powers. And it had observances, which had, no doubt, developed from the immemorial belief in magic as a set-off against the mysteries of nature.

These observances changed during the centuries according to the popular fancy. Thus, the ritual of the witches before the fourth century was essentially pagan, but, for some centuries afterwards, it was both pagan and Christian.

An explanation of such a combination is that when the first Christian converts changed gods, they did not at once give up all the ritual which they had been accustomed to. The leaders of the Christian movement realized that a visible symbolic form of a religion has a firmer hold on people's imagination than a mere belief, and, accordingly, they attempted to harmonize the pagan ritual, including many witchcraft customs, and the Christian practices. The pagan temple was changed to a Christian house of worship by sprinkling some holy water upon it, and oxen continued to be sacrificed, not to pagan gods any

more, but to the true God.

Now the converted witches who had accepted the new faith and later on broke their vows returned to their old vows and their old forms of worship but still retained some of the Christian ritual. Thus, in the early centuries, the witches not only observed a Sabbath, a Dedication, and a Sacrament, but they also had a Baptistery. And their meetings, or covens, functioned only when there were thirteen, a leader and twelve followers, as if in burlesque of Christ and His disciples. Even the word "coven" was evolved from "covent" or "convent" which was used in the Middle Ages to designate a religious assembly.⁸

Such a confused combination could not work very well, and, in time, Christianity and witchcraft became directly opposed to each other. From the third century onwards, it was believed that witches were the Devil's servants and that their deeds were the Devil's work. In accordance with the custom of the craft, it was necessary to swear allegiance to him and to renounce God. Whatever else they professed to be, they were souls in revolt. They revolted against all authority, and the most revolutionary thing they could imagine was an inversion of Christianity. They chanted the Lord's Prayer backwards and took the negation out of the Ten Commandments.

The performances of the witches--with their magic, their casting of spells, overlooking with the evil eye, their Sabbaths, the power of divination, and the alleged supernatural powers--were of grave concern to the early church Fathers. Theodore, Archbishop of

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Wickwar, op. cit., p. 23.

Canterbury, in the seventh century, forbade such witch practices as sacrifices to devils, or eating in heathen temples, including the celebration of feasts in abominable places of the heathen. He also issued an edict forbidding anyone to dress in the skin of a wild animal or to go about as a stag or a bull under the penalty of three years' penance. This latter edict was aimed at the animal disguises which were so prominent both in early nature worship and at the later Sabbath of Witches, a feast where it was customary for the chief witch to dress in the skin of a goat, stag, or bull, and thus pose as the Devil.

These practices forbidden by Theodore in the seventh century continued during the eighth and became so general that they were referred to as witchcraft. In the latter century, Egbert, Archbishop of York, forbade the people to make offerings to devils. And the laws of the Northumbrian priests stated: "If anyone be found that shall henceforth practise any heathenships, or in any wise love witchcraft, he shall, if he be king's thane, pay X half-marks, one half to Christ and the other half to the king."⁹

Two centuries later, still stricter laws were passed against witchcraft. The Ecclesiastical Canons bade the priests "zealously to promote Christianity and totally extinguish all heathenism, enchantments, and other vain practices carried on by spells with elders, trees, and stones; and also on feast-days to abstain from heathen songs and devils' games."¹⁰

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Ibid., p. 21.

10

Ibid., pp. 21-22.

These edicts were not very successful in suppressing the practices of witches and were supplanted in the twelfth century by sterner measures. There was issued the proclamation that "If witches or foul defiled adulteresses be found anywhere within the land, then let them be driven out from the country, and the people cleansed; or let them totally perish."¹¹ This injunction was followed for centuries afterwards.

Closely associated with this primitive witch creed was another dogma, also of abysmal antiquity, --the theory that all diseases are of supernatural origin. Of course, as the shaman became the physician, this belief became more limited, but it still existed and was vigorous. (If a disease baffled a doctor, it was ascribed to witchcraft, and evidences produced in numerous witch trials show that an especially wasting or virulent disease was looked upon with suspicion. It was a mark of special enlightenment for natural causes to be cited in the popular diagnosis of some illness.¹² In short, in this doctrine that diseases were caused supernaturally, the ordinary Elizabethan had not yet emerged from barbarism. And it was essentially the same theory that made witchcraft terrible.

Now after a witch had been arrested and was brought to trial, she often was asked questions based on a rather elaborate and definite system of demonology, and, of course, some of this material became a part of the popular belief. Thus we may be led to think that judges, philosophers, theologians, and even King James I were respon-

11

Ibid.

12

Gregory Zilboorg, The Medicine Men and the Witch during the Renaissance, p. 6, et passim.

sible for the widespread belief in witchcraft during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In reality, all of what they did was only incidental. They did not come into a particular case, until the witch had been suspected and accused. Someone became ill with a strange fever, or a child had hysterical fits. There were old women living in the village upon whom people had long looked askance. They were foul-mouthed and perhaps had cursed someone who had offended them. They probably claimed supernatural powers. One of these old women was mentioned as the bewitcher, and rumors were at once revived. This neighbor's cattle had died, or that neighbor's small son. The suspected old woman was brought to trial and was tortured until she confessed to riding through the air, to compacts with Satan, or to hideous revels at the Witches' Sabbath. She herself probably thought she possessed some occult power, for many accused witches were not very strong in their wits as is evidenced by the accounts of witch trials.¹³ However, all these details only confirm the case. The gist of the whole matter is injury to goods or body or life through supernatural means.

The essence of the witchcraft doctrine occurs, in a very condensed form, in the examination of Alice Butler, of Hardness:

Devon, Th' examination of Alice Butler of Hardness, in the county aforesaid, widow, taken before Sir Thomas Ridgway, Knight, the second of October, 1601.

1. This examine saith that she, sitting at a door or bench in Hardness aforesaid, used these words: "I would my child were able to run as well as any of these children that run here in the street!" Then said Trevysard, "It shall never run!" "No? That's hard!" says this examine again. "No, it

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Kittredge, op. cit., p. 8.

shall never run," answered Trevisard, "till thou hast another," repeating the same words a dozen several times at the least with great vehemency. Whereupon this examine, being much troubled in mind, especially upon a fear conceived by her before through the general bad report that went of him, departed from him. And the very same week the same child sickened, and consumed away, being well one day and ill another, for the space of seventeen weeks or thereabout, and then died.

2. This examine further saith, that Peter Trevisard, son of the said Michael Trevisard, came to this examine's house to borrow a hatchet, which Alice Beere, servant to this examine, denied, to whom the said Michael answered (var. and he answered), "Shall I not have it? I will do thee a good turn ere twelvemonth be at an end." And shortly the said Alice Beere sickened, continuing one day well and another day ill, for the space of eleven weeks, and then died. In which case both the husband of this examine and a (var. another) child of theirs fell sick, and so continued seventeen or eighteen weeks, and then died.

Th: Ridgway¹⁴

This testimony was quite enough to send Michael Trevisard to the scaffold, if he came to trial and the jury believed Alice's story.

Our sympathy goes out to him and also to poor Alice, who had lost her husband and two of her children by some strange wasting sickness for which she had no name. She could only revert to the tenets of savage man in an attempt to explain anything so dreadful, and, for this, we cannot blame her. Neither can we place the entire responsibility upon the jurists or the theologians or the neighborhood; it was the burden of the human race in general.

Incidentally the various articles of the witch-creed of the Renaissance are identical with the articles of the witch-creed of uneducated folk today and also with those of contemporary savages in many parts of the world. The complaints made against Michael Trevisard would be quite pertinent today at the trial of a witch of Ashanti or Congo or the Australian bush.¹⁵ Moreover, spiritualism and kindred

14

Ibid.

15

Ibid. p. 9.

delusions have taken over many of the phenomena that were formerly a part of witchcraft.

Such, then, is the foundation of witchcraft. Scholasticism took the motley ideas concerning magic and demonology and sorcery which Christian superstition and theology had derived from the most various sources--from Judaism, classical antiquity, Neoplatonism, and the thousand-and-one notions of pagan converts--and put them into rather definite codes and systems. Though this superstructure is not the essential part of witchcraft, it is momentous. After making thorough research, Kittredge asserts that without the schematizing influence of scholastic philosophy, the witch prosecution which was epidemic in Europe from 1400 to 1700 could hardly have taken place.¹⁶

Now it was this definite idea of witches and their supernatural powers that the Weird Sisters in Macbeth adequately reflect, and it was for this reason that they tremendously aroused the interest of Shakespeare's audience. For us to understand the grim seriousness with which these Witches were regarded, it is necessary to know the Elizabethan conception of witches.

In the first place, they were considered as creatures of flesh and blood and not as ethereal spirits or Fates. Reginold Scot, writing in 1584, relates:

Witches are women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as know no religion; in whose drowsy minds the Devil hath gotten a fine seat; so as, mischief, mischance, calamity, or slaughter is brought to pass they are easily persuaded the same is done by themselves; imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination thereof. They are lean and deformed, showing melancholy in their faces, to the horror of all that see them. They are doting, scolds, mad, devilish, and

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Ibid. p. 24.

much differing from them that are thought to be possessed with spirits; so firm and steadfast in their opinions, as whosoever shall only have respect to the constancy of their words uttered, would easily believe they were true indeed.

These miserable witches are so odious unto all their neighbors, and so feared as few dare offend them, or deny them anything they ask; whereby they take upon them, yea, and sometimes think, that they can do such things as are beyond the ability of human nature. They go from house to house, and from door to door for a pot full of milk, yeast, drink, pottage, or some such relief; without the which they could hardly live; neither obtaining for their service or pains, nor by their art, nor yet at the Devil's hands (with whom they are said to make a perfect and visible bargain) either beauty, money, promotion, worship, pleasure, honour, knowledge, learning, or any benefit whatsoever.¹⁷

To this description should be added the following vivid passage from Archbishop Harsnet's Declaration:

Out of these is shaped us the true Idea of a witch, an old weatherbeaten crone, having her chin and knees meeting for age, walking like a bow leaning on a shaft, hollow-eyed, untoothed, furrowed on her face, having her lips trembling with the palsy, going mumbling in the streets, one that hath forgot her pater noster, and hath yet a shrewd tongue in her head, to call a drab a drab. If she have learned of an old wife in a chimney's end: Pax, max, fax, for a spell, or can say Sir John of Grantham's curse for the miller's eels, Laudate dominum de Caelis; and all that they have consented thereto, benedicamus domini: Why then ho, beware, look about you, my neighbors: if any of you have sheep sick of the giddies, or any hog of the mumps, or a horse of the staggers, or a knavish boy of the school, or an idle girl of the wheel, or a young drab of the sullens, and hath not fat enough for her porridge, nor her father and mother butter enough for their bread; and she have a little help of the Mother, Epelepie, or cramp to teach her to roll her eyes, wry her mouth, gnash her teeth, startle with her body, hold her arms and hands stiff, make antic faces, grin, mow, and mop like an ape, tumble like a hedge-hog, and can mutter out two or three words of gibberish as obus, bobus; and then withal old Mother Nobs hath called her by chance idle young housewife, or bid the Devil scratch her, then no doubt but that Mother Nobs is the witch, the young girl is owl-blasted and possessed; and it goes hard but yes ye shall have some addle, giddy, lymphatical, illuminate dotrel, who being out of credit, learning, sobriety, honesty, and wit, will take this holy advantage to raise the ruins of his desperate decayed name, and for his better glory will bespray the juggling drab, and cast out Mopp the devil.¹⁸

17

Op. cit., pp. 4-5.

18

As quoted by Henry Thew Stephenson, The Elizabethan People, pp. 326-327.

These odious creatures allegedly possessed numerous powers.) Scot
 enumerates several of them. In referring to the hurtful (or black)
 witches he says:

These be they that raise hail, tempests, and hurtful weather, as lightning, thunder, etc. These be they that procure barrenness in man, woman, and beast. These can throw children in waters, as they walk with their mothers, and not be seen. These can make horses kick, till they cast their riders. These can pass from place to place in the air invisible. These can so alter the minds of judges, that they can have no power to hurt them. These can procure to themselves and to others, taciturnity and insensibility in their torments. These can bring trembling to the hands, and strike terror into the minds of them that apprehend them. These can manifest unto others, things hidden and lost, and foreshew things to come, and see them as though they were present. These can alter men's minds to inordinate love and hate. These can take away man's courage. These can make a woman miscarry in childbirth, and destroy the child in the mother's womb, without any sensible means either inwardly or outwardly applied. These can with their looks kill either man or beast.

Others do write that they can pull down the moon and the stars. Some write that with wishing they can send needles into the livers of their enemies. Some that they can transfer corn in the blade from one place to another. Some that they can cure diseases supernaturally, fly in the air, and dance with devils. Some write that they can play the part of Succubus, and contract themselves to Incubus. Some say that they can transubstantiate themselves and others, and take the forms and shapes of asses, wolves, ferrets, cows, horses, hogs, etc. Some say they can keep devils and spirits in the likeness of toads and cats.

They can raise spirits (as others affirm), dry up springs, turn the course of running waters, inhabit the sun and stay both day and night, changing the one into the other. They can go in and out of auger holes, and sail in an egg shell, a cockle or mussel shell, through and under the tempestuous seas. They can bring souls out of the graves. They can tear snakes in pieces. They can also bring to pass that, churn as long as you list, your butter will not come; especially if either the maids have eaten up the cream, or the good wife have sold the butter before in the market.¹⁹

A witch was supposed to obtain these powers from the Devil in return for her soul.) She made a compact with him and swore fealty by allowing a wicked spirit to suck blood from some part of her body,

 19

Op. cit., pp. 5-6.

sometimes under the arm. This spirit that thus partook of the witch's blood was known as her familiar. It was called by various names and was usually in the form of some animal. This animal, however, always lacked a tail.

At regular meetings, or Sabbaths, which the witches held with the Devil, he taught them to make an ointment of certain opiates, such as mandrake and belladonna, and of all kinds of gruesome objects, including the bowels and members of children, grave-robbed or cradle-stolen. These ingredients were put into a cauldron and boiled. Then the thickest part of the stew was rubbed on a witch's body, thus enabling her to fly through the air.

One of the commonest and most feared instruments of witchcraft was the clay or wax image. This was made in the likeness of a person whom a witch hated. The current belief was that whatever the witch did to the image would happen to the person represented by it. Thus, a quill stuck into the wax image would drain the blood of the victim.

A witch's heart was full of petty spites, and her deeds of vengeance were frequently out of all proportion to offenses she had received. If a person denied her an apple, she might at once bring sickness to him or his family. Sometimes witches injured the innocent ones. We are told that they tried to overthrow King James and to bring ruin to the commonwealth. #23

Now the Witches who plot the overthrow of Macbeth are true examples of these Scoto-English witches. Shakespeare's audience knew what they were like, what powers they possessed, and how they came to be witches.

When we first see them, they have evidently just come from a Witches' Sabbath, where they had plotted against Macbeth and where they had probably

rubbed witches' ointment on their bodies, for they prepare to fly through the air.

The next time we see them, they are in a spiteful mood. The First Witch has been killing a farmer's swine, and the Second Witch plans to get even with a sailor's wife who had refused her a chestnut. She plans to raise a tempest to toss the sailor's ship about; to prevent the sailor from sleeping for eighty-one weeks; and, finally, to cause his body to shrivel up. According to the current belief, she could do this last deed-- "drain him dry as hay"²⁰--by means of a wax image. She says she will go to the sailor's ship in a sieve and do her wicked deeds as an evil spirit,-- "like a rat without a tail",²¹ The hag's sisters promise to help her by lending her some bags of wind.

All these threats and this petty spite-work made the Witches very convincing to an audience of the Renaissance, for then it was the general belief that witches had such powers.

Upon the approach of Macbeth and Banquo, the Witches turn around and reveal themselves as desiccated, hag-like creatures, with choppy fingers, skinny lips, and beards. Their attire is wild, and their actions, mysterious.

They at once prophetically hail Macbeth as: "Thane of Glamis," "Thane of Cawdor," and "King hereafter".²² They also prophesy for Banquo:

First Witch. Lesser than Macbeth--and greater!
Second Witch. Not so happy--yet much happier!

20

I, iii, 18.

21

I, iii, 9.

22

I, iii, 48-50.

Third Witch. Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none,²³

Wishing to hear more divinations, Macbeth goes to the Witches' cave and there finds them making a hell-broth into which they put the most loathesome objects imaginable:

In the poisoned entrails throw,
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights hast thirty-one
Swelter'd venom sleeping got,
.....
Fillet of a fenny snake,
.....
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,
.....
Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,
Witches' mummy, maw and gulf
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,
Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark,
Liver of blaspheming Jew,
Gall of goat, and slips of yew
Sliver'd in the moon's eclipse,
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips,
Finger of birth-strangled babe
Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,
.....
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
.....
Pour in sow's blood, that hath eaten
Her nine farrow. Grease that's sweaten
From the murderer's gibbet throw
Into the flame.²⁴

As the stew boils and bubbles, the "secret, black, and midnight hags" dance weirdly around the cauldron chanting:

Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.²⁵

23

I, iii, 65-67.

24

IV, i, 5-8, 12, 14-17, 22-31, 33, 55-58.

25

IV, i, 10-11.

This time they foretell events for Macbeth by means of apparitions rising from below. Though this device was not one of the most common practices of witchcraft, it was, nevertheless, in strict accord with the witch lore of the sixteenth century.) The Witch of Endor supplied King Saul with knowledge of future events by raising up an apparition from below.²⁶ This spirit was in the shape of the prophet Samuel and was presumably the woman's familiar spirit. Likewise, Dr. Faustus had his familiar spirit, Mephistophilis, to assume the shape of an old Franciscan friar.²⁷

The first child apparition, which appears before Macbeth, carries an armed head, thus foreshadowing the final episode in the play where Macduff carries in Macbeth's severed head on a pole. The second child is blood-smearred and signifies Macduff "untimely ripp'd from his mother's womb".²⁸ The third child wears the crown of Scotland and carries a leafy bough in its hand. The crown symbolizes Malcolm's ultimate coronation, and the bough foretells the method by which Malcolm concealed his army in his attack on Dunsinane.

Besides symbolizing future events, the apparitions utter prophecies:

First Apparition. Macbeth! Macbeth!
 Macbeth! beware Macduff!

 Second Apparition. Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!--

 Be bloody, bold, and resolute! Laugh to scorn
 The power of man for none of woman born
 Shall harm Macbeth.

26

I Samuel XXVIII.

27

Christopher Marlowe, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, scene III.

28

V, vii, 45.

Third Apparition. Be lion-mettled! proud! and take no care
 Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are!
 Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
 Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
 Shall come against him.²⁹

Macbeth, still not satisfied, asks the Witches: "Shall Banquo's issue
 ever reign in this kingdom?"³⁰ To answer this question, they present a
 show of eight kings, each in the likeness of Banquo. Then there is a
 puff of smoke, and the ugly hags vanish.

Thus, by presenting ideas about witchcraft which he found existing in
 people around him, Shakespeare was able to touch a fear that to his specta-
 tors was terribly real.) Even the prophecies of the Weird Sisters are such
 as might have been uttered by Old Demdike, a famous witch of Lancaster.³¹

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IV, 1, 62, 67, 69-72, 81-84.

30

IV, 1, 93-94.

31

Stephenson, op. cit., p. 343.

CHAPTER III.

THE DRAMATIC PURPOSE OF THE WITCHES

Critics are quite well agreed that there are only three witch scenes in the original Macbeth.¹ The first of these scenes opens the play; the next one incites and complicates the action; and the last one furnishes the crisis. If the critics are right, it may be reasonably assumed that Shakespeare intended the Witches to serve a definite choric purpose.

Their performances afford relief from the monotony of the spoken dialogue. They dance on the barren heath to the staccato accompaniment of thunder and lightning. In the murky cave, they march weirdly around the boiling cauldron, and each in turn advances and throws in her contribution to the hell-broth. They raise apparitions and present a dumb show of kings. All these effects take the place of songs incidental to comedy.

Moreover, the Witches' prophecies are a dramatic method of showing the audience what happens in the play. They prophesy that Macbeth shall be king and that Banquo shall beget kings and thus announce the final outcome of all the circumstances connected with the murders of Duncan and Banquo. The crisis of the play comes when Macbeth goes to the Witches' cave. He is now willing to do anything in order to quiet the whisperings of conscience, so he places himself completely in their

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Adams, *op. cit.* pp. 256-261; also Thomas Middleton, The Witch, pp. viii and 190. The witch scenes which are considered Shakespeare's own occur in Act I, scenes (i) and iii and in Act IV, scene 1.

power. The Witches prophesy that none of woman born shall harm him and that he shall never be overcome until Birnam Wood comes against him to Dunsinane. These announcements lead the audience to expect Macbeth's utterly reckless and bloody career. They also tell what will eventually happen. Boughs from Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane, and Macduff, who was ripped from his mother's womb, vanquishes Macbeth.

The entire tragedy is permeated with the element of secrecy. Macbeth has a secret ambition for the throne; he and Lady Macbeth secretly lay the plans for murdering Duncan, and Banquo's murder is carried out in secrecy. The noblemen of the land become suspicious of Macbeth but keep their thoughts carefully hidden until they rise in revolt.

The witchcraft of the play adds considerably to this atmosphere of secrecy and mystery. Though Shakespeare did not change the substance of the current witchcraft, he did select and improve the material, avoiding the merely ridiculous and dismissing (unlike Middleton) the sexually loathesome and stimulating. He rehandled and heightened whatever could touch the imagination with fear, horror, and mysterious attraction. The Weird Sisters work in secret; they vanish into nothingness; their prophecies contain hidden truths; and they are clairvoyant in the sense that whatever happens outwardly among men is immediately known to them.) In the thunder and lightning of a desert place, they look upon the distant battle and know that it will be lost and won before the day ends. They do not travel to the camp near Forres where Duncan receives news of the battle, but when the title, "Thane of Cawdor," is conferred upon Macbeth, they seem to know it at once. All the events of the drama - the murder of Banquo and

the escape of Fleance, the striking down of Lady Macduff and her children, Macbeth's accumulating sins and tragic death - are perceived by some secret intelligence of the Witches.

The double meaning of their pronouncements increases the weird feeling already aroused in the minds of the audience. They tell Banquo that he shall be "lesser than Macbeth - and greater; not so happy - yet much happier".² Their Birnam Wood prophecy is likewise fraught with hidden meaning, and their statement, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair,"³ is paradoxical. Such statements perplex and deceive Macbeth. He calls the Witches "imperfect speakers".⁴

Since the play is one of murder and mystery, emphasis is placed upon night and darkness. Banquo is murdered in the thick shadows of twilight, - when the "good things of day begin to droop and drowse".⁵ Duncan, too, is murdered at night. The moon is down, the stars fail to shine, and the faint glow of the torch only serves to emphasize the intense darkness. Ross tells us that the darkness of this night is strangely extended far into the next day. We know that the blackness of this and other nights becomes terribly oppressive to Lady Macbeth, for she commands her nurse to keep a light by her continually.

To contribute further to his picture of night and darkness,

2

I, iii, 65-66.

3

I, i, 11.

4

I, iii, 70.

5

III, iii, 52.

Shakespeare makes many allusions to sleep. To be specific, he makes twenty-one such references. He harps on this theme from the night of the murder when Macbeth heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more!"⁶ until almost the end of the play. "Cursed thoughts" and dreams of the Weird Sisters disturb Banquo's sleep. Night after night Macbeth lies awake, until he desires sleep above everything else. "Duncan is in his grave," he murmurs, "he sleeps well."⁷ Nor can Lady Macbeth sleep except fitfully.

The emphasis placed upon the color black intensifies this night atmosphere. In Shakespeare's time, it was the general practice to use black hangings on the stage to provide an appropriate setting for a tragedy.⁸ This black setting aroused a fearful expectancy in the minds of the audience as did also the numerous references to black objects.

All these references help to establish a tragic atmosphere into which the "secret, black, and midnight hags" fit perfectly. This harmony further illustrates the importance of the ultimate tragic effect of pity; for we pity a great man thrust into circumstances of horror. By making the audience conscious of the horror of Macbeth's mental circumstances, Shakespeare provided the means by which pity could be engendered and so meet the fundamental purpose of tragedy. The Witches intensify the horror of the play. They thus contribute vitally to the tragic effect.

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II, ii, 35.

⁷

III, ii, 22-23.

⁸

E. K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage, III, 79.

But the supreme significance of the Witches is their relation to the character of Macbeth. In this capacity, the representatives of a popular superstition assume a majestic, even sublime, aspect. They inspire awe among the spectators and compel contemplation. They know the past and the present. They not only know the future but also predict it. Their power in controlling human affairs is not unlike Fate, and, as Macbeth comes under their influence, we become conscious of the smallness of man, and of his helplessness before agents that lie beyond his knowledge.

Though their power is nowhere exhibited as absolute, there subsists between them and Macbeth's evil thoughts a terrible sympathy and reciprocity. As soon as a regicidal ambition begins to ferment in his mind, the Witches manifest themselves as ready and willing to help him in his intentions.) They are as quick to respond as Sin and Death in Milton's Paradise Lost are represented to have been. Even before Adam and Eve sinned, (before the connatural forces started in them and were realized in act), Sin is made to say to Death, as they sit together within the gates of hell:

"Methinks I feel new strength within me rise,
Wings growing, and dominion given me large
Beyond this Deep, whatever draws me on
Or sympathy, or some connatural force,
Powerful at greatest distance to unite
With secret amity things of like kind
By secretest conveyance. Thou, my shade
Inseparable, must with me along;

.....
Nor can I miss the way, so strongly drawn
By this new-felt attraction and instinct."
Whom thus the meagre Shadow answered soon:
"Go whither fate and inclination strong
Leads thee; I shall not lag behind nor err
The way, thou leading;"
.....

So saying, with delight he snuffed the smell
Of mortal charge on Earth.

.....
and upturned
His nostril wide into the murky air,
Sagacious of his quarry from so far.⁹

The similarity between this representation of Sin and Death (so "quick-scented," so "sagacious" of their quarry) and the representation of the Witches is quite striking. They seem to scent Macbeth's evil propensities and at once prepare to stimulate them.

→ They meet him on the heath and hail him as "Thane of Glamis," ←
"Thane of Cawdor," and "King hereafter". At the last salutation, ✓
Macbeth starts violently, thus causing Banquo to ask: "Why do you ✓
start? and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?"¹⁰ ✓

He starts guiltily because the Witches give open expression to a ✓
secret and wicked thought already in his mind. As he was coming from ✓
the great battle, in which he had been the hero, he was thinking of his ✓
great superiority to Duncan and was contemplating a foul plan to seize ✓
the throne. As his letter to Lady Macbeth indicates, such thoughts had ✓
previously occurred to him, but they were renewed and strengthened by ✓
the events on the battle field. If the weak Duncan were only disposed ✓
of, the nobles would surely elect him as the next sovereign. After all, ✓
he was co-equal with Duncan in royalty of birth and the natural ✓
successor to the throne.¹¹ ✓ Duncan's two sons, being inexperienced in ✓
government and war and apparently weak, could hardly be considered for ✓

9

Bk.X, ll. 243-250, 262-267, 273-274, 279-281.

10

I, 111, 51-52.

11

Adams, op.cit., pp. 127-128.

the kingship, whereas Macbeth had demonstrated his strong leadership and had won the high esteem of his fellow noblemen. He decided that he should take advantage of the situation and murder Duncan. But to have this thought known to others and expressed in words startled him.

Though the Witches do not plant the evil thoughts in Macbeth's mind, they do stimulate them. They speak to him when his body is tired and his longing for the throne is especially intense. And they seemingly assure him success in carrying out his scheme. He stands rapt in thought, balancing in his mind the horror of the contemplated crime against the glory of the crown achieved. And he realizes that he is free to choose his course of action. He also knows that there is really no connection between the Witches' announcements and any action of his. For all that appears the natural death of an old man might make him king any day. His inference is:

If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me
Without my stir.¹²

That his choice of evil is entirely his own is made more evident by the obviously intentional contrast between him and Banquo. What the Witches say does not startle Banquo, for there is nothing within him that they can appeal to. Nor is he afraid to command them: "Speak then to me - who neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate."¹³

In reply to his command, the Witches answer:

First Witch. Lesser than Macbeth - and greater!
Second Witch. Not so happy - yet much happier!
Third Witch. Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.¹⁴

12

I, iv, 143-144.

13

I, iii, 60-61.

14

I, iii, 65-67.

Then they start to go away, but Macbeth leaps forward and commands:
 "Stay, you imperfect speakers! Tell me more!"¹⁵) It is obvious where
 temptation has found root. None of this eager insistence is caught
 by Banquo.) When the Witches vanish, he quietly remarks:

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
 And these are of them.¹⁶

But Macbeth longingly cries: "Would they had stayed!"¹⁷ He thinks
 he must hear more of what so deeply concerns him. Banquo, further
 indicating that there is nothing in his own mind to be stimulated
 by what he has heard, simply says:

Were such things here as we do speak about?
 Or have we eaten on the insane root
 That takes the reason prisoner?¹⁸

Wholly absorbed and inflamed by what he has heard, Macbeth pays
 no attention to Banquo's question, but continues: "Your children
 shall be kings."¹⁹ Banquo evidently makes nothing of this saying,
 but Macbeth adds with great satisfaction to Banquo's, "You shall be
 king": "and Thane of Cawdor, too; went it not so?"²⁰ With the
 utmost indifference, Banquo replies: "To the selfsame tune and
 words. Who's here?"²¹

15

I, iii, 70.

16

I, iii, 79-80.

17

I, iii, 82.

18

I, iii, 83-85.

19

I, iii, 86.

20

I, iii, 87-88.

21

I, iii, 89.

That the evil thoughts originated in Macbeth's mind and that the Witches have succeeded in stimulating and inflaming them, is evident up to this point. But the evidence is strengthened by what follows. Ross enters with the official announcement that Macbeth has been made Thane of Cawdor. This almost immediate fulfilment of one of the prophetic salutations of the Witches assures Macbeth that the one concerning the kingship will also be fulfilled. His imagination is fired by the sudden coincidence, and he murmurs: "Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor! the greatest is behind."²² And then, thanking Ross and Angus for having brought the message, he asks excitedly of Banquo:

Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
When those that gave the "Thane of Cawdor" to me
Promised no less to them?²³

Banquo considers the whole thing a joke and laughingly replies:

"That, trusted home, might yet enkindle you unto the crown!"²⁴ But he notices the troubled expression on his friend's face and hastens to add:

But, 'tis strange.
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.²⁵

22

I, iii, 117-118.

23

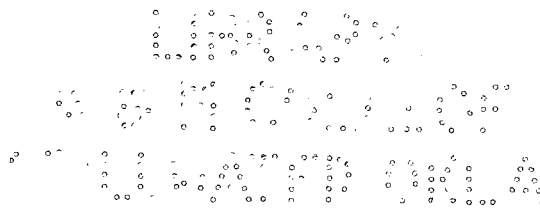
I, iii, 119-120.

24

I, iii, 120-121.

25

I, iii, 122-126.



Banquo tries to encourage Macbeth to assert his free agency, but his warning has absolutely no effect. So absorbed is Macbeth by the idea of sovereignty that he is impervious to any saving influence. In exultation, he murmurs to himself:

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.²⁶

He indeed exaggerates the truth. In the first place, "Thane of Glamis" is not prophetic in the least, and "Thane of Cawdor" is not truly prophetic, for the title had been conferred upon Macbeth before the Witches met him on the heath. Yet he considers both salutations as a double assurance of the fulfilment of the third. He also falsifies the truth when he speaks of the Witches' "supernatural soliciting,"²⁷ for the Witches do not solicit. He originated the foul plan himself.

His conscience, with its effective weapon of vivid imagination, tries to save him from the wiles of evil. He soliloquizes:

This supernatural solicting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success
Commencing in a truth? I am "Thane of Cawdor".
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.²⁸

26

I, iii, 127-129.

27

I, iii, 130.

28

I, iii, 130-142.

But Macbeth's moral nature is not strong enough to resist the collaboration of his own evil thoughts and the evil influences of the Witches. He murders Duncan and then hires some professional cut-throats to kill Banquo. Again conscience asserts itself, and, in order to get relief from the "scorpions" in his mind, he deliberately resolves on a campaign of ruthless cruelty.) That his moral nature is rapidly deteriorating is indicated when he says:

I am in blood
 Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
 Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
 Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
 Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.²⁹

In complete desperation, Macbeth goes to the Witches, and now that he has placed himself in their power, they do solicit. They not only prophesy, but they also give advice. They bid him be bloody, bold, and resolute, and they seemingly promise him some degree of security in his bloody career of crime. We have no hope that he will refuse their advice; but, even now, they are so far from having any power to force him to accept it that they are very careful to deceive him into doing so. And, as if to stress the fact that Macbeth is yet entirely free to choose his course of action, Shakespeare makes his next act, after the interview, one for which the Witches gave not a hint,--the slaughter of Macduff's wife and children.

Furthermore, Macbeth nowhere betrays a suspicion that any external power has forced his deeds upon him. When he is told to beware Macduff, he says: "Thou hast harp'd my fear aright."³⁰ They had only "harp'd"

²⁹

III, iv, 136-140.

³⁰

IV, i, 65.

his inner thought and had put no new evil purpose into his mind. When they tell him that none born of woman can harm him, he instantly exclaims: "Then live, Macduff!"³¹ The speed with which this thought comes to him shows that the desire to murder Macduff had been deeply rooted in his mind. The Witches' prophecy that he will never be vanquished until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane incites him to an utter recklessness of conduct.) Yet in this they are only working upon an idea already in his mind, for he had previously declared: "Let the frame of things disjoint!"³²

After he is assured that "none of woman born" can harm him, he is eager to know whether the Witches' predictions in regard to Banquo will be fulfilled. They answer his question with a show of eight kings followed by Banquo's ghost. This is not the Banquo that Macbeth knew in life, but the Banquo that appeared in the banquet scene: "The blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me and points at them (the kings) for his."³³

This show of kings sears Macbeth's eyeballs. Gleeeful over his misery, the First Witch says:

Come, sisters, cheer we up his spirits,
And show the best of our delights.
I'll charm the air to give a sound,
While you perform your antick round,
That this great king may kindly say,
Our duties did his welcome pay.³⁴

This last sentence, "Our duties did his welcome pay," is highly

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IV, 1, 73.

32

III, 11, 16.

33

IV, 1, 114-115.

34

IV, 1, 127-132.

significant. It expresses implicitly the whole relationship of the Witches to Macbeth. He invited them into his mind, and, as agents of evil, they have done their duty by him. They have originated nothing within him; they have only harped his thoughts and desires, and thus have stimulated his evil propensities into acts. He clings to their ambiguous prophecies with utter confidence, until each in turn proves to be a false reliance. In the end, Birnam Wood does come to Dunsinane, and Macbeth is forced to his death.

CHAPTER IV.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Since King James was a firm believer in witchcraft, the use of the Witches in Macbeth brought special court favor to Shakespeare.

2. The weird Sisters are true representatives of the Scoto-English witchcraft of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

3. By using characters drawn from popular superstition, Shakespeare was able to arouse tremendously the interest of his audience and to create a fear that was terribly real.

4. The Witches serve a definite choric purpose in that they afford relief from the monotony of the spoken dialogue and dramatically show what happens in the play.

5. The witchcraft of Macbeth adds considerably to the tragic atmosphere of the play.

6. Though Shakespeare did not change the substance of the popular witchcraft, he rehandled and heightened certain aspects of it.

7. There exists a terrible sympathy and reciprocity between the Witches and the evil in Macbeth's mind.

8. Though the Witches do not plant the evil thoughts in Macbeth's mind, they powerfully stimulate them.

9. Powerful as the influence of the Witches is, they cannot force Macbeth's conduct.

10. By placing Macbeth in horrible circumstances and under the influence of creatures not unlike Fate, Shakespeare is able to engender the ultimate tragic effect of pity.

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