THREE SCENES OF SORCERY: AN ANALYSIS OF WITCHCRAFT IN *MACBETH*

Mary Gleeson
Universidad de Granada

When he came to write ***Macbeth*** Shakespeare had already dealt with magic and sorcery in several of his previous plays: ***Midsummer's Night Dream*** with its mischievous sprites; *1* ***Henry VI*** where Joan of Arc's "voices" are shown to be devils who have deceived her, and in *2* ***Henry VI***, where there is a full-blown conjuration scene complete with witch, conjurer, demon and equivocating language.[1] In these last two plays magic is closely linked with witchcraft, as it is in ***Macbeth***.[2] Although witchcraft had not been made an offense in England until Henry VIII's law of 1542 (ratified in Elizabeth I's Conjuration of 1563) the persecution of witches increased steadily during the second half of the sixteenth century, and few doubted the power of the evil eye, including King James, author of a treatise on witchcraft and fresh from a kingdom where 7,000 women had been burnt as witches between and 1563 and 1603. It is therefore hardly surprising that the play itself seems to treat as factual the powers ascribed to the practitioners of witchcraft at their trials. By uniting in ***Macbeth*** the twin themes of the descent of the House of Stuart and the union of diabolical forces against the Lord's anointed, Shakespeare could be sure of having found a very fitting subject with which to entertain his sovereign.

In two of the earlier plays mentioned, *1* and *2* ***Henry VI***, Shakespeare had shown the dangers of having truck with the devil and with his intermediaries the witches. For one thing was common to all forms of dealing with the fiend: the devil was deceitful. By definition he did not speak the truth, and his appearance was deceptive. The devil's power was based on the gullibility, ambition or avarice of those who blinded themselves to reality. This theme of false appearances and equivocation is repeated frequently in the play,[3] as is the popular idea of the witch as a woman lacking the aspect or attributes of her sex, as is physically true of the Weird Sisters, and morally true of Lady Macbeth.[4] One of the pointers to their extra-human calling had been the fact

that they were said to resemble men: that is, they had lost the appearance of women. Shakespeare's witches conform fully to this requisite, and we have Banquo's words to confirm this, while Lady Macbeth makes a famous abjuration of her sex. In addition to these two aspects, Shakespeare incorporates into the play other beliefs both popular and classical about witches prevalent in his day.

By the time they appear to Macbeth and Banquo, our attitude towards the Sisters has already been set in the opening scene of the play. The creatures there are quasi-mythological creatures -*Ur-Hexen*,- belonging to the world of cosmic forces with their knowledge of the future and their identification with the elements. Thunder and lightning, the traditional accompaniment of devils in the Mystery plays, herald their entry, leaving us in no doubt of the fact that we are in the presence of something baleful. The short, choppy rhythm in which the witches speak, distinguishing them from the other characters, has an incantatory effect, the sort of verse Shakespeare might have heard in charms recited in his childhood. We learn that their meeting will be at set of sun: Macbeth and Banquo will see them in what in Scotland is called the "gloaming", the twilight, a traditionally dangerous time when one's eyes may well be deceived, and when the powers of darkness are rousing themselves to come into their own at the "witching hour". The meeting itself significantly will be upon the Heath -the pagus, or pagan place. The scene ends in "magic" as the witches fly off: flying or hovering (besides showing us that Shakespearean stage technique could move with the times) was a common accusation against witches. Indeed it was a power they claimed for themselves. For their ceremonies, they anointed themselves with a mixture of belladonna, henbane, aconite and other noxious products which produced the hallucination of flying -or a "trip" as we call it nowadays. In the play, however, it is treated as a real power they possess -a reversal of the order of things and so proof that their supernatural powers come from the devil.[5]

In the opening scene we saw the witches in the aspect of wild women whose knowledge was hardly human; now, before their meeting with the thanes, we are given a different, but equally valid, view. The almost immaterial creatures of the first scene become real, spiteful and vindictive old women, though still falling within the popular idea of the witch. This depiction shows us the witches not as the figures from another dimension that we have seen and as they will appear to the victorious generals, but as the common people

envisaged them in their contact with everyday life. The maiming or killing of livestock was an accusation taken very seriously in rural communities, hence the widespread use of charms for protection against this. What was no doubt the result of a knowledge of poisonous herbs, was believed to be magic worked by persons in league with the devil. In this scene, the incantatory effect of the first witch's words, cheered on by her sisters mounts to a crescendo as she gives full rein to the vengeance she will wreak. Not only has she command of the elements, she also has the witches' power over sleep and dreams (as Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and even Banquo will find): the references to the disruption of sleep in the play are too well known to mention here. With powers such as these and the delight taken in avenging imagined slights, witches must indeed have seemed fearsome beings to even fairly educated persons. This horror was fuelled by the well-founded belief that among their most prized possessions were parts of corpses, which were powerful for working charms. The pilot's thumb will be especially useful for the first witch's purpose: the violent death of its owner would considerably enhance its storm-making powers. Witches' charms involved the mixing of a range of hallucinatory ingredients with an incantation made over them, usually accompanied by some form of gesture or dance. This is what the Sisters work before Macbeth's arrival -presumably to produce the filthy air out of which they appear like extraterrestrial beings, and into which they disappear again: the medieval grimoires or books of magic lore contained just such recipes for creating these conditions,[6] but at the same time, these perturb were seen as a concomitant of the evilness of the beings involved, -beings who habitually came into their own, -as Macbeth duly reminds us whenever he is about to commit some evil deed,- after fall of night.[7]

It has not gone unobserved that Macbeth's opening words echo those of the witches in scene 1. Somehow, he is already tuned to their wavelength, or they to his. Before the Thanes, the Sisters again revert to the rôle of mythological beings in touch with the other world: the form of greeting, thrice repeated, ranges the gamut from what Macbeth knows to be true, through what he has not even thought on, to what up till then he had not dared to admit even to himself -from good, to neutral to evil- the same downward path he is about to tread. There is nothing intrinsically *evil* about what they say, although it demonstrates some form of superior knowledge or surmise not available to the Thanes: it is their appearance as ugly, old women, that is, sexless beings, that should alert Macbeth. Banquo's reaction "What, can the devil speak true?"

shows he had recognised them for what they are (sensing evil must have been an hereditary trait in the Stuart family). When Macbeth starts as though in fear at their greeting, and then remains as though transfixed, it must be because their words confirm some dark secret of his soul. Presumably he was still smarting over the Thanes' choice of Duncan as king. We cannot think that the witches appear to Macbeth to help him to the kingship: their true aim is the spread of evil: at the same time as they give Macbeth hope, they dash that hope with their prophecy to Banquo. The apparition of the women effectively divides the two victorious males -with his question to the Sisters Banquo breaks the bond that united them, so leaving Macbeth free to turn against him: this, not "magic", will lead to the destruction of both.

There is evidence that Macbeth is not so innocent as we might have thought: he has already entertained thoughts which he dare not admit. If the witches' words find their mark it is because he has left himself open to the temptings of the Evil One: -for as King James warns in the ***Daemonologie***: "that old crafty serpent easily spies our affections and so conforms himself thereto to deceive us to our wrack". The conclusion must be that the evil one has sent his servants to tempt Macbeth. Somehow the Thane has wittingly or unwittingly issued a call to these denizens of hell with his musings on the kingship. It is even possible that it has been Macbeth himself who has conjured them: -by harbouring evil thoughts, Macbeth may have set in motion the evil forces that come to tempt him. We find here an echo of Paracelsus' views on the relationship between the macrocosm of the Universe and the microcosm which is Man, and which showed how a person's feelings or thoughts might evoke a response from the corresponding force in the macrocosm, be it good or evil.[8] Macbeth's reactions, so different from those of Banquo's evidence this. What Banquo, sees as a trick of the Evil One masquerading as the truth, his companion takes at its face value. Macbeth, more aptly than he realises, addresses the witches as "imperfect speakers", -they are truly imperfect because they do not complete what they say; they are also imperfect because they are evil, and their words will deceive him to his destruction. Though they reply to Banquo, they neither obey Macbeth nor answer his questions. But he does not seem to grasp at that time the full significance of the prophecy to his companion. He seems mesmerised: in front of the witches he is "rapt" -a word used of him several times in the play (-reminding us of Prospero, "rapt in his books," who also neglected his duty). Another word to describe his state might

be "bewitched". We may be in the presence of some sort of hypnotism, brought about by the shock he receives from the witches' words. The scene ends with another show of magic as the hags disappear. League with the devil was one way to perform this vanishing act: another was a recipe found in the necromancers' books, -the "hand of glory"- which also conveyed this power. It involved desiccating a felon's hand and inserting in it a candle made of a gibbeted criminal's fat, wax from a newborn baby, sesame seed and horse dung: when lit, this conferred invisibility. Nevertheless, as with the power of flight, this power of the witches to disappear at will is treated as factual in the play.

The witches' spell now begins to work its evil in Macbeth's soul. Like his mentors he begins to equivocate. He lies to his companions, saying he was thinking of "things forgotten" when in fact the opposite is true, - he has started to practise deception. He can no longer speak at all times with a "free heart". His ambition has been whetted, and the letter he writes soon after adverts the one person who can persuade him to carry out the terrible act of regicide.

Whatever Lady Macbeth represents -and her subsequent collapse may make us doubt the exact extent of her strength, there is no doubt that in the first scene she appears in she comes across as a powerful being,- strong and fierce as the Scots women Shakespeare may have read about in Holinshed, or as another Shakespearean anti-heroine, Queen Margaret, the "she-wolf of France" in 3 Henry VI. Shakespeare in this scene also seems to have used classical sources such as Seneca's *Medea*.[9] But is Lady Macbeth a sorceress like Medea is? Is she possessed? Murder and ambition are sadly not prerogatives confined to witches. It is true that Lady Macbeth is immediately conscious of the significance of the letter, almost as if she too had been awaiting such a moment, and had harboured similar thoughts to his: but with the consent that is at the beginning lacking in her mate. She also realises from the beginning that if Macbeth is to attain the crown, it must be "wrongly"[10] - something that is only slowly beginning to dawn on her husband. The thought of Macbeth's human-kindness actually produces fear in her, -further proof of the inverted value system of practitioners of evil. Where the Sisters have lost the physical appearance of women, she, though apparently attractive, consciously rejects the womanly attributes, making herself also a "man-like woman". Her evocation to the spirits of hell would seem to reveal some familiarity with the workings of the underworld. Though she works no magic, she has at least some knowledge

of the darker side of medicine -it is she who drugs the possets of the grooms, casting them into a sleep that will lead them to the sleep of death. Like the Sisters, her system of values is askew- for her, highly is in opposition to holily. Evenso, the rapidity of the response to her powerful summons to him -"Hie thee hither"- bringing not only her husband but the King, catches even her by surprise. Her reaction is not unlike that of Macbeth to the prophecy of the witches: her darkest desires have been promised fulfilment. The change that comes over her after this first shock of receiving the message is startling -from being a wife consumed by ambition she turns into a malevolent and fearful creature before our eyes, justifying the description "fiend-like queen" given to her at the end of the play. The language she uses is diabolical and full of foreboding. (The references to darkness and to night show us on which side she belongs). Her diabolical purposes are made patent by her evocation of those birds of ill-omen, the raven and the owl, and her direct appeal to the "murdering ministers". Most striking is the way she steels herself, not for the last time, against her womanly nature. This rejection of the stereotyped role of woman as a carer and protector of life marks Lady Macbeth as an outcast from the those ideals of womanhood then prevalent. The mark of the witch was precisely this -the masculine attributes of the "mannish woman", the obliteration of those qualities men prized in the sex, and the assumption of the masculine role. The parallels between her and the fierce Queen Margaret in *3 Henry VI* - are striking. The Frenchwoman also has a "tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide".[11] The Duke of York, about to be put to death at her orders, cries:" Women are soft, mild, pitiful and flexible [...]/ But thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless/ [...] more inhuman more inexorable/ [...] than tigers of Hyrcania".[12]

In fact Queen Margaret is never explicitly accused of being a witch, and does not have to call on the powers of darkness in order to carry out her cruel acts. The similarity lies only in the fact that as then, the strong, ruthless character is the woman, and that this is seen as reversing the natural order of things. Lady Macbeth fears her man's weakness -also reversing the traditional roles. But she turns to the supernatural for help and consciously assumes the trappings of a classical witch: like Medea she calls on the powers of darkness to help her carry out her horrible deed. At this point, it is she herself who thinks to murder Duncan, with her "keen knife". Yet she fears not only Macbeth's nature, but her own, and rightly so: the "compunctious visitings of

nature" will return to torment her, both before the murder of Duncan, and after she is queen. Her tragedy is that she violates her nature, but once the deed is done, finds that her pupil, with typically masculine condescension, relegates his mentor to a secondary position -he no longer has any need of her. "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck" (3. 2. 46). This to her, who had planned to "chastise" him "with the valour of (her) tongue", she who in this scene is both witch and conjurer. When inviting the powers of evil to possess her, she needs no apparitions to put her in contact with the other side, she acknowledges no intermediaries, -it is she who commands the spirits, while the dunnest smoke of hell she invokes here corresponds to the murky air of the witches. She is a necromancer who summons the devils, but thinks to make them do her will by offering them the blood sacrifice of Duncan- insensible to the fact that the demons' price will be her own and her husband's souls. The diamond Duncan has presented her with at the hands of Banquo, and one of whose virtues was to protect the wearer from murder, (and which theoretically might have saved him) also has the property of protecting against evil thoughts -but it is of no avail against her conscious decision to attain her ends. Yet in spite of her whole-hearted self-dedication to the powers of darkness, she too will be destroyed. In this Shakespeare is being "politically correct". The stories of necromancy and demonic possession always had to show how the evildoer was deceived by those he served. Shakespeare had already shown us this in *1 Henry VI*, in the person of Joan of Arc abandoned by her "voices". The "visitings of nature" which Lady Macbeth thinks to have exorcised, will return when her assumed masculinity looses its hold, and will make the murder prey on her mind. The fall of Lady Macbeth is a prelude which heralds that of her husband.

The third scene of sorcery is that of Macbeth's visit to the witches' lair. This time his change of attitude towards them is spectacular. He is no longer a hesitant and remorseful sinner of the first act. The murders he has committed have made him an adept of evil, and he seeks out the witches with all the authority of the superior being that kingship and his crimes have made him. The rites that precede Macbeth's arrival belong to the purest stream of witchcraft lore. We find the Sisters, again to the accompaniment of thunder, making a charm from the classic ingredients familiar since Horace's time and which echo those used by Ovid's Medea in the ***Metamorphoses*** to make her magic potions. Almost before they begin we are told that the charm they are working is poisonous. The thrice repeated, alliterative rhyme "Double, double

toil and trouble" links the two halves of the charm together, making it a potent whole. The flesh of babies -preferably unbaptized ones, the grease and slime from executed felons, extracts of toad and bat etc., were all documented ingredients of the potions elaborated, and had been used by the North Berwick witches in their turn. The books of magic were full of such recipes. Mixtures of baby's fat, aconite, belladonna, soot, bat's blood, and thornapple were used by witches to produce hallucinations and even delirium. The ***Book of Secrets of Albert Magnus*** (1525) gives similar recipes for making men appear in the form of animals, or as incredibly large. The audience, and the royal patron would find no cause for mirth at the gruesome concoction.

The problem Shakespeare, and King James for that matter, never elucidates for us is what part this pharmacopoeia plays in the magic worked by the witches: why exactly does one need to mix these noxious ingredients when presumably the devil is able to function without their aid.[13] Is magic a question of illusion and hallucination of the perpetrators, as many early and medieval Christian doctors believed, or was there some pact with the devil that allowed its practitioners to upset the laws of nature, as the reformers believed? Shakespeare seems to choose the second, though we must remember that deference to his royal audience must have obviously played a part while not foregoing the more anecdotal aspects of witchcraft.

In seeking the witches out in this scene, Macbeth is the conjurer: his very words to the witches "I conjure you", echoing the words of the rite of exorcism, show the change in his character that has taken place since he first met them. Before, he dared hardly think on the images the prophecies suggested to him: now in his thirst to know and eagerness to have his doubts resolved, he defies the elements and calls down the destruction and doom on the world. This change is typical of the victims of the devil's deceit. The kingship which he desired is as dust and ashes in his mouth, now that he realises the import of the second part of the prophecy. His opening words to them show the alteration that their relationship has undergone -now they are not "Weird Sisters" but "secret, black and midnight hags", as he acknowledges their association with the devil. As in the first act, he demands that the witches answer him: with the duplicity inherent in their nature, they appear to comply at first, only to ask him a question in return. They now admit their inferiority, -they are mere servants of their "masters"- the spirits to whom they owe fealty. If at the beginning Macbeth respected the Sisters' "more than mortal knowledge," and seemed to

believe in their autonomy, now he rejects them in favour of their masters with the same sexist attitude he has shown to Lady Macbeth when spurning her help. Although he knows from the first meeting that Banquo's heirs will one day reign, he pathetically tries to go over the women's heads as it were, to get a more favourable answer from their apparently male masters.

We have heard of the witches' masters at the beginning -Paddock the toad, Grimalkin, the cat and now Harper: under the effect of the charms strengthened with more noxious ingredients- they transform into the apparitions that speak to Macbeth. We might even hazard that the spirit of the squat Paddock appears as the head, the brindled Grimalkin as the bloodstreaked babe, and Harpier, the harpy with gorgon-like locks, as the crownèd child. Now Macbeth is in a position of inferiority: unlike his wife and the witches he has not reached that grade of initiation that would permit him to address the spirits directly. He cannot question them as he would, and their answers, seemingly factual, are the instruments that will drive him on to commit further outrages, "sin plucking on sin" as Richard III has it.[14] Though the answers of the second two apparitions are admittedly equivocal, it is Macbeth who leaps to the assumption that they mean what he wants them to mean: the words themselves with typical diabolical duplicity, do not explicitly state that he is safe, even though they encourage him to persevere in the path he has chosen. The euphoria he feels after these reassurances actually brings out in him the sort of tender language he has used for his wife in earlier scenes -"sweet bodements good". But his joy is short-lived. The question that he burns to know has not been answered. The apparitions in effect have mocked him by spurring him on to greater deeds of darkness, without promising the only recompense that he now realises will make it all worth-while. He is thrown back on the three Sisters and what they show him leaves him in such a state of the despair, that he is at last driven to curse them for the "filthy hags" and deceivers that they are. Yet even this is not enough to make him desist from his crimes: with the obstinacy typical of the victim-practitioners of necromancy, he still trusts to the words of the (male) apparitions, which have confirmed him in his determination to make "assurance double sure".

The figures the charm brings forth may be hallucinations brought on by breathing the noxious fumes from the cauldron plus a little ventriloquism, but to the audience they must have appeared real and frightening, and totally in line with what was then known about necromancy. According to the

Daemonologie, these apparitions were the devil or devils in person assuming the different forms seen. (Shakespeare had in fact already presented devils on stage -those that appear to Joan of Arc, but cannot help her; the demon Asnaeth that is conjured before the Duchess of Gloucester in *2 **Henry VI***, and answers the questions she has written down for the conjurer to read out, though, as befits the devil, they are misleading, in exactly the same way as those given to Macbeth are). The result of these apparitions is to make Macbeth believe that he is invincible, forestalling any doubts that might make him hold his hand, and driving him to commit the crime against MacDuff that will set in motion his downfall. At the end of the play, Macbeth finds he has to reject all his magical supports, that they have never really existed, and in the final outcome, he must challenge what he considers to be the dictates of fate, and rely on his own human strength to save him. The bitterness of his discovery of the falsity of the fiend echoes that of Faustus, of Joan, and of all those who put their faith in the instruments of darkness.

To Shakespeare's audience, the message and the moral would be clear: the good Christian should not seek to know more than was good for him: trying to peer into the future was always dangerous, nor should he have truck with the purveyors of charms and spells -they were all in league with the devil, and thought they might hide themselves under the trappings of wise women and soothsayers, they were equally perverse and dangerous. Their power to work magic came from the devil who would exact a price for any favours given. In fine it was a justification of James I's methods of dealing with them, and in line with his anti-feminist views of keeping women in their place. Quite apart from the fact that the scenes of witchcraft themselves make splendid theatre, of course!

NOTES

1.- *2 **Henry VI*** 1. 4.

2.- Though the word "magic" does not actually appear in the play, the concept in Shakespeare's time ranged from "white magic", bordering on folk-medicine, to various forms of devil-worship to obtain one's ends. The definition of sorcery was the working of charms and spells; conjuration was the raising and commanding of spirits, and witchcraft proper was based on an

agreement with a spirit to gain certain wishes in exchange for some gift -a blood sacrifice or the person's soul. See R. Kieckhefer, ***Magic in the Middle Ages***. Rep. 1990. (Cambridge: C.U.P.) 1989. p. 80-85.

3.- For example Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: 1. 5. 62-65, 70; 1. 7. 82-83; 3. 2. 35-36. The good Christian, like Banquo, would know not to be taken in by fair-sounding words, or by the aspect the fiend might adopt.

4.- There was a large element of misogyny involved in this belief- witchcraft was a gynocentric art: woman, the weaker vessel, and responsible for the Fall, was considered more susceptible to being prey to the wiles of the devil. Men who dabbled in magic tended to be necromancers, who conjured or commanded the spirits, and alchemists, with rich and powerful patrons. Not surprisingly, figures show that something like 90% of those executed for witchcraft were women. For the Elizabethan view of the "manly woman", see G. B. Jackson, "Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons and Shakespeare's Joan of Arc", in ***English Literary Renaissance***, 18 (1988) p. 40-65, and P. Shaw "Alewives, Old Wives, Widows and Witches: the Older Woman in English Renaissance Literature" in ***Proceedings of the I National Conference of the Spanish Society for English Renaissance Studies***, Zaragoza, (1990) p. 15.

5.- Frightening as the witches are meant to be, Shakespeare makes it patent that they are at the beck and call of their familiars -their masters. Although familiars are common throughout the tales of necromancy and demonic possession, the use of these pet-names of small animals is peculiarly British. Devotion to small animals is a national trait that is still apparent today.

6.- A recipe for producing nauseabund smoke was contained in one of the most famous books of magic, the so-called ***Book of Secrets of Albert Magnus***. It consisted of mixing human fat and blood with balsam of storax, formed into pellets and dried: when these were burned with artemisia and a scrap of shroud from a grave, the desired effect was said to be produced.

7.- ***Macbeth*** 2. 1. 49 ff; 3. 2. 47 ff.

8.- See W. A. Murray "Why was Duncan's blood golden?" in ***Shakespeare Survey 19***, Rep. 1980 (C. U. P., 1966) 34 ff.

9.- See Inge-Stina Ewbank in "The Fiend-like Queen", ***Shakespeare Survey 19, op. cit.*** 82 ff.

10.- ***Macbeth*** 1. 5. 21.

11.- ***3 Henry VI*** 1. 4. 138.

12.- ***3 Henry VI*** 1. 4. 142-3, 155-6.

13.- This was a problem that taxed moralists and theologians alike. See R. Kieckhefer, ***op. cit.*** p. 184 ff.

14.- ***Richard III***, 4. 2. 65-6.