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Staged Magic: Performing Witchcraft in *Macbeth*

Kristin Bezio

The three witches who initiate William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) *Macbeth* (1606) are the play's primary figures of theatrical spectacle, their bodies and actions the products of the 'magic of the theatre.' While much critical attention has been paid to the interpretive significance of the witches in *Macbeth*, much less has focused on the practical physicality of the witches' presence and the methodology of their theatrical presentation.¹ The witches' entrance opens *Macbeth* and is central to understanding their role within *Macbeth's* Scotland. The 'magic' that appears on stage is acknowledged by its audience as a series of illusions that is an open fiction; but if the 'magic' of the play is illusory, then so too may be the physical and linguistic 'magic' in the world around them. Macbeth's credulity, within the Jacobean context of the play's composition, echoes James's published beliefs in *Daemonologie*. The theatrical spectacle of the 'magic' in Shakespeare's play concentrates the blame for treason and tyranny exclusively upon Macbeth, and, as James himself was beginning to question his former beliefs in the potency of witchcraft, the play exposes the danger in the persisting belief in magic and prophecy.

Banquo and Macbeth's first encounter with the witches

provides a physical description that situates them as figures of ambiguity in terms of gender, politics, and substance. They are categorized as 'fantastical' (I.iii.53), and Banquo's description of them suggests inhumanity:

BANQUO What are these,
 So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
 That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth,
 And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
 That man may question? You seem to understand
 me,
 By each at once her choppy finger laying
 Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,
 And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
 That you are so. (I.III.39-47)

The witches are 'wither'd', 'wild', most likely tattered and dirty, and 'look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth.' The witches mock the superstitious 'sailor's wife' and 'her husband' (I.iii.4, 10), cackling and cavorting, exploiting audience expectations of witches to comic effect.

What had been entertaining becomes disturbing as these figures trespass from the petty mockery of the sailor's wife to interfering in political affairs.² Banquo's descriptors align with the conventional understanding of the witch as described by Christina Lerner:

The stereotype witch is an independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behaviour. [...] She has the power of words—to defend herself or to curse. In addition, she may have other, more mysterious powers which do not derive from the established order.³

Macbeth's witches are labelled women by Banquo's use of the female pronoun, but have 'beards.' These 'beards' belie the conventional assumption that female characters were portrayed by boys; boy players would have needed to wear false facial

hair, an unnecessary complication. The casting of adult men also reinforces a reading of the witches as explicitly undercutting the patriarchal early modern English culture.⁴ Boys were more acceptable as female characters because of their submissive position within the gender hierarchy; therefore the choice to have men portray the witches grants them increased potency within the socio-political sphere. As men, the witches would have power as members of the patriarchal hierarchy; as women wielding such power, they become doubly dangerous as they allow the demonic feminine access into that hierarchy. However, although the witches embody transgressivity and inversion, their potency as corruptive agents is undercut by the very theatricality that seems to grant them power.

The play opens with the witches' entrance to '*Thunder and lightning*' (I.i.1), a recurring pattern of special effects (likely executed with metal 'thunder sheets' or large cannonballs in the over-stage heavens) that establishes their supernatural nature. What goes unspecified is the method by which the witches enter and exit. Neville Coghill focuses his reading on this question, asking, 'were the witches, at their several exits, flown out on wires?'⁵ His thesis is predicated on the assumption that 'all Europe, not to mention America, knew that witches were able to ride the air' (Coghill 1975: 223). Coghill concentrates on frequent references to air and the witches' use of the word 'hover' (I.i.12), which he understands as 'a concealed stage direction' (Coghill 1975: 224). Coghill's reading coincides with Macbeth's suggestion that the witches vanish 'Into the air':

BANQUO The earth hath bubbles, as the water
has,

And these are of them.—Whither are they
vanish'd?

MACBETH Into the air; and what seem'd
corporal,

Melted as breath into the wind. (I.III.79–82)

Later Macbeth again describes the witches' aerial departure: 'Infected be the air whereon they ride' (IV.i.138). Given the

feasibility of 'flying' players at the Globe, where deities and spirits were lowered or raised on wires during performances, there is no reason to assume that the witches could not have flown. This spectacle functions as a sleight-of-theatrical-hand that distracts the audience (and authorities) from the play's criticisms, for even as spectacle seems to reinforce the culpability of the witches, it presents 'magic' as a theatrical trick; if Shakespeare's witches can fly, their 'spells' enacted with stage tricks, then 'real magic' may be nothing more than illusion. In *Macbeth*, culpability ceases to be the fault of the witches and blame is redirected onto Macbeth for granting veracity to prophecy simply by believing in it.

The magic performed by the witches culminates in the Apparitions which rise from the depths of hell (beneath the stage) to give their prognostications:

ALL Come, high, or low;
Thyself and office deftly show.

Thunder. First Apparition, an armed head.

[...]

Thunder. Second Apparition, a bloody child.

[...]

*Thunder. Third Apparition, a child crowned, with a tree
in his hand.*

MACBETH What is this,
That rises like the issue of a king.

(IV.I.67-68, I.76, I.86, I.87)

At the end of each prophecy, the folio gives the directions 'Descends' and 'Descend' (F1 mm6v), indicating the direction of the Apparitions' exits. Their arrival and departure through the stage trap door shows their hellish origins, but also allows the Apparitions to enter through a cauldron placed over the trap, a possibility revealed by Macbeth's line, 'Why sinks that cauldron?' (IV.i.106). Like the witches, the Apparitions arrive to 'Thunder'; unlike them, the Apparitions' strange physical appearance helps to clarify their meanings.

The physicality of the Apparitions provides clarification

for their prophecies, as Harry Berger, Jr., explains: ‘meanings slip from their verbal signifiers to extraverbal referents in the order of the body.’⁶ In performance, the bodies of the Apparitions communicate more than the prophecies they speak as language breaks down. The first Apparition warns Macbeth to ‘beware Macduff;/Beware the Thane of Fife’ (IV.i.71–72) and its head, undoubtedly the same property head used in the final scene, represents Macbeth’s decapitation by Macduff.⁷ The second Apparition, which tells Macbeth ‘none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth’ (IV.i.80–81), is more ambiguous, perhaps taking the form of Macduff’s murdered son or the newborn Macduff. If the former, the same boy would play both son and Apparition, while the latter requires an unspeaking figurine.⁸ The ‘*child crowned, with a tree in his hand*’ offers a more extensive prophecy:

3 APPARITION Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be,
until

Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

MACBETH That will never be:

Who can impress the forest; bid the tree

Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!

(IV.I.92–96)

This Apparition is widely understood to represent Malcolm, although the player portraying Malcolm certainly would not have acted both roles. More likely, the ‘*child crowned*’ was performed by Fleance, a casting which reinforces the prophecy that Banquo’s heirs will inherit the throne.⁹ The final Apparition also shows the audience how ‘Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come’ with the ‘*tree in his hand.*’ Macbeth’s response to this third Apparition reveals his vexed relationship to the play’s magic, but also exposes the deceptive nature of magic as reliant on the gullibility of its audience.¹⁰

The final magical sequence, the ‘Show of Kings’, also relies upon extraverbal signification and has produced a wide variety of critical interpretations. As the cauldron disappears

beneath the stage, the 'Show' begins, prefaced by the witches' invocation:

ALL Show his eyes, and grieve his heart;
Come like shadows, so depart.
*A show of eight Kings, the last with a glass in his
hand;*

BANQUO *following.*

MACBETH Thou art too like the spirit of
Banquo: down!

Thy crown does sear mine eye-balls:—and thy
hair,

Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first:—

A third is like the former:—filthy hags!

Why do you show me this?—A fourth?—Start,
eyes!

What! will the line stretch out to th'crack of
doom?

Another yet?—A seventh?—I'll see no more:—

And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass,

Which shows me many more; and some I see,

That two-fold balls and treble sceptres carry.

Horrible sight!—Now, I see, 'tis true;

For the blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me,

And points at them for his. (IV.I.110–124)¹¹

The 'Show' contains a contradiction between the stage direction and Macbeth's explanation. The stage direction in the folio reads, '*A shew of eight Kings, and Banquo last, with a glasse in his hand*' (F1 mm6v), which suggests that Banquo holds the glass, although Macbeth's line gives it to the eighth king.¹² Mitsuru Kamachi wonders whether Banquo enters with the mirror and passes it to the eighth king, although this seems unnecessarily complicated.¹³ It is more likely that errors in typography resulted in the contradiction of the stage direction with Macbeth's lines. However, the purpose of the glass and number of kings have drawn more critical attention than the discontinuity in the play text.

The glass has spurred many interpretations, including Richard Flatter's suggestion that the eighth king held the mirror in front of his face so that James might see his own physiognomy reflected therein.¹⁴ Arguments have also been made for the use of a 'perspective glass', two mirrors showing an infinite replication of kings, Nostradamus's Mirror, or, as Kamachi claims, 'a crystal ball, like the one owned by John Dee, for presenting magical illusions' (Kamachi 2000: 40).¹⁵ Concurrent with the nature of the glass is the question of the eighth king's identity. Tradition holds that the eighth king most likely represents James, as in Flatter's interpolation. Kamachi, however, argues that James would also be shown his mother—otherwise absent from the line of kings.

My suggestion, as a solution to this final puzzle, is to use two mirrors (one hidden from the view), so that not only the figure of James himself but also that of Mary could be presented solely to the royal view (Kamachi 2000: 41–42).

Kamachi draws this idea from 'what EA Robertson calls "Nostradamus's mirror", which uses two mirrors to reveal distant figures hidden from the viewer' (Kamachi 2000: 42). Kamachi suggests that a boy hidden backstage dressed as Mary Queen of Scots would be revealed to James via the mirror before it was turned to show James his own reflection.¹⁶

However, Macbeth's explicit description contradicts the suggestions that the mirror shows something other than the line of kings itself: 'And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass,/Which shows me many more.'¹⁷ Another problem with Kamachi's and Flatter's suggestions is presence of a living (or recently deceased) monarch on stage—whether reflected in a mirror or through a costumed player. Kamachi's argument for the 'private' exhibition of royal reflections also fails to take into account the audience of the public playhouse (for whom the trick would likely fail altogether from the perspective of most of the theatre). However, the eighth king can stand in for the absent Mary even without a mirror-trick. The figures on stage do not need to impersonate specific people; instead, they represent the impersonal royal office. Given the

prohibition of placing living monarchs on stage, this representational reading makes the most sense.

As an allegory, the procession's 'magic' is mitigated by the audience's ahistorical awareness of James's lineage, the generations of which have already passed.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the 'Show' is prophetic, and its associations with amphibolic treason taint James's claims of descent. The ambiguity of the final king criticizes belief in the 'magic' of prophecy explicitly because the 'prophecy' in the play has already come to pass with James's accession. In essence, because the viewing audience already knows the legend of Stuart descent from Banquo, the 'prophecy' loses its influence because there is nothing 'magical' about prophesying what is already known.

Within *Macbeth*, magic's potency is derived from Macbeth's willingness to invest it with legitimacy. Macbeth believes the prophecies' surface truth, ignoring their inherent contradictions in favour of the 'magical' properties endowed by his misinterpretation.¹⁹ Macbeth's belief causes him to commit the original act of regicide, to return to the witches for confirmation, to believe that confirmation as truth, and to ignore the events around him in favour of a promise of infallibility. The illusions of stagecraft permit the witches to fly and the Apparitions to rise from hell, but they are self-conscious trickery that focuses the audience's attention on 'magic's' false nature. *Macbeth* demonstrates an increased awareness on the part of the drama that its own performative mode of production is employed physically and linguistically across society, religion, and politics. By calling its audience's attention to theatricality as a vehicle for deception beyond the walls of the Globe, *Macbeth* exposes the illusory nature of such 'magic' and seeks to dismantle its plausibility as a method of manipulation, whether in a hypothetical second Gunpowder Plot or, more likely, in the ideological manipulations of social, religious, or political speech.

Notes and References

1. For the sake of this examination, I exclude the scenes presumed to be late additions to the play written by Thomas Middleton for *The Witch*. The suspect nature of their authorship and tangential relationship to the other scenes of witchcraft indicates their peripheral relationship to the play as a whole. While there are stage directions that indicate the use of song and dance—'Music and a song, "Black spirits," etc.' (IV.i.43.1)—in act four and Hecate's fury in act three, these scenes are less significant in terms of stage magic and political import than those which appear here.
2. The image of the sailor's wife mingled with political amphibology recalls the blame James placed upon witchcraft for the difficult sea voyage he and his wife, Anne of Denmark, had while crossing back to England.
3. Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, ed. A Macfarlane, Basil Blackwell, New York, 1984, pp. 84–85.
4. In his introduction to the Bedford *Macbeth*, William C Carroll explains this relationship:

We should see the witches in *Macbeth*, then, not simply as external symbols of evil: they are profoundly linked not only to what is already in Macbeth himself, but also to the violent, hierarchical, male order of culture itself. [...] Virtually everything about them—their appearance, their riddling language, their ambiguous gender—represents some inversion of the personal and social values exhibited by the dominant culture. (19)
5. Nevill Coghill, 'Macbeth at The Globe, 1606–1616(?) Three Questions' in *The Triple Bond*, ed. JG Price, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1975, p. 223. Subsequent references from this work are given in the paper **itself**.
6. Harry Berger, Jr., 'Bodies and Texts', *Representations*, Vol. 17, 1987, p. 156.

7. At the play's conclusion, Macduff enters 'with MACBETH'S head' (V.ix.19.1), holding it aloft for the view of the audience and the assembled nobles on stage.
8. These and other possible suggestions are found in AW Crawford, 'The Apparitions in Macbeth, Part II', *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 39, issue 7, 1924, pp. 383–388.
9. Additionally, if the Son has already played the 'bloody child', he would not be used again as the Third Apparition.
10. For a more specific interpretation of Macbeth's response, see Sharon L Jansen Jaech, 'Political Prophecy and Macbeth's "Sweet Bodements"', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 34, issue 3, 1983, pp. 290–297.
11. Kenneth Muir notes that the witch's subsequent lines (125–132) may be an interpolation, possibly Middleton, a suggestion which makes sense, given the absence of singing and dancing in the non-interpolative scenes in *Macbeth*.
12. Muir edits the stage direction so that it matches Macbeth's later line.
13. Kamachi explains that the players may have used a version of Nostradamus's mirror, suggesting that the passage of the glass from Banquo to the eighth king signifies the shift in perspective between Mary Queen of Scots and James himself. See Mitsuru Kamachi, 'Banquo's Glass: The King of Anamorphosis on the First Night of *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. 38, 2000, pp. 39–53. Subsequent references from this work are given in the paper itself.
14. In a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement*, Flatter describes his interpretation:

My suggestion is that the actor who as the eighth king concluded the procession, entered with his head hidden behind a mirror and that, passing along, he stood for a while in front of his sovereign (who, of course, was seated in the centre of the first row) so that James could see himself in the glass. In this manner the king in person would have taken his place in the genealogical display, without having to take any actual part in the stage

procession, and without anybody else's impersonation of him. Richard Flatter, 'Letter', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 23 Mar. 1951, qtd. in Kamachi, 41.

15. A 'perspective glass' is a mirror not unlike a 'funhouse mirror' which would distort or add to the image in order to alter its appearance.
16. Kamachi believes that a mirror reflection would have avoided the controversy of placing James or Mary on stage, which seems to be an unlikely conclusion.
17. Certainly, unless the kings on the stage held 'two-fold balls and treble sceptres', as Macbeth describes being held by the mirror-kings, the kings in the mirror would not be able to hold them, but it seems a safe assumption that the audience could accept that particular imaginative stretch.
18. In the fiction James claims for himself, as Hector Boece (in *Historia Gentis Scotorum*, 1527) invented the figure of Banquo and his lineage to ratify James' ancestors' claim to the throne. In 'Two Truths are Told', Carroll notes that most early modern writers did not remark upon this fact, leaving ambiguous whether they (here, Shakespeare) were aware of this fiction.
19. William O Scott explains this in greater detail in 'Macbeth's—And Our—Self-equivocations', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 37, issue 2, 1986, p. 171.