Scene 1 (I 1)

(I i 4) Enter three witches. It has been said that this scene is superfluous -- "The witches here seem to be introduced for no other purpose than to tell us they are to meet again" (Seymour 1805:172) -- and there is some truth in that. It has been said that this scene is exactly the right way for the play to begin -- "The true reason for the first appearance of the Witches is to strike the key-note of the character of the whole drama" (Coleridge ed Coleridge 1836 2:238) -- and there is some truth in that. Well staged, well acted, this can be a powerful little scene. It can serve as a sort of prologue, to put the audience into the right frame of mind.

And yet, despite everything that can be said in its favour, this scene is problematic for two reasons -- and these problems are what persuade me that this scene is an afterthought, not part of the play as Shakespeare first designed it.

First, it is not compatible with the beginning of scene 3. In that scene, as I will explain in due course, the witches do not immediately reveal their true nature. At first they seem to be figures of fun; step by step they transform themselves into embodiments of evil. It is only as the transformation approaches its climax that the witches start speaking their own special type of verse. If the audience has already heard them talking like this in scene 1 (see below), the beginning of scene 3 becomes pointless -- not just pointless but positively confusing. The witches who appear at the start of scene 3 seem to be different creatures from the witches whom we met in scene 1 -- and different creatures is what they are, until those mutate into these.

Second, it makes the play unbalanced. If the play is to begin with scene 1, it ought to end with a similar short scene -- a scene in which the witches have a chance to exult over their triumph, or start to look about for their next victim. In a word, there ought to be an epilogue to balance this prologue.

Any actors planning to perform the play need to think hard about this scene. One option would be to omit it. There is no necessity for it. The audience are going to see Macbeth and Banquo -- not just Macbeth -- ambushed by the witches in scene 3,* and do not need to be told about it in advance. In fact, might it not be better if that encounter were to

come as a surprise for the audience, just as much as for Macbeth and Banquo?

* If the witches are going to mention Macbeth, they ought to mention Banquo too. For their purposes, it is necessary that they should ambush the two of them together. Banquo needs to hear the promises made to Macbeth; Macbeth needs to hear the promises made to Banquo.

In the end, I assume, the actors will side with Coleridge. Given the mangled state of scene 2, I can see why it might be thought that some other scene -- any other scene -- would make for a better beginning. Even so, if the actors choose to keep scene 1, they will have to face up to the problems that I have mentioned. That means, I think, that they will have to cut out the sailor's wife and her chestnuts; and they will also have to ask themselves whether they want to end the play with some echo of scene 1.

(I i 5) When shall we three ... As soon as they open their mouths, the witches start using a type of verse which is peculiarly theirs -- rhymed couplets of seven-syllable lines: tum ti tum ti tum ti tum, tum ti tum ti tum ti tum. I call it witchspeak and have more to say about it later, in connection with scene 3.

(I i 12) There to meet with ... Once our ears have become attuned to witchspeak, this line begins to sound wrong. Pope (1723:517) wanted to change it to "There I go to meet Macbeth"; Capell (1768:3) preferred "There to meet with great Macbeth". Steevens (1793:327n) suggested inserting "Whom?", and Kemble (see below) accepted that --

3 Witch. There to meet with --
1 Witch. Whom?
2 Witch. Macbeth.

but I doubt whether Steevens was being serious. (I would, however, not object if an owl were to hoot at this moment -- but let it say "Whooo", not "Whooom".)

None of these suggestions is convincing, and editors since then have mostly refrained from trying to improve the text. A pause at this point -- "There to meet with .... Macbeth" -- may be the very effect that Shakespeare was aiming for. Perhaps it is only at this moment that the witches choose Macbeth to be their next victim.

(I i 13) I come, Grey-malkin. Macbeth's name, preceded by a pause, is succeeded by some eruption of horrid noises as the witches' familiars demand attention. This line is First

Witch's reply: her familiar, we gather, takes the form of a cat.

(I i 14) Paddock calls ... Folio runs these words together -- "Padock calls anon: faire is foule, ... -- though "faire" should clearly be the start of a new line. An acting edition published in 1794, which represents the script being used by Kemble, construes the last lines of the present scene like this:

> *1 Witch.* I come, Graymalkin.
> *2 Witch.* Paddock calls.
> *3 Witch.* Anon!
> *All.* Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
> Hover through the fog and filthy air.
> *Thunder and Lightning. Exeunt.* (Kemble 1794:5)

It was, apparently, Kemble's own idea to give "Paddock calls" to Second Witch and "Anon" to Third Witch, so that each had something to say. Other acting editions, such as Oxberry (1821:1) supply the appropriate cues: "Noise of a cat" for First Witch, "Noise of a toad" for Second Witch; they do not venture to guess what Third Witch's familiar might be.*

* "Some say they can keepe diuels and spirits in the likenesse of todes and cats" (Scot 1584:10). One of the Windsor witches had a rat for her familiar: she called it Philip (Galis 1579 D2r). Rats can squeal very loudly when they want to.

This arrangement of Kemble's was stolen -- unwittingly,* I am sure -- by Hunter (1845 2:165). He gets no credit for originating the idea, only for introducing it into the scholarly literature.

* Joseph Hunter was a presbyterian minister. I am not sure whether that precluded him from going to the theatre; but he does indubitably treat the plays as things that he has read, not as things that he has seen performed.

(I i 15) Hover through the fog ... Rowe (1709:3301) took this to mean that the witches should "rise from the Stage, and fly away". Everyone knew, of course, that witches could fly. (Macbeth knew it: he curses "the air whereon they ride" at the end of scene 20.) Whether it is practicable for these three witches will depend on the design of the theatre where the play is to be staged. Rowe, it might be said, was thinking of the theatres he knew, not of those that had existed a hundred years before. No doubt he had seen a performance of Davenant's play, where the witches do

indeed "Ex. flying" (Chetwin 1674:1).*

* This revival at Dorset Garden featured "new Scenes, Machines, as flyings for the Witches" (Downes 1708:33). A comedy by Thomas Shadwell, The Lancashire Witches, first performed at the same theatre in 1681, was similarly supplied with "several Machines of Flyings for the Witches, and other Diverting Contrivances" (ib 38).

On the evidence of the musical extravaganza in Middleton's The Witch -- the same that was later transplanted into Macbeth (scene 18) -- we know that it was possible for the singing witches to perch in the roof above the stage, and for Hecate to ascend slowly, singing all the while, until she disappeared from view.* That much is clear. But I am not sure that one can argue from this that the witches could be made to fly away at the end of scene 1.

* In Garrick's version of Shakespeare's play, Hecate was allowed to fly, but the witches in scene 1 were not: "the three Witches who open the play ... are improperly made to sink thro' a trap-door in the stage, instead of being rais'd by a machine into the clouds" (Waldron 1789:43). "It is a great breach of propriety in action, to make the witches sink, after saying 'hover through the fog, &c.'" (Gentleman in Bell 1773:4). "But possibly no other means are to be found with safety to the performers; and, this allowed, it was contrived as the most immediate way to make them vanish" (Gentleman in Bell 1774:63-4).

Nevertheless, I am inclined to go further than Rowe. The intention was, I think, for the whole scene to be an aerial spectacle. The witches should be suspended in the air throughout, as high above the stage as can be contrived. They should "enter flying", speak their lines, and "exeunt flying", without their feet ever touching the ground. And in that case it is hardly going to matter what they say or how they say it. The spectacle is what counts.

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