

Scene 18 (III v)

(III v 2-3) Enter ... Hecat. This whole scene is spurious, and so is the connected passage in scene 20 (IV i 41-7). Anyone who agrees with that statement can stop reading now.

If it is still necessary to argue the point, this is how I would go about it. It is clear, for a start, that Hecate is an intruder, not part of the play as Shakespeare first imagined it. The witches that we met in scene 3 are autonomous beings, not answerable to any higher authority. They are not going to stand there like naughty children while Hecate tells them off. There is more that might be said, but that, I think, ought to be enough.

If that is agreed, it is clear what the next question should be. Was the interpolation made by Shakespeare himself? Were the lines given to Hecate written by him? Or were they written by somebody else, possibly without his approval, possibly without his knowledge?

The suggestion that they were not Shakespeare's work originated with the separate edition of *Macbeth* produced for the Clarendon Press by Clark and Wright (1869).^{*} They realized that inertia was against them. "We know that it is not easy to convince readers that such and such passages are not in Shakespeare's manner, because their notion of Shakespeare's manner is partly based on the assumption that these very passages are by Shakespeare" (1869:xi). (They were speaking of an assortment of passages which seemed suspect to them, not just of the Hecate passages.) Anyone who thought that these lines were authentic would think that Shakespeare did sometimes write doggerel; anyone who thought that Shakespeare did sometimes write doggerel would think that these lines were authentic. That self-reinforcing loop had held good for three hundred years: was there any way to break out of it?

^{*} As Fleay (1891 2:374-5) understood it, the idea was more Clark's than Wright's. The only prior hint that the text might have been adulterated was the note "Omit as spurious, Anon. conj." which occurs four times in Clark and Wright (1865), attached to a few stray lines.

This is a matter of judgment, not of proof. I think it is true to say that most editors and critics have come round to endorsing Clark and Wright's opinion of the Hecate passages, more or less enthusiastically. But if anyone chooses to disagree, they have to be allowed to do so. It would be a waste of breath to try to make them change their mind. In my judgment, for what it may be worth, it is safe to say

that Shakespeare would never have written verse as vapid as this.

If that is agreed, again it is clear what the next question should be. If Shakespeare did not write these lines, who did?

The Hecate passages exist for one purpose only -- to introduce two songs: "Come away, come away" at the end of scene 18, "Black spirits and white" in scene 20. Those songs, originally written for a different play, had music by Robert Johnson and lyrics by Thomas Middleton. That is a fact, or as nearly a fact as anything can be, at this distance of time. But it does not follow from that fact that either Johnson or Middleton had any involvement with the decision to splice these songs into *Macbeth*. I do not understand why Clark and Wright jumped to the conclusion that Middleton was involved.* There is nothing to prove nor even to suggest that he was.

* The style of the suspect passages, they say, "seems to us to resemble that of Middleton" (1869:ix). But they make no attempt to justify that statement. (Their edition remained in print for more than thirty years; generations of children were expected to know that Hecate's speeches were "not improbably" (1898:xii) written by Thomas Middleton.)

When the decision was made, the actors had to invite someone to write some introductory lines. Admittedly Middleton is one of the people who might have been invited -- but I think it very unlikely that he was. In his play, Hecate is a 117-year-old hag; the Hecate introduced here seems to be more like a fairy than a witch. (She speaks of mortals as of an alien species.) Why would Middleton think of making that change?

In Middleton's play, Hecate mostly speaks in blank verse, or in a rhythmical prose not far removed from blank verse. On her first appearance, however, she speaks in rhyming couplets (ed Dyce 1840 259-60):

There, take this unbaptised brat;
Boil it well; preserve the fat:
You know 'tis precious to transfer
Our 'nointed flesh into the air,
In moonlight nights, on steeple-tops,
Mountains, and pine-trees, that like pricks or stops
Seem to our height; high towers and roofs of princes
Like wrinkles in the earth; whole provinces
Appear to our sight then even leek
A russet mole upon some lady's cheek.

When hundred leagues in air, we feast and sing,
Dance, kiss, and coll, use every thing:
What young man can we wish to pleasure us,
But we enjoy him in an incubus?

This is, I stress, the only passage in Middleton's play which might be thought to resemble the Hecate passages in *Macbeth*. The question is whether the person who wrote those lines was the same person who wrote these:

I am for the air. This night I'll spend
Unto a dismal and a fatal end.
Great business must be wrought ere noon.
Upon the corner of the moon
There hangs a vaporous drop, profound.
I'll catch it ere it come to ground --
And that, distilled by magic slights
Shall raise such artificial sprights
As, by the strength of their illusion,
Shall draw him on to his confusion.
He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear --
And, you all know, security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy.

And these:

Oh, well done. I commend your pains --
And everyone shall share in the gains.
And now about the cauldron sing,
Like elves and fairies in a ring,
Enchanting all that you put in.

Again this is a matter of judgment, not of proof. I say no, and feel fairly sure of it. The metre is more or less the same, but not the sensibility.

It is a point to note, by the way, that Hecate is perfectly aware of the purpose of their encounter with Macbeth. He is to be lulled into such a state of over-confidence -- security, she calls it -- that he will commit the atrocity which brings about his destruction. The person who wrote these lines for Hecate understood that Macbeth was to meet the three apparitions; he had no idea that Macbeth was also to meet the eight kings and Banquo's ghost. The "show of kings" is thus shown to be, not just an interpolation, but a later interpolation than the Hecate passages.

C.F. Sep 2025