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The early seventeenth-century origin of the Macbeth superstition

The theatrical superstition regarding Shakespeare's Macbeth--that naming it or alluding to it brings bad lack--is well documented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although critical editions of the play seldom refer to it. Popular belief that the superstition began in the seventeenth century has been sustained by repetition of a story about the death of an actor called Hal Berridge while playing Lady Macbeth on 7 August 1606. This story is rife on World Wide Web sites about the play and appeared in a book whose author should know better (Epstein 1993, 428). No actor named Hal Berridge is recorded in the lists of theatrical personnel produced by E. K. Chambers, Edwin Nungezer, G. E. Bentley, or David J. Kathman (Chambers 1923, 295-350; Nungezer 1929; Bentley 1941, 343-628; Kathman 2001a), although Kathman found that

A boy named Henry Berredge was christened on 28 July 1593 in Bitchfield, Lincolnshire, the son of George Berredge. This would make him 13 years old in 1606, just about the right age to play a female role on the London stage at the time. (Kathman 2001b)

John Aubrey is sometimes given as the source of the Hal Berridge story, but the name cannot be found in the index to any Aubrey work. The only book devoted to the topic of the supposed theatrical curse on the play Macbeth makes no attempt to substantiate its assertions (Huggett 1981). Without evidence that the boy from Bitchfield became a player, let alone that he died playing Lady Macbeth, we might be tempted to assign the origin of the superstition about Macbeth to the nineteenth-century theatre industry, but in fact there is a hitherto unnoticed example of it from the seventeenth century.

In August 1634 a play by Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood called The Witches of Lancashire was performed by the King's men at the Globe playhouse in London and in the autumn of that year it was printed as The Late Lancashire Witches (Brome & Heywood 1634). The word 'late' in the title was intended to distinguish the journalistic story from a similar incident in the same north England location twenty years earlier. In the play, the Seely household suffers a charm which inverts social hierarchy: the children bully the parents and are in turned bullied by their servants. In the following exchange Joan Seely tries to calm her daughter Winny:

JOAN I will take any course so thou wilt
leave thy passion; indeed it hurts thee child. I'll
sing and be merry, wear as fine clothes and as
delicate dressings as thou wilt have me, so thou
wilt pacify thyself and be at peace with me.

WINNY Oh, will you so? In so doing I may chance to look
upon you! Is this a fit habit for a handsome young
gentlewomen's mother, as I hope to be a lady? You
look like one o' the Scottish weird sisters. Oh,
my heart has the got the hiccup and all looks green
about me! A merry song now, mother, and thou
shalt be my white girl.

JOAN Ha, ha, ha! She's overcome with joy at my
conversion.

DOUGHTY [aside] She is most evidently bewitched.

(Q C2v-C3r; 1.2.155-69[1])

Winny's complaint that her mother looks like one of the "Scottish weird sisters" (in Q, "Scottish wayward sisters") is clearly an allusion to Macbeth, where the Scottish witches are so named (1.3.30, 2.1.19, 3.4.132, and 4.1.152). No matter how one spells the unusual adjective (weyward, wayward, weyard, weyrd, or weird), Shakespeare's is the only proximal collocation with "sister" occurring in a literary work written by someone alive in the period 1600 and 1650, according to Chadwyck-Healey's Literature Online database. It would appear that the King's men could expect an allusion to one of their early successes to be intelligible almost thirty years after its first performance.

Exactly what Winny finds objectionable in her mother's clothes is not specified, but it appears to be a matter of social status. When the charm is lifted near the end of the play, the servants Lawrence and Parnell enter "in their first Habits" and even without speaking they are observed to be "civilly accorded / Againe it seems, and accoutred as they / Were wont to be when they had their wits" (Q K4v; 5.5.19-21). It would appear that while the charm lasted they wore clothes to match their inappropriate dominance of the household.[2] We may presume, therefore, that Joan Seely's newly-lowered social status is also signalled by costume when her daughter compares her to "the Scottish weird sisters". Alluding to Shakespeare's play has an instant physiological and psychological effect on Winny as the existing charm is intensified. Winny's heart has a spasmodic "hiccup", her vision is disturbed, and she now explicitly talks of swapping social roles with her mother, whom she calls "my white girl". The greening of Winny's vision might be an allusion to green-sickness, an adolescent anaemia thought to be caused by a girl's sexual longing (Williams 1994, 621-24); in response to Winny's request for a "merry song", Joan sings one on the adolescent theme of unwanted pregnancy.

Notes

[1] The modernized text is from Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood, The Witches of Lancashire edited by Gabriel Egan (London, 2001).

[2] The phrase "first Habits", however, is not quite right. The audience first saw Lawrence and Parnell already charmed and bullying, so the dramatist who wrote this stage direction clearly failed to check with his colleague that the servants' normal, pre-charm, state would be shown at the beginning of the play.

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