INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the witchcraft episodes in Macbeth in relation to two sets of ideas: the crime of witchcraft, as it was understood in Shakespeare's England, and King James' experience of witchcraft.

In the present context 'witchcraft' has little to do with folklore, nor with the practices of 'primary witchcraft' by people all across Europe who were recognised in their local community as having special abilities as fortune tellers, midwives or practitioners of folk medicine. It has nothing to do with the early forms of wicca. What we are concerned with in this paper is a construct of the law, for it was principally through accounts of the trial and punishment of witches that witchcraft was defined in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Generally punishment was preceded by confession, and what witches confessed to depended to a large degree on the preferences or prejudices of their interrogators. Their confessions also served to validate the views of their interrogators, and were absorbed by spectators, reinforcing the prevailing view of what witches might be supposed to do. The circularity of this process sustained regional differences in the crime of witchcraft, particularly as between England, Scotland and the Continent of Europe.[1]

James VI of Scotland married princess Anne of Denmark by proxy in 1589. She sailed for Scotland, but was driven back by storms which the Danish admiral Peter Munk blamed on witches in Copenhagen.[2] James then went to Denmark himself, where he spent the winter and may have absorbed Continental views on witchcraft. On his return to Scotland in 1590 he again encountered storms at sea, subsequently blamed on a group of Scottish witches.[3] James himself took over some of the interrogation of these people and was convinced that they had been trying to kill him by raising storms, by working on wax images, and by manufacturing poison. An attempt was made to implicate the King's cousin, Francis, Earl of Bothwell, in the plot.

An account of the affair was published in England, called Newes from Scotland (1592) – a fairly nasty combination of propaganda and pornography – and King James wrote a tract called Daemonologie (1597) to persuade sceptics of the importance of witchcraft, and to put himself in the forefront of modern thinking, showing that his learning and scholarship was thoroughly up to date.

The text of Macbeth goes back to the 1623 Folio. It is corrupt, being cut in some scenes and having interpolations in others. The date of its composition is controversial – Dover Wilson put it as early as 1601 on stylistic grounds, whereas topical allusions suggest it might be after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. It may have been performed by the King's Company before King James and Christian IV of Denmark at Hampton Court on 7 August 1606,[4] but more recently these dates have been questioned, as has the financial motivation. It is not clear that putting on a play for the court was very profitable; nor is the play as flattering to James' political sensibilities as it might be. It seems likely that it was the general topicality of things Scottish that led Shakespeare to see some potential in Holinshed's story of King Macbeth, and it is argued below that it was the opportunity to deploy a range of special effects that led to the revision of the Macbeth so as to incorporate material shared with Middleton's play The Witch.

All references in this paper are to the text of the Oxford Shakespeare edition of Macbeth (1990), edited by Nicholas Brooke. Brooke's dating suggests that the original composition of Macbeth was towards the end of 1606, and that this was followed by a revised version in 1609-10; Middleton's Witch may then have followed around 1615.

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While Holinshed leaves open the question of who or what the weird sisters are[5], Shakespeare brings them on stage with thunder and lightning. It was standard thinking that storms were associated with witchcraft, and conversely the entry of the witches provided an excuse for getting the play started with an attention-getting special effect.[6] The status of the weird sisters is reinforced by:

FIRST WITCH: I come, Graymalkin
SECOND WITCH: Paddock calls [I.i.8-9]

– by which the audience would at once understand that these are witches, since the cat ('Graymalkin'[7] ) and the toad ('Paddock') were frequently to be found as familiars in witchtrials in England. These familiar spirits or 'imps', demons in the form of pet animals, were not of central importance in the witchcraft traditions of Scotland or the Continent at the beginning of the 17th century,[8] but they were almost the defining characteristic of English witches. As a reward for serving the witch, familiars were allowed to suck blood from a special nipple hidden somewhere on the witch's body, the 'devil's teat'. In the Witch of Edmonton Mother Sawyer has a familiar spirit in the form of a dog, to which she turns with:

SAWYER:: Comfort me: thou shalt have the teat anon.
DOG: Bow wow: I'll have it now.
SAWYER I am dried up / With cursing and with madness; and have yet
No blood to moisten these sweet lips of thine: [IV.i.151-4]

Shakespeare uses familiar spirits to show that Joan of Arc is a witch in *Henry V*:

**JOAN OF ARC**

*Now, ye familiar spirits that are cull'd*

*Out of the powerful legions under earth ... Where I was wont to feed you with my blood*

And of course this is exactly the function of the rats on the witches' heads and shoulders in *Masque of Queenes*: they are 'properties' introduced by Jonson to tell the onlookers what kind of people have come on stage – witches with their familiars.

*Macbeth's* witches exit with the lines:

ALL: *Fair is foul, and foul is fair*

*Hover through the fog and filthy air* [I.i.11-12]

– introducing one of the themes of the play, and perhaps providing an occasion for the stage machinery to produce one of the popular special effects of the theatre. To permit this Shakespeare allows the witches to demonstrate something fairly unusual by English standards, flying witches being rather more in the Continental tradition at this time.

The witches reappear in Scene 3 announced by a roll of *thunder*, to relate their misdeeds to each other, and the audience:

FIRST WITCH *Where hast thou been, sister?*

SECOND WITCH *Killing swine.*

THIRD WITCH *Sister, where thou?*

FIRST WITCH *A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,*

*And munched, and munched, and munched*

*'Give me', quoth I;*

*Aroint thee, witch; the rumpled *ronyon* cries [1.iii.1-6]*

Thus far, this is standard English witchcraft material. 'killing swine' is malefice, exactly the kind of thing that accusations of witchcraft in England turned upon. If having a familiar or a devil's taint was good evidence that someone was a witch, there was generally little chance of a conviction in court unless it could be shown that actual harm had been done to someone's person or property. The request for a share of the chestnuts is typical too: the witch is poor, perhaps a beggar, and this may contrast with the sailor's wife - 'rumpled' is surely 'rump-fed' here, like 'belly-fed' elsewhere, meaning fat-bottomed, of course. ('ronyon' is not known for sure, but I would link it with the Italian *la rogna*, meaning the itch. If so, the witch is describing the sailor's wife as fat-bottomed and scabby).

Moreover, there are so many cases of witchcraft accusations that start off in exactly this way, that there is a widely-accepted theory in the sociology of witchcraft that during the transition from a customary economy to a market economy people who were unable to make the usual charitable gifts to the poor felt guilty, and assuaged their guilt by accusing the beggar of being a witch; this would also validate their decision to withhold the traditional charity. It is not new an idea, and Shakespeare (like Jonson, Middleton and Heywood) used Reginald Scot as a source:

*These miserable wretches ... go from house to house and from door to door for a pot full of milk, yeast, drink, pottage, or some such relief, without the which they could hardly live ... It falleth out many times that neither their necessities nor their expectation is answered or served in those places where they beg or borrow, but rather their lewdness is by their neighbours reproved ... so as sometimes she curseth one, and sometimes another, and that from the master of the house ... to the little pig that lieth in the sty. [Scot Discoverie of Witchcraft]*

This is precisely what we have here: 'Aroint thee, witch!' - 'Shove off, witch!' Notice too that the use of 'witch' can be seen as insulting, if you wish to stress the view that these are three 'weird sisters' - but it can also be read as an implicit threat: 'Be off, or I'll accuse you of being a witch!' [9]

Things get interesting as the First Witch explains the revenge she means to exact on the sailor's wife:

*Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' th' Tiger;*

*But in a sieve I'll thither sail,*

*And like a rat without a tail,*

*I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do [I.iii.7-10]*

There may be an allusion here to the ship Tiger which was in an English fleet that returned from the Far East in 1606,[10] if we have the dating of the text right. I find this unpersuasive, however, and would prefer to focus on the idea of that the witch will sail to Aleppo 'in a sieve'. But first let us be clear about what is happening here. In the conventional version of English witchcraft the offended witch should seek revenge by sending her familiar spirit to harm her enemy. If the spirit happened to be 'like a rat' no-one in England would have been in the least surprised by the idea that it would be sent to Aleppo to catch up with the sailor and harm him. But the text conflates this idea with a second one, that the witch will herself go to Aleppo and will do this by sailing there in a sieve. Her intention appears to be to act as a succubus.[11] If 'like a rat without a tail' is to mean anything, it perhaps has to refer to the theory that a witch might be transformed into another animal, with a direct correspondence between each of her limbs and those of the animal. A witch might readily
become a hare, for example, because the hare has (practically) no tail; she could not become a complete rat, however, because she has nothing corresponding to the rat's tail.[12]

Certainly as Brooke points out 'it was common in the mythology of witches ... to sail in a bottomless boat.' Reginald Scot's catalogue in Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584) indicates that witches could 'saile in an egge shell, a cockle or muscle shell, through and under the tempestuous seas.' (Bk.1 ch.14 p.6) This is how the witches travel in Jonson's Masque of Queenes:-- 'we all must home i' the egg shell sail.'[13]

But Scot does not mention witches sailing in sieves, and nor I think does anyone else before 1590 – because this idea was not widely current until 1590 when the case against the North Berwick witches was being constructed under King James. The ditty (indictment) against Ewfemia McCalzeane, one of the North Berwick witches, accuses her of going to sea in a sieve to raise storms; all the other accused were described as going to sea in boats. In Newes from Scotland this is extended and the 'riddle or sieve' is the means by which all two hundred of the witches go by sea to their meeting at North Berwick - borrowing from the Continental tradition of great assemblies of witches.[14] There is no other early use of the sieve in this way - apart from Montgomerie's Scots poem Flying which refers to the general impossibility of sailing safely in a sieve without a compass or map.[15] It appears to be arguable that Shakespeare's source here is most likely to have been Newes from Scotland.

This is supported by the observation that although the witch can raise winds and storms to toss the ship about, she can not make it sink: 'yet it can not be lost.' If King James saw the play, he would surely have sat up at this point. Coming immediately after the sieves, this would be striking for the North Berwick trial dittays (with which James was certainly familiar[16]) and the Newes from Scotland pamphlet (which we argue Shakespeare was familiar with) both stress the point that the witches could not harm the King because he was the agent of God - this is the conclusion of Newes from Scotland, indeed it is precisely the point that the pamphlet was written to put across. James repeats the same proposition in his Demonologie, for it was an important part of the image that he wished to project as the divinely-appointed Protestant leader of Europe.

The First Witch then continues with:

"Here I have a pilot's thumb,
Wrecked as homeward he did come.[I.iii.28-9]"

- and this may again be read as an allusion to which King James would respond. Elizabethan English witches were not often accused of rifling graves or making use of parts of corpses. It was a significant part of the North Berwick witch trials, however: in John Fian's ditty it was a satanic commandment that bodies were to be dismembered; and in the ditty of the great witch, Agnes Sampson: 'on his command, they opnit vp the graves, twa within and ane without the kirk, and tuik of the jountis of their fingaris, tais and neise, and partit thame amangis thame . . . the Devill commandit thame to keep the jountis vpoun thame, quhill they were dry, and thame to mak ane powder of thame, to do ewill withall.'

The use of joints of the dead to raise storms is made specifically in Newes from Scotland; and the general prohibition of grave-robbing for sorcery was imported into England with James VI and I, when the English witchcraft law was tightened up at his insistence in 1604, so that for the first time grave-robbing became part of the crime of witchcraft in England. There was thus some topical interest in this aspect of the witches' behaviour.

Immediately after this Macbeth and Banquo enter and find the witches engaged in a dance. Again, one should say that this is not part of the English witchcraft tradition. English witches were understood to be mainly solitary, or family groups of mother and daughter, at this time. They obviously could not go in for much dancing. In Macbeth they chorus:

"The Weird Sisters, hand in hand
Posters of the sea and land
Thus do go, about, about,
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again to make up nine.
Peace, the charm's wound up.[I.iii.32-7]"

Scottish witches, however, were sociable and did dance - and one of the most striking parts in the Newes from Scotland is the account of the witches being led in a dance at the graveyard by Gellie Duncan playing on a Jew's Harp. The King was fascinated by this part of the evidence and had her play the tune for him in court. The words (apparently sung to the tune of Gillatripes) were:

"Commergo ye before, commer go ye
If ye will notgo before, commer let me."

- and again if we go to the trial documents a little more information becomes available, that the devil took John Fian by the hand "and led him widderschinnis about" (art.15) In the ditty of Agnes Sampson "the men wer turnit nyne tymes widderschinnes about, and the women sax tymes" (art. 50), Members of the Edinburgh jury were themselves put on trial on 7 June 1591 'Dilatit of manifest and Wilfull Errour' in acquitting Barbara Napier of Witchcraft. King James showed them where they had gone wrong by reiterating the points he thought important.[17] These included the evidence that Barbara Napier "danceit endlang pe Kirk-3aird, and Gellie Duncan playit on ane trump . . . the wemene wer turnit saxtyymes widdersouns about ".[18] While the groundlings may have simply enjoyed the spectacle, then, King James would certainly have appreciated what was going on.
It seems likely that the witches' dance in Macbeth was identical to that in Middleton's The Witch, and both were probably inspired by the dance in Ben Jonson's The Masque of Queens (1608) which says (on the strength of King James' Demonologie and continental authorities) that dancing is "an usual ceremony at their convents, or meetings" and adds a description of the dance:

with a strange sodayne Musique, they fell into a magicall Daunce, full of preposterous change, and gesticulation, but most applying to their property: who at their meeting: do all things contrary to the custome of Men, daunting back to back, hip to hip, their hands loyn'd and making circles backward, to the left hand, with strange phantastique motions of their hands, and bodies.

After this, Banquo's description of the witches takes us back to England again they are:

So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o'th'earth
And yet are on'? - 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.[19] [I.iii.40-7]

Despite all the discussion of 'wierd - weyard sisters' these are simply standard English witches - 'old, lame, bleare-eied, fowle, and full of wrinkles... Lean and deformed', as Reginald Scot (Bk.i,iii) says; or consider the Mother Sawyer in The Witch of Edmonton who is described as poor, deform'd, and ignorant/ And like a bow buck'd and bent etogether'[II.i.3-4]. By contrast the Scots witches described by the experienced King James could be 'rich and worldly-wise, some of them fatte and corpulent in their bodies',[20] no doubt thinking of Barbara Napier and Euphame McCalzeane, wives of Edinburgh burgesses.

There is also an interesting ambiguity about 'Live you, or are you aught that man may question?' for the answer is yes, they live; but no, a man may not question them - not simply on moral grounds, but because to do so was itself an act of witchcraft: as in the Scottish Act of 4 June, 1563 anent the using of witchcraft sorserie and Necromancie ... Nor that na persoun seik any help response or consultatioun at any sic vsaris or abusaris forsaids of Witchcraftis Sorserais or Necromancie vnder the pane of deid alswell to be execute aganis the vsar abusar as the seikar of the response or consultatioun [Acts of the Parliament of Scotland,1424-1567 p.539 no.9] English law under Elizabeth also regarded it as an offense to enquire about the life expectancy of the sovereign, but the law was reinforced when James came to the throne of England. Macbeth himself, therefore, becomes guilty of the crime of witchcraft when he says:

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:
----- to be King
Stands not within the prospect of belief
No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence
You owe this strange intelligence, or why
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you.[I.iii.70-8]

G.K. Hunter observes in the New Penguin Macbeth that in III.v Macbeth is "viewed as an adept or disciple of the witches, not a victim" (p.167) This clearly begins here in Scene 3 where Macbeth insists on an answer. Lilian Winstanley's treatment of the historical content of Macbeth was flawed, but it can certainly be said that questioning the witches at this point in the play puts Macbeth in a similar position to that of the Earl of Bothwell consulting Edinburgh sorcerers about the life expectation of his cousin, King James.

Setting aside Act 3, scene 5 where Hecate meets up with the witches in what is clearly an interpolation into the original play, providing a song and dance interlude that takes the plot no further forward, the witches next appear in Act 4, again heralded by thunder.

FIRST WITCH Thrice the brinded cat hath mewed.
SECOND WITCH Thrice, and once the hedge.pig whined.
THIRD WITCH Harpier cries, 'tis time, 'tis time. [IV.i.1-3]

Once again the familiar spirits direct the witches, telling them it is time to meet or depart. The witches now proceed to dance around a cauldron, cooking up their 'hell-broth'. If the image seems familiar today, it is largely because Macbeth has made it so – it would presumably have seemed alien, foreign to Shakespeare's audience, for the witches of Elizabethan England did not go in at all for cauldrons. The pauper-witch of Elizabethan pamphlets would have had little use for a cauldron, supposing she could afford such a thing; nor indeed did the Scots witches – when Agnes Sampson collected venom from a toad to poison the king, the container she used was an oyster shell.

Consider, however, the well-known woodcut illustration (Fig.1) from Newes from Scotland: it includes a group of well-dressed ladies stirring a cauldron with a ladle.
The illustrations have little connexion with the text – some in fact relate to material which can be found in the trial documents but not in the pamphlet itself – and the cauldron image does not even have that justification. There is no cauldron in the Scottish trial dittays of 1591, and there is no cauldron in the text of Newes from Scotland. Cauldrons can be found in the Continental tradition which so often includes the idea of a great gathering of witches feasting together and cooking up unbaptised infants. Ultimately it borrows from classical sources, especially Medea, Clytemnestra, Lucan and Ovid's metamorphoses; but if a wager ha to be placed on the source of this illustration one might try the woodcut from Olaus Magnus' Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus (1555) which depicts witches emptying a cauldron on the right to raise a storm which sinks the ship on the lest. (fig.2 below)

Be that as it may, there is no cauldron in Jonson' Masque of Queenes - the witches collect a list of magical materials for their spells, but the method is to put them in holes in the ground, throw them in the air, and the like. This is well-grounded in Jonson's scholarship but it lacks the dramatic effect and focus of the cauldron. There is a certain similarity of detail between the Macbeth and Newes from Scotland, but it should not perhaps be pushed very far:

Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one,
Sweltered venom sleeping got:
Boil thou first i'th' charmed pot. [IV i.6-9]

- compared with the passage cited by Foakes:

Touching this Agnis Tompson [sic] she is the onlie woman who, by the Divels perswasion, should have intended and put in execution the Kinges Majesties death, in this manner: She confessed that shee tooke a blacke toade, and did hang the same up by the heeles three dais, and collected and gathered the venom as it dropped and fell from it in ane oister shell, and kept the same venom close covered ... (Newes.) [22]

It may indeed be simply coincidental, based on the commonplace that toads were viewed with suspicion.

If it is the case that the cauldron in Macbeth was inspired by the illustration alone, it is perhaps understandable that Shakespeare was free to develop its dramatic use without constraint. He may have had no clear idea of what went into a cauldron, or why. So we have the long list of ingredients put into the cauldron by Shakespeare's witches,[23] and they are chosen for effect; the intention is left vague – to concoct a "charm".
This may be as far as the connection between Macbeth and Jacobean witchcraft extends. It is true that on Holinshed's warrant Macbeth turns to the witches for advice.[24] Initially they are indeed traditional witches (secret, black and midnight hags), maleficient creators of storms and natural disasters: Though you untie the winds, and let them fight! Against the churches, - though the yeasty waves/ Confound and swallow navigation up,-/ Though bladed corn be lodged, and trees blown down ... [IV.i.66-74] Once Macbeth asks to consult the witches' masters, however, they adopt a role closer to that of the renaissance magus [25]: The three apparitions with their deceptive and incomplete advice are in the tradition of Faust or Friar Bacon, rather than Elizabethan witchcraft, and the further sequence of future kings after the cauldron sinks through a trapdoor belong more to the style of Prospero, than to the earlier Macbeth.

There remains the problem of Hecate and her troupe of singing, dancing witches. It was at one time thought that they were inventions of Middleton, crudely interpolated into Shakespeare's Macbeth; more recently Brooke, for example, has argued that they could have appeared first in Macbeth, and later in Middleton's The Witch.

It may be suggested that the alien, Scottish dimension which was introduced with an eye to King James ended by providing Shakespeare or the theatre managers with an irresistible opportunity to put on the kind of spectacle that would help extended the play's profitable life – The spirits (Grey)malkin, Stadling, Puck, Hecate, Hellway and Hopper are taken directly from Reginald Scot, and the stage directions, common to Middleton's Witch and Macbeth, make it plain that the only real interest of interludes such as Act 3 Scene 5 is the machinery that allowed an illusion of flight to be mounted.

We may suspect that Hecate and her troupe also owe something to the success of the cauldron scene, for in the revised version of Macbeth the familiar cauldron is reprised with the return of Hecate and her followers. The language of the encore in bawdy and the ingredients of the brew are again taken from Reginald Scot:

4th WITCH Black spirits and white, red spirits and gray,
Mingle, mingle, mingle, you that mingle may
Titty, Tiffin, keep it stiff in,
Fiendrake, Puckey,[26] make it lucky,
Liard, Robin, you must bob in.[IV .i.44-8]

The most probable source of this is Chapter 33 of the Discoverie of Witchcraft, in which Scot attacks the credulity of Brian Darcy, the justice at the St Osyth witch trials of 1582: 'Brian Darcy's he-spirits and she-spirits, Tittie and Tiffin, Suckin and Pidgin, Liard and Robin, etc.: his white spirits and black spirits, gray spirits and red spirits ...

The point of his attack is that the testimony was given by 'lewd, miserable, and envious poor people ... old women, and children of the age of 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 or 9 years.[27] We do not need to know this, however, to doubt the seriousness with which Middleton (or the author) could expect us to take these witches. The rhythm and implicit timing of the material make it clear that this is farce - the scene is evidently intended to be played for laughs, with the Fourth Witch, who acts as head chef and master of ceremonies, posturing and holding her nose.

CHORUS OF WITCHES: Round, around, around, about, about,
All ill come running in, all good keep out.
5th WITCH: Here's the blood of a bat.
6th WITCH: Here's the lizzard's brain
4th WITCH: Put in a grain
5th WITCH: The juice of toad, the oil of adder
These will make the younker madder!
4th WITCH: Put in, there's all, and rid the stench
6th WITCH: Nay, here's three ounces of the red-haired wench[IV.i.49-56]

It is a surprising conclusion towards which we seem to be driven, that what the supernatural elements in the Tragedy of Macbeth may finally have contributed to The Witch, a Tragi-Comedy was – the comedy!

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Endnotes

[1] Differences of course existed between witchcraft practices in France, Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia; these are ignored for present purposes.

[2] The storm which impeded Anne's voyage was also felt severely in Scotland, and a passage-boat between Burntisland and Leith was lost: "... the vehement storm drave a ship upon the said boat, and drownit the gentlewoman [Lady Melville] and all the persons except twa.' This appears to be the boat lost between Kinghorn and Leith which was attributed in the trail of Agnes Sampson (and the Napier jury) to the activity of the North Berwick witches and their allies at Prestonpans.

[3] The witches were also accused of trying to have the king wrecked on the coast of England by raising a dense fog: John Fian confessed (Dittay item 8) that 'ane thing lyke to ane fute-ball, quhilk apperit to the said Johnne lyk a wisp' was thrown into the sea. There may be a link here with Montgomerie's *Flyting*: 'Nicnevin with hir nymph is... Quhais cunning consists in casting a clew'. The ritual of the 'wisp' or 'clew' appeared to be successful since 'The king and queen, with sundry of the nobility and blood-royal of Denmark, accompanied with sixty gentlemen - being seven great ships - convoyed by the grace of God through the great mist by the navy of England - arrivit in the firth of Leith.' (Chambers To. Hist.)

[4] Paul's The *Royal Play of Macbeth* is the most completely worked out version of this thesis. It may be compared with Clark's argument in *Murder under Trust* that the play was inspired by the Gowrie Conspiracy of 1601 rather than the Gunpowder Plot.

[5] "there met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world ... afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or fairies, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromantical science." [Holinshed Historie of Scotland. 170/2/52] Compare with "He sawe the Wemen by gangand; / And pai Wemen pan thowcht he/ Thre Werd Systrys mast lyk to be." [Andrew Wyntoun (ca.1424) Cronykil of Scotland IV .xviii. 18-20]

[6] As Alan Farrar reminded the Timisoara conference in 1993, Shakespeare's plays were intended to capture the interest of large audiences in large theatres. The witches in *Macbeth* provide a splendid excuse for thunder and lightning, flying effects, trapdoors and song-and-dance interludes.

[7] Malkin is a cat, also a lewd woman; perhaps this could rhotacise to merkin, so that Greymalkin would have something of the sense of 'Greybeard'?

[8] Agnes Sampson had a familiar spirit in the form of a dog called Elva (Dittay items 34,38) which may owe something to the account in Bodin's *Demonomanie* of the black dog that served Cornelius Agrippa. Certainly her attempted malefice towards David Seton (Dittay item 49) looks very like a rewriting of Bodin's account of Jeanne Harvillier in the introduction to *Demonomanie*.

With the passage of time familiar spirits of the kind usual in England were imported into Scottish witchcraft trials. For example at Paisley on 15 February 1678 Annabil Stuart (aged 14) said she had a spirit called Enippa which nipped her arm painfully when giving her the 'witch's mark'; she then named the familiars of the other accused - her mother, Janet Mathie, had a spirit called Landlady, Bessie Weir had a spirit called Sopha, Margaret Craigie's spirit was Rigerum and Margaret Jackson's was called Locas.
[9]. There is some uncertainty over the word 'aroint', which is unusual. Allowing that the manuscript 'r' and 'v' may easily be confused, the word is similar to the one attributed to John Fian in Newes from Scotland: 'Avoide, Satan, avoide!'

[10] E.A. Loomis argues that the fleet had a stormy passage, and (discounting the days of entering and leaving harbour) took 567 days - "Weary sev'n nights, nine times nine". The voyage of the Tiger started and ended in England, however, whereas the witch in Macbeth had to journey to Aleppo before she could begin counting off her 567 maleficient days.

[11] "I'll do, I'll do and I'll do ... I'll drain him dry as hay" If the witch is to act in this way, there is some indication e.g. in the Malleus maleficarum that to couple three times with a succubus would exhaust a man.

[12]. Transformation into a rat was not common in England, but rats featured conspicuously in Jonson's Masque of Queens (1609) where the coven of witches open the masque by appearing "some with rats on their head, some on their shoulders." There is no doubt that Jonson expected the significance of these rats to be understood: "I praescribed hem [the witches] theur properties ..." out of ancient and recent writers. see Meagher p.46

[13]. Jonson's gloss on this passage, presented to James's eldest son, Prince Henry, gives away the game: "The like illusion is of their fantasy, in sailing in egg shells, creeping through auger holes, and such like, so vulgar in their confession." is surely derived from Scott's "They an go in and out at awger holes, & sail in an eggge shell..." (Book I ch.14 p.6) But this is the one source that Jonson can not cite in a masque to be performed at Court, since James was so firmly opposed to Scot. See W. Todd Furniss 'The annotation of Jonson's Masque' Queens' Review of English Studies V, 20 (1954)

[14]. In Newes from Scotland the witches go out to sea to throw a cat into the water to raise storm; this is more dramatic than the original in the trial, in which the ditty indicates hat the cat thrown into the sea from the end of the pier - and promptly swam ashore again.

[15]. The passage 'Nicnave, as nurish, to teach it gart take it To saill sure in a seiff but ommasse or caert.' (Montgomery ca. 1585 Flying 447) may appear to echo the trial at St Andrews in 1569 of a notabill sorceres callit Nicnivene was condemnet to the death and brunt' (Historie ... of King James the Sextp.40) The 'sorceress' was 'Nicnivene', subsequently changing sex to become 'a notable sorcerer called Nic Neville' (Chambesp;60), or 'a fellow called Nick Niven, a notable witch'. Herries p.115. 'nic' is simply the feminine form of the Gaelic patronymic 'mac'. This simple interpretation also evaded Montague Summers, who was fascinated by 'Nicniven', seeing it as the witch's name bestowed by her on a demon. and 'Mow Nicniven is the Queen of Elphin, the Mistress of the Sabbat, and this office had evidently been filled by this witch whose real name is not recorded'. (Summers pp.7,80) See Alison Hanham 'The Scottish Hecate' (1969)

[16]. Echoes of the trial can be seen in King James' Daemonologie. For example the devil appears to tempt people who burn 'in a desprat desire of revenge ... he finds the time proper to discover himself unto them ... either upon their walking solitary in the fields, or else lying pansing in their bed ...'Daemonologie 2.II) and in the John Fian's Ditty we find ' ... quhen he was lyand in his bed ... mwsand and pansand, how he might be revengit'. Similarly Daemonologie 2.III appears to owe a good deal to the account of a Sabbat in Agnes Sampson's Ditty; the latter link was perhaps first noted by Henry More in his 1726 edition of Glenville's Sadducismus Triumphatus pp 396-399.

[17]. James was clearly very angry with the jury that acquitted Barbara of planning the king's death, finding her guilty of the lesser charges only; and he was sceptical of her plea of pregnancy – in a letter to John Maitland, Lord Thirlstane, King James wrote: 'Chancellor ... Try, by the mediciners' oaths, if Barbara Napier be with bairn or not. Take no delaying answer. If ye find she be not, to the fire with her presently and cause [dism]bowl her publicly ... James R' (holograph Spring 1591, Akrigg pp.112-5) It may put King James' attitude into perspective to observe that the paragraph dealing with the trial of the witches comes at the end of a letter mostly concerned with his parlous financial position, the kitchen staff who had decamped leaving the cook and his boy to prepare dinner, and the problem of getting Bothwell into exile without disgrace. An account of the king's speech to the jury accused of bringing in the wrong verdict was sent next day to Lord Burghley by Robert Bowes, English ambassador in Scotland. Calendar of the State Papers relating to Scotland 1589.93 (1936) pp 522-525 King James freed Barbara Napier eventually.

[18]. The importance attached by the inquisitors to three and its multiples is clear. At the Lammas Eve convention were 'assemblit nyne principalis' in one group beside the devil, separated from thirty inferior witches. Poison was to be prepared from a toad hanging by its heels 'thre nychtis, and dropit betuix thre oister schellis and nyne stonis, sottin thre nychtis (Ditty 7 June, 1591)

[19]. There is a kind of sexual ambiguity about the witches in Macbeth, as there is later when Lady Macbeth wishes to have the female aspects of her character removed; and the whiskers of the elderly were associated with witchcraft, as when Falstaff dresses up as a woman and Sir Hugh Evans says 'I think th'oman is a witch indeed. I like not when a 'oman has a great peard.' (Merry Wives IV ii.202-3)

[20]. Daemonologien 2,1- James was concerned to argue that since some of the witches were fat or corpulent, pleasure-seeking, sociable and merry they were not subject to the melancholic humour, and their confessions could not be dismissed as the mere 'melancholique imagination of simple raving creatures'. Bodin has a similar line of argument.

[21]. For a brief discussion of this woodcut see 'Notes on Collection and Research ...' by the editors of Scottish Studies 14 (1970) pp.189-191 It may be added that there is a distinct but hitherto unrecognised, similarity between the image of the 'cellar' in the woodcut and the picture by Jacques de Gheyn II 'Sorcerers at work in a vaulted cellar'.

[22]. There was more detail at the trial: The Dewill... ordenit hir and thame to hing, roist and drop ane taid, and to lay the droppis of the taed, mixt with strang wasch, ane edder-skyn and the thing in the forheid of ane newfoillit foll, in his hienes way... thair wes ane taid hingand be the heilis thre nychtis, and dropit betuix thre oister schellis and nyne stonis, sottin thre nychtis (Ditty of Barbara Napier's
[23]. 31 day toad, fillet of fen snake, eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, tongue of dc blood of bat, adder's fork, blindworm's sting, lizard's leg, howlet's wing, scale of dragon, tooth of wolf, witch's mummy, shark's maw & gulf, root of hemlock, liver of Jew, gall of goat, slips of yew, nose of Turk, Tartar's lips, finger of unbaptised babe, tiger's chawdron, baboon's blood.

[24]. And suerlie herevpon had he put Makduffe to death, but that a certeine witch, whom hee had in great trust, had told that he should never be slaine with man borne of anie woman nor vanquished till the wood of Bername came to the castell of Dunsinane. ' [Holinshed Historie of Scotland174/2/4]

[25]. There is also an overlap with the celebrated Biblical episode where Saul consults the witch of En-dor (1 Sam.28) King James refers to this as '... Saul being troubled in spirit being come to a woman that was bruted to have such knowledge, and that to inquire important news, he having so guiltie a conscience for his hainous offences, and specially, for that same vnlawful curiositie, and horrible defection ... ' (Daemonologie 1,1)

[26]. Brooke notes that Firedrake is "not mentioned in ... Scot" and Puckey is "Possibly confused with Pygin in Record (Pidgin in Scot)." It would seem that he overlooked the list in Scot which includes "...the fierdrake, the puckle..." (VII,xv)

[27]. When we know that Ursula Kemp was hanged on the evidence of her eight year old son that she had four familiars - Titty, like a little grey cat, and so on; we may perhaps wonder whether 'Titty' really refers to the witch's teat, or whether it was simply a child's pronunciation of 'kitty', the diminutive of kitten.

Return to Beginning

Abstract: The witches in Shakespeare’s Macbeth equivocate between the demons of random malevolence and ordinary (if exceptionally nasty) old women; and both King James I, whose book on witchcraft may have influenced Shakespeare, and A. W. Schlegel, whose essay on Macbeth certainly influenced Verdi, also stress this ambiguity. In his treatment of Lady Macbeth, Verdi uses certain musical patterns associated with the witches; and like the witches, who sound sometimes tame and frivolous, sometimes like incarnations of supernatural evil, Lady Macbeth hovers insecurely between roles: she is a hybrid of The play is called Macbeth and was first performed in the summer of 1606 with James and the visiting king of Denmark in attendance. The play was written by Shakespeare in thought to please King James and account for the prominence of witchcraft in Macbeth. In that time witches were feared by the less educated people. No one wanted to spread of witch's they thought that witches use accusations of witchcraft as a way to get rid of political enemies. In the play Macbeth there were a couple people that influenced Macbeth to do the bad things or things that he did to become King and to stay King.