Scene 3 (I iii)

(I iii 2) Thunder. Not yet. The witches have to trigger their charm (line 40) before the thunderstorm starts.

(I iii 2) Enter the three Witches. This "the" implies that we have met the witches before; that is, it implies the existence of scene 1. To understand the beginning of the present scene, however, we have to forget scene 1: we have to imagine that we are meeting the witches for the first time.

Here they come. The king and his entourage having made a dignified exit, three actors dressed as crazy old women -- "withered and wild in their attire" -- come bounding onto the stage, each from a different direction. We laugh: we are meant to laugh.

Who are they? Folio's stage-directions consistently call them witches, and that is what they seem to be -- old women who have lost any husbands or children or other relations that they might once have had, and who have sold their souls to the devil in return for the ability to revenge themselves on their neighbours for real or imagined insults. These three have made themselves a home together, in a hovel or cave (where Macbeth will come looking for them in scene 20), in some remote spot.

They are certainly possessed of occult powers. They have knowledge which three old women living in the middle of nowhere would not be expected to have. They can control the weather, conjuring up winds and thunderstorms at will. It is questionable whether the powers that they possess are just the powers possessed by every witch, or whether these three are especially gifted. Perhaps thay are not witches at all, even if that is what they look like? They speak of themselves as the weyard sisters (line 35);* Banquo and Macbeth, unprompted, call them by that name (and Macbeth's attendant in scene 20 understands what he means by it). Might any witches call themselves or be called that, or does the name apply exclusively to these three? The point is left in doubt.

* In Holinshed the word is "weird" -- "the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie" (1587:171a) -- and that is one syllable. Not having met the word before, Shakespeare read it as two syllables and spelt it "weyard" (or "weyward"). I think we have to do the same. A modern audience will be familiar with the word "weird" and will expect it to be treated as a monosyllable: they are right (as any rhyming dictionary will confirm), and it makes no sense

to try to tell them that they are wrong. (Theobald (1733:392-3) hoped to split the difference by adding an extra dot over the "i"; but that is not going to work. The word "weïrd" did not exist till he dreamed it up: it has never been a real word.)

There is, however, not the slightest doubt about their being malevolent. They use their powers to bring about the destruction of some chosen victim. And the victim they have their eyes on at the moment is ... Macbeth.

We become acquainted with them, little by little, over the space of 28 lines. At first sight, they are purely comic -- three men in drag, making fools of themselves. They start to speak -- and of course they speak in prose. What else would we expect? They are comedians: like the porter in scene 10, witches are sure to speak in prose.

But then something strange starts to happen. First Witch has a story that she wants to tell us, about her squabble with a sailor's wife -- and she tells this silly story in the language of tragedy. Incongruously, with the line "A sailor's wife ...", she starts to speak blank verse:

ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum

A little later, with the line "But in a ship ...", she shortens the line to eight syllables:

ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum

And immediately after that, with "And like a rat ...", she starts to rhyme her lines, two by two:

ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum)
ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum)

Finally, with "And the very ports ...", she loses one more syllable, from the beginning of the line,* and starts talking like this:

tum ti tum ti tum ti tum)
tum ti tum ti tum ti tum)

And from this point onwards, that is how the witches usually talk. That is what I call witchspeak.†

* That is what gives the lines a trochaic, not iambic rhythm, if one wants to use those terms.

† Though not necessarily sinister, witchspeak has a rhythm which is meant to sound unearthly. The same metre is used sporadically by the

fairies in A midsummer night's dream -- e.g. for Oberon's spells "What thou see'st when thou dost wake" (II.ii), "Flower of this purple dye" (III.ii), "Be as thou wast wont to be" (IV.i). Likewise in Ariel's song in The Tempest, "Where the bee sucks, there suck I" (V.i).

Meanwhile we learn what First Witch has on her mind. She intends to get her own back, not on the sailor's wife, but on the sailor himself. The unfortunate man has done nothing to provoke the witch's resentment; he cannot know that his wife has hurt the witch's feelings; and yet he is to be persecuted mercilessly, week after week, to satisfy the witch's thirst for revenge. By this time, we have stopped laughing: we are wishing we had never laughed, hoping that the witches did not see us laughing. The witches have transformed themselves from figures of fun into monsters of malevolence. If they look at us, we shiver.

That is the metamorphosis which we are supposed to see happening in the first 28 lines of this scene. How successfully it is brought off will depend on the actors, and chiefly on First Witch; Shakespeare has provided the material for them to work with.

The effect is all lost, the effort is all wasted, if we have already met the witches, if we have already heard them talking witchspeak, in a previous scene. Worse, if the weyard sisters who departed at the end of scene 1 reappear as the witches at the start of scene 3, the audience can be forgiven for feeling baffled. That is my reason for thinking that scene 1 is an addition, not part of the play as it was originally written and performed; and I draw the lesson that something has to give. Either we omit scene 1; or else we omit the whole of this passage, lines 3-28.

(I iii 10) ... to Aleppo gone, ... Shakespeare's Aleppo is a port. The real place is some 60 miles from the sea. We are not supposed to fret about details like that.

(I iii 29) Look what I have. Why the digression? Why do we need to be told about the pilot's thumb? Would it not be more effective if "tempest-tossed" were followed immediately by the sound of the drum?

It is conceivable, I think, that Folio is offering us a choice between two alternative beginnings for this scene. Option 1 (lines 3-28) is the original beginning, the one where we meet the witches for the first time. When scene 1 was added, Option 2 (lines 29-32) -- reintroducing us briefly to characters that we have met before -- was

(hypothetically) substituted for Option 1.

(I iii 30) Show me, ... Folio gives the line to Second Witch. If it were up to me, I would give it half to Second and half to Third.

(I iii 32) Drum within. The drum signifies an army on the march, just out of sight of the audience. In this instance it denotes the approach of the Scottish army, marching back towards Forres after their double victory. At this point the army is still some distance away: the drum should only just be audible.

(I iii 33-4) A drum, ... Here again, I would be inclined to divide the line as Folio does, to share it between Second and Third.

(I iii 35) The weyard sisters ... As soon as they hear the drum, the witches spring into action. They start winding up a spell, which apparently takes the form of some complicated three-ply knot. Some choreography is needed here, to accord with what they say -- "hand in hand", "about, about". One acting edition has this:

> The Witches join hands and turn whilst they repeat these lines; they continue turning, until the second gets into the centre, facing the audience; she then bends her head thrice over the hands of the other two, and speaks; after which the third and first do the same, and part hands as they retire to the right. (Cumberland 1827:14)

(I iii 38-9) Thrice to thine ... The actors tended to think that these lines should be distributed among the witches. I think they were right: "thine" and "mine" should surely be spoken by one witch to another, not by all three together. In Kemble's script -- almost the same as in Lee's (1753:6) -- the lines are arranged like this:

> *2 Witch.* Thrice to thine, ---
> *3 Witch.* And thrice to mine, ---
> *1 Witch.* And thrice again, ---
> *All.* To make up nine. (Kemble 1794:9)

What arrangement works best will depend on the choreography.

(I iii 40) Peace, ... Kemble, like Lee, gave this line to First Witch -- rightly, I should think.

The army is now close by, and the witches trigger their spell. Whatever it was that they were tangling up, all of a

sudden they disentangle it now. The magical energy that they have injected into it is released. A violent thunderstorm erupts. (Now is the time for thunder, not at the beginning of the scene. The SFX department needs to make all the noise it can.) The marching soldiers (we imagine) break ranks and run for cover, and -- as fate would have it -- the commanding officers take refuge in the witches' cave.

What happens here is known to them alone. The witches have arranged things so that they can have a private conversation with Macbeth, overheard only by Banquo, and a private conversation with Banquo, overheard only by Macbeth. That is what the thunderstorm is for. Those editors who introduced other characters -- "with Soldiers and other Attendants" (Rowe 1709:2304), "Soldiers, and Others, at a Distance" (Capell 1768:7) -- were seriously missing the point.*

* Acting editions used to make the same mistake, on a spectacular scale. This is from Kemble's script (1794:9): "*A March. / Enter Macbeth, Banquo and the Army. / Mac.* Command they make a halt upon the heath. / *Within.* -- Halt, Halt." (The line given to Macbeth is from Davenant's play, not Shakespeare's.)

(I iii 41) Enter ... Macbeth and Banquo, entering in a hurry, brushing the rain off their cloaks, have reached the centre of the stage before they become aware of the witches' presence. (Perhaps the witches had each run off in a different direction as they released their spell.)

(I iii 42) So foul ... Meaning simply "I have never known the weather to change so suddenly!"

(I iii 43) How far is it called to Forres? "How much further have we got to go?" The name Forres occurs just this once; it counts as two syllables. This is the modern spelling. It is "Fores" in Holinshed: the encounter with the witches occurred, we are told, "as Makbeth and Banquho iournied towards Fores, where the king then laie" (Holinshed 1587:170b). Folio has "Soris"; Pope (1723:522) corrected that to "Foris". Since Holinshed's "F" is not likely to be misread as an "S", I take it that this is someone else's mistake (copyist's or printer's), not Shakespeare's; so I agree that it ought to be put right.

But this is an exception to the rule. There are some names and words which Shakespeare knew only as he found them printed -- and sometimes this meant that he mispronounced them: "Banquo" pronounced "bank-wo" instead of "Banquho"

pronounced "ban-hhwo",* "Glamis" as two syllables, "Scone" rhyming with "one", "Dunsinane" stressed on the first syllable, "Seyward" instead of "Siward", "weyard" as two syllables (see above). But after all the play is not a history, nor a lesson in geography. The world in which it takes place is a world imagined by Shakespeare, not the real one: so it is not really up to us to correct his spelling or pronunciation for him.

* Banquo was the thane of Lochquhaber (Holinshed 1587:168b). I do not know how Shakespeare would have thought of pronouncing that. Perhaps Shakespeare did not know either.

(I iii 43) What are these ... Rather than letting Banquo interrupt himself, I think the speech-prefix "Macb." should be inserted at this point (and deleted from line 52).

It is axiomatic, I suppose, that we have to try to see the play through the eyes of an audience who are seeing it for the first time. That is, we have to forget that we have seen the play before; moment by moment, we can never be quite certain what is going to happen next.

Two characters appear on the stage. We do not know them. From the way that they are dressed, we can tell that they are high-ranking military officers: if we were not too perplexed by the preceding scene, we will understand that these are the commanders of the king's army, and that their names are Macbeth and Banquo (I ii 40-1). (Macbeth's name has been mentioned a few times already, Banquo's only that once.) Without some help from the author, however, we have no way of knowing which is which.

If X has a line -- Y has a line -- X has a speech -- we will realize, without even having to think about it, that X is Macbeth. That is my arrangement. If X has a line -- Y has a speech -- we will be puzzled as to who is who. We will not be able to recognize that X is Macbeth until the witches speak to him. That is Folio's arrangement -- and I say flatly that it is wrong.

Not just here. All the way through, it is easy to see how a speech-prefix might be omitted, almost as easy to see how one might become misplaced. As I see it, the prefixes are the editor's personal responsibility. The fact that Folio gets most of them right is neither here nor there. How could it fail to do that? It is the editor's job to make sure that all of them are right.*

* A remark of Pope's -- "that had all the Speeches been printed

without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have apply'd them with certainty to every speaker" (Pope 1723 1:iii) -- is a huge exaggeration, but it is not altogether untrue. Reading the text to ourselves, we have to try to listen to the voices in our heads.

(I iii 52) Speak if you can. This is where Folio wants to put the prefix "Macb.": the preceding lines are all still governed by the prefix "Banq." at line 43. As I have said, I do not see how that can be right. Why would Shakespeare write a speech for Banquo if he did not intend to let the witches answer? That serves no purpose -- except to mystify the audience. As I understand it, Shakespeare's intention was perfectly straightforward. Macbeth speaks to the witches (lines 43-52) and they reply to him (lines 53-5). Then Banquo speak to the witches (lines 57-66) and they reply to him (lines 67-72).

(I iii 53) All hail, ... In speaking to Macbeth the witches use blank verse -- for no reason, I think, except that there are not enough syllables in a line of witchspeak for what they want to say.

The witches speak in turn, as they usually do; they have just one line each. The first line proves only that they know who Macbeth is -- which is surprising, but not vastly so. The second and third lines, if they have any truth in them, can only be predictions. They seem to mean that Macbeth will become thane of Cawdor -- which has already been decided, as we know, and the witches know, but Macbeth and Banquo do not -- and that he will become king one day. His reaction is described by Banquo (I iii 56-7), who does not understand why Macbeth is so startled. The witches understand. They know that the thought of killing the king to make himself king is already on his mind. They know that he has been hesitating, and that this prediction of theirs will be just enough to tip him over the edge. They do not tell him that he has to commit murder to make the prediction come true. They do not tell him to do anything. He has to make the decision for himself. And they know him well enough to know that he will make it.

(I iii 57) In the name of truth, ... Now the time has come for Banquo to talk to the witches.

(I iii 67-72) Hail! Here again, the witches take it in turn to speak. (The printer understands that this is what they should do. Even when the speech consists of just one word, he gives it a line to itself.)

(I iii 70-2) Lesser than Macbeth, ... In talking to Banquo the witches revert to witchspeak. They have only one prediction for him, but they deliver it three times -- cryptically twice, and then in so many words. He will not become king himself, they say, but his descendants will.

Though Macbeth may not register the fact straight away, there is an implicit prediction here for him as well. In the long run, it is Macbeth who will be "lesser", Macbeth who will be "not so happy". He will be king, but his descendants will not be. The witches want him to realize that -- which is why they have arranged to meet Macbeth and Banquo together.

(I iii 73-4) So all hail, ... "These two verses should be pronounced by [the three witches] in chorus" (Lettsom in Dyce 1866:76). I agree.

(I iii 75) Stay, ... The witches start to move away. Macbeth tries to call them back, but they do not listen. They have said what they wanted to say, done the mischief that they wanted to do.

(I iii 76) By Sinel's death ... Macbeth had only recently succeeded to the thanedom of Glamis "by the death of his father Sinell" (Holinshed 1587:170b). The audience will not have the slightest idea what he means.* They just need to get the point that the witches are right about this.

* I think the actor is allowed to mumble slightly. There is some risk of these words being mistaken for an oath like "By Grabthar's hammer!"

(I iii 84) Witches vanish. Nothing that Macbeth can say makes any impression on the witches. Folio calls for them to "vanish" at this point; Banquo uses the same word. I am not sure how that would have been contrived on Shakespeare's stage.

(I iii 90) Were such things here ... As they recover from the surprise of this encounter with the witches, Macbeth and Banquo begin to laugh about it. How can three crazy old women living in the middle of nowhere possibly know such things? Their predictions are all equally absurd. Macbeth and Banquo are still laughing when Ross and Angus arrive.

(I iii 97) Enter ... The thunderstorm has blown itself out by now, and the army (we suppose) is getting back into line, ready to resume its march. The two lords whom we saw departing from Forres at the end of scene 2 have now arrived, looking for Macbeth. Someone points them in the

right direction. On entering at just this moment, they take it in turns to speak to Macbeth. Neither says a word to Banquo, but presumably they do shake hands with him, or something of the sort.

(I iii 116) In which addition ... It is important for the audience to understand that Macbeth is being promoted. His new title is of higher status than his old one. If "thane of Glamis" is like an earldom, "thane of Cawdor" is like a dukedom. But those terms were not available to Shakespeare. Because the point cannot be made verbally, it has to be made visually. There ought to be some insignia to go with the title, given by the king to Ross at the end of the previous scene, now given by Ross to Macbeth. Hunter (1845:153-4) thought that "borrowed robes" (I iii 120) was to be be taken literally -- that Ross should drape a robe around Macbeth's shoulders. I doubt whether that is a good idea, but there are other possibilities. Perhaps Macbeth is given a new coronet? Or a new sword? Or (what I would choose if the choice were mine) a new chain to wear around his neck, on top of one which he is already wearing, the new one visibly fancier than the old one. The actors will need to think about this and discuss it with the costume department.

(I iii 118) What, can the devil ... Taken by surprise, Banquo blurts out these words, but he speaks under his breath -- to Macbeth or to himself. (Ross and Angus do not hear this exclamation: if they did they would be sure to ask what it meant.) Instantly, silently -- they exchange glances, no doubt, but nothing more -- Macbeth and Banquo agree that their encounter with the witches is to be kept a secret between them. During the rest of this scene, not counting the time when Macbeth is talking to himself, we see this tacit agreement taking effect. Some of the time, Macbeth and Banquo are talking openly with Ross and Angus; some of the time, they are talking confidentially -- almost conspiratorially -- with one another. (A similar effect is used in scene 19, where passages spoken loudly alternate with passages spoken quietly.)

(I iii 121) Who was the thane ... As far as Ross and Angus know, the ex-thane of Cawdor is still alive at this point. (The execution will presumably take place at dawn tomorrow; that is no concern of theirs.) In scene 2, when the king made his announcement of Cawdor's treachery, neither Ross nor Angus was present (they did not enter till afterwards); so they cannot say exactly what Cawdor's crime was. (This is Angus speaking, but Ross is equally ignorant: he would interrupt if he knew more.) If Macbeth wants to learn the

details, he will be able to ask as many questions as he likes when they reach Forres; Angus's report is good enough for us. Shakespeare does not want us to be burdened with irrelevant information.

(I iii 142) Cousins, a word, ... Banquo decides that he has something to discuss with Ross and Angus. As he retires to the back of the stage, he becomes inaudible. (Something similar happens at the end of the next scene.) I am not sure what the topic might be (only that it has nothing to do with the witches). Perhaps they are considering what to have for supper. Perhaps they are going to look at a map and decide on the best line of march. Whatever they find to talk about, Macbeth needs to be left alone, so that he can soliloquize.

(I iii 148-9) If ill, why ... Banquo told him the answer to this question, just 10 lines before. Macbeth was not listening.

(I iii 159-65) Look how our partner's ... Banquo has run out of things to say to Ross and Angus. He can see that they are beginning to wonder why Macbeth has gone into a reverie. Since he cannot ignore it any longer, he makes some apology for it. (Shakespeare has an interesting effect here. These lines of Banquo's, spoken to Ross and Angus, alternate with the last few lines of Macbeth's soliloquy. Twice he completes a line of Macbeth's, even though he cannot hear what Macbeth is saying. Conversely Macbeth completes a line of Banquo's, even though he has not been listening.)

(I iii 160-2) If chance ... Just for one moment, Macbeth pulls back from the brink. The witches told him that he would be king one day. They did not tell him that he had to commit murder to make the prediction come true. Why not just leave it to chance? Good advice. But if Macbeth had taken it, we would not have the play.

(I iii 171) ... with things forgotten. "Things so inconsequential that I can't remember what they were."

(I iii 181) Exeunt. The drum starts up again and the army resumes its march.

That same evening, further down the road, they camp for the night. Macbeth has the opportunity to write a letter to his wife. (When we meet Macbeth's wife for the first time, at the beginning of scene 5, she has this letter in her hand.) He shares the secret with her. He tells her (perhaps in

some coded language that only she will understand) that he is now fully determined to murder Duncan. He thinks it a safe assumption that he will be chosen as the next king -- provided that he is not thought guilty of the murder. He needs to contrive an opportunity for killing Duncan without bringing any suspicion on himself. He does not know, when he writes this letter, that the opportunity is about to present itself. His wife does not know, when she reads the letter, that the opportunity is about to arrive on her doorstep.

At an early hour, letting the army follow at its own speed, Macbeth and Banquo set out for Forres, still accompanied by Ross and Angus. In the next scene we see the four of them arrive.

C.F. Jan 2026