

Shakespeare's Bewitching Line

In the prefatory material to the First Folio (1623), Ben Jonson praised Shakespeare with a phrase too fitting to be fitting. Shakespeare's lines, he wrote, were 'richly spun, and woven so fit' (49).¹ This makes Shakespeare into, or out to be, a labourer warping and wefting in a tapestry workshop – a description perhaps too artisanal and banal for an encomium (of sorts). Jonson moves over his own verse line to arrive at a more evocative criticism: that Shakespeare writes a 'living line' (59), transforming 'spun' from the tedious routines of a weaver into the alacritous activity of a spider or bug. The textile Shakespeare, weaving 'so fit', becomes a textual Shakespeare. Jonson's line even picks up a thread from Shakespeare's, since in *Henry VIII, or All is True* (1613) the Cardinal Wolsey thrives in 'his self-drawing web' (1.1.63), forever creating the contours of his own power and abundance, at once an act of imaginative range and limitation.

Hugh Holland connected Shakespeare's 'lines' with 'life' in another poem for the Folio, 'Upon the Lines and Life of the Famous Scenic Poet, Master William Shakespeare' – concluding 'For though his line of life went soon about, / The life yet of his lines shall never out' (13-14). In some respects, this language is conventional. Poems (or verse) are referred to as 'lines' throughout the English Renaissance and beyond. Like Jonson's poem, Holland's can be an endearing tribute to Shakespeare's enduring work (or, like Jonson's poem, it can have a sharper edge). Yet it also hints at an undead Shakespeare who cannot or will not perish because, somehow, of his prosodic aptitude. It is as though the versification of Shakespeare's lines will keep him alive, fending off death with supernatural tenacity; the lines assume an apotropaic quality rather than simply shuttling information from one location to another. These verse lines become strange participants in their meaning.

¹ All references to prefatory material in the First Folio correspond to *The Norton Facsimile of the First Folio of Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Charlton Hinman and Peter W.M. Blayney (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996).

When Macbeth asks ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee’ (2.1.33-4), the relationship between the dagger, Macbeth’s hand and Macbeth’s verse lines is thickly imbricated. Does Macbeth reach for the dagger and the verse line reach with him, much as the ‘*handle*’ of the dagger and the ‘*hand*’ of Macbeth seem snugly, dangerously identical? Or is it the other way around: does the verse line reach Macbeth’s hand out for him? Is the dagger a metaphor for the verse line, part of Wallace Stevens’s ‘strange rhetoric’ of analogy between ‘nature and the imagination’?² Actors often encounter the final two syllables of the line as extraneously physical, pushing at the edge of the pentameter with the possibility of a feminine ending. Both Ian McKellen (1978-9) and Patrick Stewart (2010) only properly reached for the dagger on the words ‘clutch thee’, taking this as Shakespeare’s imperative instruction to the players. Once we start thinking about the verse line’s contribution to its own meaning, it is difficult not to find Shakespeare’s prosody somewhat eerie, as the Victorians often did, fearing it ‘a form that could control you without your knowledge’.³

Renaissance prosodists were also uneasy about certain kinds of verse. They seem especially disturbed by lines with an odd number of syllables. These lines appeared to them to have incomplete prosodic feet, as though anatomically mangled. Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe compare seven-syllable lines to a hobbling brewer’s cart and a butterwoman’s ‘rank’ to market, phrases Rosaline and Celia invoke or pre-empt when discussing Orlando’s seven-syllable love poetry in *As You Like It* (3.2.92-4, 160-1).⁴ If we see or hear Orlando’s seven-syllable lines ending with an incomplete foot (rather than regarding them as headless or catalectic), then they can easily be figured as stumbling, lame and deformed. The line is not just numerically or syllabically uneven; for the Renaissance prosodists, at least, it is physically unstable too.

² Wallace Stevens, ‘Effects of Analogy’ pp.107-130 in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on reality and the imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p.118.

³ Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.20.

⁴ Thomas Nashe, *Strange News* (London: n.p., 1592), D2v. For discussion of Shakespeare’s local debt to Nashe, see *As You Like It*, ed. H.J. Oliver (London: Penguin, 1968), p.168. Ben Jonson, *Ben Jonson’s Timber or Discoveries*, ed. Ralph S. Walker (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), p.102.

One of those prosodists, George Puttenham, reckoned that seven-syllable lines could be excused if ‘slid away with a flat accent’ (i.e. if the stress falls on the penultimate syllable of the line) – so that the lines move like limbless reptiles, unable to walk on their metrical feet.⁵ Although he preferred ‘even-footed verse’, William Scott thought that odd-syllabled lines could be remedied if ‘pressed down’ (stressed) since thereby the reader could imagine the line rectified with a closing unstress and a full foot.⁶ In a language which relies upon disyllabic feet (if English relies upon feet at all), odd-syllabled metres leave a syllable dangling redundantly, sometimes disturbingly, at the end of a verse line.

As one of Raymond Williams’s ‘key words’, ‘form’ was ‘a visible or outward shape, with a strong sense of the physical body’ – of what we call ‘the human form’.⁷ Prosodic forms have always had kinship with the body – a verse line is made up of feet, fingers (the etymology of ‘dactyl’), and the ‘breathing space’ of caesura.⁸ These anatomical attributes afford the verse line, in Puttenham’s terminology, an *energia* (vividness) as well as a more static *enargeia* (grace).⁹ Odd-syllabled lines provoke Renaissance unease because of their deformed form, but also because that physical deformation might deform the meaning a verse line can be said not only to transport but to constitute.

If they can countenance the possibility of an odd-syllabled line (George Gascoigne, among others, doesn’t) then Renaissance prosodists read them with their senses in revolt. William Webbe briefly contemplated an odd-syllabled verse (a nine-syllable metre) before dismissing it as synaesthetically ‘rough’.¹⁰ Puttenham’s palate could ‘find no savour in a metre of three syllables nor in effect in any odd’.¹¹ Shakespeare may have known about the prosodists’

⁵ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy* (1588), ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne Rebhorn (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p.160.

⁶ William Scott, *The Model of Poesy* (1599), ed. Gavin Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 60.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Flamingo, 1983), p.138.

⁸ Puttenham pp.163-5; the phrase is originally Philip Sidney’s – see *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), pp.212-250 in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.248.

⁹ Puttenham, p.227.

¹⁰ William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586), ed. Edmund Arber (London: A. Constable & Co, 1870), p59.

¹¹ Puttenham, p.160.

disdain. As we have seen, Orlando's execrable love poetry – so wooden as to be indistinguishable from the trees it garlands – is almost entirely in seven-syllable lines, as is Claudio's dubious epitaph for Hero at the start of *Much Ado About Nothing* 5.3. 'The Phoenix and Turtle', a poem that makes much of its 'defunctive music' (14), is also rendered in seven-syllable lines.

Shakespeare's witches are forever speaking in seven-syllable lines, in which the final, half-formed feet strike the ear like thunder and lightning: 'When shall we three meet **again?**' (1.1.1), 'When the hurly-burly's **done** / When the battle's lost and **won**' (3-4), 'Fair is foul and foul is **fair**' (10). Critics are always attempting to resolve the lines – in Hamlet's sense of 'melt, / Thaw, and *resolve* itself into a dew' (1.2.129-130) – by reading them as trochaic tetrameter, perhaps because a seven-syllable line still perturbs us. 'The speeches of the three weird sisters are prevailingly tetrameter', writes D.L. Chambers.¹² George T. Wright finds tetrameter the 'signal' verse line of Shakespeare's witches and fairies.¹³ While not entirely untrue – there is a trochaic beat through some of the lines, so it is possible to read them as headless – it is not their 'prevailing' or 'signal' feature. If it was, we could reasonably expect the lines to have eight syllables most of the time. Yet the witches speak more seven-syllable lines than all other lengths of line put together, and more than double the number of octosyllabic lines (most of which are under authorial dispute – see pp.00-00). These critical resolutions tend to 'supplement' the seven-syllable line – not only to afford it an extra syllable, to 'resolve' it in the sense given above, but also, in Derrida's notion of 'the supplement', to 'add only to replace', to add a syllable in order to replace the seven-syllable line with a markedly different kind of verse (tetrameter).¹⁴ In his seven-syllable lines, as opposed to his tetrameter lines, Shakespeare stresses the length of the line above the stresses of the line; he here prioritises a syllabic above an accentual prosody. What

¹² David Chambers, *The Metre of Macbeth: its relation to Shakespeare's earlier and later work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1903), p.11.

¹³ George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.114.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.144.

matters most in the seven-syllable line, at least, is its form and shape – or, rather, its putative formlessness and shapelessness.

The seven-syllable lines in *Macbeth* are a metrical version of the deformity they render, where syllable counting is less important than the gruesome shape made during (and by) the counting. These lines are not ‘about something’ (as Beckett wrote of Joyce); they almost *are* ‘that something itself’.¹⁵ For all Renaissance observers – from the sceptical Reginald Scot (witches are ‘lean and deformed’)¹⁶ to the assured accusers (‘upon her left side near her arm was a little lump like a wart’)¹⁷ – agreed that the witch was deformed. Witches were not only deformed in themselves; they were the cause of deformation in others. Children’s hands were ‘turned where the backs should be, and the back in the place of the palms’.¹⁸ Witches ‘pinch’ and ‘pull [into] pieces’.¹⁹ In one account, they fold the tongue of their victim.²⁰ It seems fitting, then, to communicate the deformation and deformations of the witches through a supposedly deformed verse line, a verse line that never seemed to ‘fit’. In the seven-syllable lines of *Macbeth* we sense (what Walter Pater called) ‘the great, irregular art of Shakespeare’.²¹ We sense, too, what he can do with verse form when he is nudging or yanking at its edges, or challenging it altogether.

Why should *Macbeth* be so full of seven-syllable lines, lines that are a little empty, one syllable short of a disyllabic foot? Or, looked at the other way around, why should *Macbeth* be full of supererogatory lines, with one syllable too many, as though suffering from a syllabic abscess? The answer originates in the play’s patronage. *Macbeth* is generally thought to have been

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, ‘Dante...Bruno...Vico...Joyce’ (1929) in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), pp.26-7.

¹⁶ Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London: n.p., 1584), p.5.

¹⁷ Unknown authors, *Depositions from The Castle of York, Relating to Offences Committed in the Northern Counties in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. James Raine (London: Surtees Society, 1861), p.30.

¹⁸ Unknown author, ‘A true and just Recorde, of the Information, Examination and Confession of all the Witches, taken at S. Osses in the countie of Essex; whereof some were executed, and other some entreated according to the determination of lawe. Wherein all men may see what a pestilent people Witches are, and how unworthy to lyue in a Christian Commonwealth. Written orderly, as the courses were tryed by evidence, By W.W. 1582’ and ‘A most Wicked worke of a wretched Witch’ (1592-3) in *Witchcraft in England 1558-1618*, ed. Barbara Rosen (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969), p.107.

¹⁹ *Depositions* p.82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.72.

performed before King James, where Shakespeare struck an uneasy congruence between his seven-syllable line and the Stuarts' dynastic line. In 1584, aged eighteen, James had written a dialect treatise about prosody: *Ane Schort Treatise conteining some reulis and cautelis to be obseruit and eschewit in Scottis Poesie*. The treatise was reissued with other of James's works when he came to the English throne in 1603. In it, he warned poets about odd-syllabled lines. 'Always take heed', he cautions, 'that the number of your feet [syllables] in every line, be even, and not odd: as four, six, eight or ten and not three, five, seven or nine'.²² He excepts the use of odd-syllabled lines for what he calls 'broken verse', which is 'daily invented by diverse poets'.²³ He sustained his prosodical interests; we have records of James pronouncing on psalmody at the 1601 General Assembly of the Kirk and discussing poetic metre in a private audience with William Alexander in 1617.²⁴

Despite his exclusion from Gavin Alexander's anthology of Renaissance literary criticism, King James is one of the few Renaissance prosodists we can reasonably suppose Shakespeare and other writers might have read (if only through obligation or opportunism). John Donne wrote for many (as well as himself) when he claimed that James was entering into 'a conversation' with his writer-subjects.²⁵ Gabriel Harvey 'praised James as a David-like figure'.²⁶ A couplet attributed to Richard Barnfield celebrates how 'The King of Scots now living is a Poet'.²⁷ There is evidence that English Renaissance writers knew of, or knew, the *Schort Treatise*. Francis Meres calls the king a 'favourer of poets',²⁸ Francis Bacon flatters James's literary knowledge in

²² King James VI of Scotland, *Ane Schort Treatise, conteining some reulis and cautelis to be obseruit and eschewit in Scottis Poesie* in *Ancient Critical Essays upon English Poets and Poesy*, 2 vols., vol. 2, ed. Joseph Haslewood (London: T. Bensley, 1815), p.106.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King: A Life of James VI & I* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p.203; Jane Rickard, *Writing the Monarch in Jacobean England: Jonson, Donne, Shakespeare and the Works of King James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.41.

²⁵ John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr* (London: Walter Burre, 1610), sig. A3r.

²⁶ Rickard, p.25. See Gabriel Harvey, *Pierces Supererogation* (London: John Wolfe, 1593), p.53.

²⁷ Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury* (London: Cuthbert Burbie, 1598), sig. Oo4v.

²⁸ Meres, p.284.

The Advancement of Learning (1605),²⁹ and Samuel Daniel, who binds and presents his *Defence of Rhyme* (1603) with a panegyric to the king, praises James's 'happy inclination' to discuss poetics and the place of 'rhyme in this kingdom'.³⁰ In a recent study Jane Rickard has demonstrated the wide range of allusive engagement between James and Shakespeare – from Shakespeare's references to James's poem *The Lepanto* (1591, reprinted 1603) in *Othello*, to a meditation upon 2 *Henry 4* in James's *Meditation upon Saint Matthew* (1620).³¹ Given all this, it seems at least plausible that Shakespeare knew (something of) James's *Schort Treatise*.

James's interest in witchcraft is much better known; Joyce called him a 'Scotch philosophaster with a turn for witch-roasting'.³² In 1597 James published the *Daemonologie* (inspired by 'The fearful abounding at this time in this country of these detestable slaves of the Devil, the witches or enchanterers') and introduced legislation to address English witchcraft in 1604. Shakespeare clearly responds to the King's interest in witchcraft with *Macbeth* (1606): some lines in the play indicate Shakespeare's close knowledge of the *Daemonologie*.³³

The seven-syllable line does double service to Shakespeare's king-patron by combining two of his preoccupations or pedantries. Macbeth straightaway refers to the witches as 'imperfect speakers' (1.3.68). The *OED* furnishes this instance within its fourth definition of 'imperfect': 'of persons in respect of imperfect or defective action or accomplishment'. This is correct: Macbeth thinks their speech defective because they stop speaking, and make him want to hear 'more' (68). But it is an imperfect example, too, since the speech of the witches is imperfect in two other senses. In a now obsolete implication, it is 'positively faulty, vicious, evil' (first usage 1377). It is also 'wanting some part or adjunct usually present [. . .] not fully formed, made, or done;

²⁹ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. William Aldis Wright (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p.3.

³⁰ Samuel Daniel, *Selected poetry and A defense of rhyme*, ed. Geoffrey G. Hiller and Peter L. Groves (Asheville: Pegasus Press, 1998), pp.198-9.

³¹ Rickard, pp.209-249.

³² James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. Declan Kibberd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.751-2.

³³ John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603-1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.16-17.

unfinished, incomplete; of less than the full amount' (first usage 1340). Like King James, Macbeth complains that the numerical unevenness of the witches' lines is part of their 'broken' physical deformity – they need one more or one fewer syllable to end on a full metrical foot. Just before Macbeth speaks, Banquo points out the witches' 'withered' bodies or attire (38), their 'choppy' fingers (42) and 'skinny lips' (43), as physical accompaniments to or reflections of their verse lines.

Shakespeare most often uses his seven-syllable lines in scenes of spoken supernatural action – the casting of spells, the application of curses and the incantation of magic. In *Macbeth*, for example, the witches use seven-syllable lines when plaguing the shipman's card (1.3.14-23), going about and about the sea and land (30-35), adding ingredients to the cauldron (4.1.1-38), opening locks without contact (61-3) and conjuring the show of kings (126-7). The seven-syllable line's deformity is also, therefore, its efficacy: by refusing the normalities or normativities of the body and the verse line, it attempts to be free of the line's physical constraints and move into movement (not an illusion of movement but 'the thing itself' (*King Lear* 3.5.97)). Strictly speaking, the attempt fails. Yet the seven-syllable line provokes these reflections in a way that other lines could not; that is, certain kinds of thought and association can only occur in and with certain lengths of verse line.

The seven-syllable lines are additionally eerie for their relationship to other verse lines, other bodies, other types of form. If verse lines are a little like our bodies, these deformed verse lines must be in a perverse proximity to us too. Since verse lines are also unlike our bodies, lacking some of the attributes that bodies have, it ought to follow that seven-syllable lines can be kept at the safe distance proffered by such analogy. However, one of the ways Shakespeare's seven-syllable lines test their audience is by being at or in the hinterland of other verse lines; they are always close to both trimeter and tetrameter, only ever an elision or expansion away. When Picasso looked at Cezanne's painted apples, he saw 'the weight of space on that circular form'

rather than fruit ‘as such’.³⁴ Picasso noticed how forms, including the forms of verse lines, are always drawn or motivated by other, surrounding forms. Indeed in *As You Like It*, Jacques calls Orlando’s seven-syllable love poetry infectious (*AYLI* 3.2.110). It is as if deformity is catching; as if the chant of the seven-syllable lines could also en-charm; as if the witches speak with a ‘socially poisonous tongue’.³⁵

If *Macbeth* is threatened with deformation by the witches’ seven-syllable lines, Malcolm’s accession to the throne offers some respite to, and through, the play’s prosody.

this, and what needful else

That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace

We will perform in measure, time, and place.

So thanks to all at once, and to each one,

Whom we invite to see us crowned at Scone.

(5.11.37-41)

In fairly smooth blank verse Malcolm brings some ‘measure’ back to Scotland, the word partly meaning ‘metrical order’ (*OED* 16a).

We can imagine a few of James’s possible responses to Shakespeare’s witches. He may have been flattered and interested. Here was the chief writer of the King’s Men connecting two of James’s published interests: witchcraft and prosody. James may not have responded at all, because he may not have noticed at all: although people sometimes wrote of going to *hear* rather than *see* a play in Renaissance England, and although James’s ear seems to have been metrically sensitive, it can be difficult to register the exact prosodic arrangement of verse lines in

³⁴ Pablo Picasso, qtd. in Franklin R. Rogers, *Painting and Poetry: Form, Metaphor, and the Language of Literature* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), p.152.

³⁵ Jonathan Gil Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.107.

performance (which could in turn mean that Shakespeare smuggled offence past James). James thought that he had been the subject of assassination attempts by witches, so Shakespeare's grating stumbling prosody may have been eerie to the kingly ear. James might have been angry: the play's conclusion contains a series of hints – think of the witchy hailings by the thanes in 5.6 – that Malcolm's (and therefore James's) unification of the two kingdoms has the witches' endorsement (or worse). All of these possible reactions are accommodated within a court performance – 'treason's license' says Supervacuo in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (5.1.173) – in which the king's ability to react to Shakespeare's provocations was girdled by ceremony. Though the play's prosody is born out of patronage, *Macbeth* is 'aware of the fact of [its] compromise' while being 'in no sense compromised'.³⁶

Perhaps *Macbeth*'s verse lines have been infected by those in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1594), another play dark with supernatural menace. The fairies of the *Dream* speak in seven-syllable lines too; to adapt Stephen Greenblatt, they are not exactly witches but they are not exactly *not* witches either.³⁷ The witches 'hail' Banquo thrice (1.3.60-62) and the fairies 'hail' Bottom thrice (3.1.168-170). In Simon Forman's account of seeing *Macbeth* in April 1611 he describes the witches as '3 women fairies or nymphs' (perhaps recalling Holinshed, in which the supernatural characters are more fairy than witch).³⁸

At first, Shakespeare emphasises the fairies' benevolence – they are like the Clean Fairy of folklore, tidying up the stage:

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen.

³⁶ Geoffrey Hill, 'The True Conduct of Human Judgment': Some Observations on *Cymbeline* pp.58-71 in Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.60.

³⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.162.

³⁸ My emphasis. Raphael Holinshed, *Shakespeare's Holinshed: The Chronicle and the Historical Plays Compared*, ed. Walter Boswell-Stone (London: n.p., 1907), p.124.

Newts and blindworms, do no wrong,

Come not near our Fairy Queen.

[. . .]

Weaving spiders, come not here;

Hence, you longlegged spinners, hence!

Beetles black, approach not near,

Worm nor snail, do no offence.

(2.2.9-12 and 20-23)

This fairy song is in seven-syllable lines (apart from line 9) but there is little sense of danger. The fairies clear the stage of any witchy familiars. In banishing newts and blindworms they get rid of two ingredients from the witches' cauldron (4.1.14-16); in banishing 'Weaving spiders' they get rid of the 'creeping, venom'd things' that menace Lady Anne in *Richard III* (1.2.19). Yet the clearing-away of witch-like 'offence' also creates space for Oberon to enter and to cast the first of the play's morally dubious spells – crucially, in seven-syllable lines (2.2.33-40). By ending the spell 'Wake when some vile thing is near!' Oberon both contradicts and counteracts the fairy song that has taken place ten lines earlier. Nor is Oberon's the only ethically suspect spell: Puck's spell on Lysander (2.2.72-89), Oberon's spell on Demetrius (3.2.102-9) and Puck's invocation to lead the mortals 'up and down' (3.2.396-99) are all, with the exception of two lines, conducted in seven syllables. By their metre shall we know them: the fairies are less benevolent than they seem.

The supernatural seven-syllable line appears to be Shakespeare's invention. Between 1594/5 and 1606 there are no seven-syllable lines in (surviving) supernatural drama. Before 1594/5 there is a little seven-syllable verse in John Lyly's *Endymion* (c.1588), a play that Shakespeare may have drawn upon when writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lyly's fairies fitfully speak in a seven-syllable metre when chanting supernaturally:

Pinch him, pinch him, black and blue.

Saucy mortals must not view

What the Queen of Stars is doing,

Nor pry into our Fairy wooing.

(*Endymion* 4.3.29-32)

(There is another bundle of seven-syllable lines at 4.3.42-5.) The way the fairies ‘pinch’ Corsites has witchiness hovering about it, a witchiness Shakespeare developed in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and in the molested Herne/Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c.1597). However, Lyly takes the pinching to a safer destination – although Tellus causes Corsites ‘to be pinched with Fairies’, he punningly forgives her since ‘her fairness hath pinched [his] heart more deeply’ (5.3.249-250).

Slightly later than *Macbeth*, from 1608, other writers find themselves similarly provoked by the seven-syllable line. Ben Jonson’s masques are able, moreso than Shakespeare’s theatre, to realise the manifold, multiform potential of the seven-syllable line. *The Masque of Queens* (1609), for example, stresses deformity in all its forms – physically, musically, metrically. The masque’s witches enter ‘with a kind of hollow and infernal music’ while ‘making a confused noise with strange gestures’ (20-21). The court audience would have seen them dance, ‘making their circles backward, to their left hand, with strange phantastic motions of their heads and bodies’ (349-351). Such sinister (Latin: ‘left, or left hand’ *OED*) action reverses the normal patterns of movement. It was accompanied by music ‘metrically unstable [. . .] unable to sustain metrical coherence’, in which the time signature changes four times in short succession.³⁹ The rhythmically regular first section of the dance is blared over by two protracted blasts, and the

³⁹ Amanda Winkler, *O Let Us Howle Some Heavy Note: Music for Witches, The Melancholic, and the Mad on the Seventeenth Century English Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp.31-2.

restoration of convention (in the form of a triple metre) is soon shocked by a bombardment of eight notes. The first words spoken by a witch are in uneven seven-syllable lines ('Sisters, stay, we want our Dame; / Call upon her, by her name' (47-48)) and there are bursts of seven-syllable lines, as well as eleven-syllable lines, throughout the witches' speech. Like the music, like the movement or dance, this is a verse which will 'loose the whole hinge of things' (148). Jonson's masque is the seven-syllable line's *Gesamtkunstwerk* 'in which partial contributions of the related and collaborating arts [dance, movement, music, prosody] blend together, disappear, and, in disappearing, somehow form a new world' for which the seven-syllable line could be thought the prosodic *leitmotif*.⁴⁰

When Heroic Virtue and the other personifications of fame arrive, they subvert the witches – which is to say, they correct the witches' subversions and bring the masque to a new kind of order. As the witches have familiars, so the allegorical worthies have fame-iliars: eagles 'to note Fame's sharp eye' (467), griffins 'that design / Swiftness and strength' (468-9) and lions that 'imply / The top of graces' (470-471). Heroic Virtue enters and disperses the hags in heroic couplets: 'So should, at Fame's loud sound and Virtue's sight, / All poor and envious witchcraft fly the light' (367-8). Her iambic pentameter performs a restoration, with its only abruption the double stress at the centre of line 367 – meaning that 'Fame's **loud sound**' is heard all the more clearly, supplying additional emphasis to the line's proclamation.

Jonson's witches were perhaps more offensive to James than Shakespeare's. They form the masque's 'political unconscious' to the extent that, at one point, they are called 'Erinyes' (367) – invoking Aeschylus's tragedy of Orestes, pursued by Furies when he has killed his mother.⁴¹ This may be a dim allusion to James's complicity in the execution of his mother Mary Queen of Scots – the kind of dim allusion (or 'dark conceit') that James noticed, to Spenser's

⁴⁰ Carl Maria von Weber, review of *Undine* (1816), in *Source Readings in Music History: The Romantic Era*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), p.63.

⁴¹ Martin Butler, *The Stuart Court Masque and Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.138.

disadvantage, in Book 5 of the *Faerie Queene*.⁴² Even here though, amid the offence, Jonson's 'independent image' could make him 'a more valuable and attractive dependent': in the space of a few months, for example, Jonson was imprisoned for part-authorship of *Eastward Ho!* before being commissioned to write his second court masque *Hymenai*.⁴³

When Thomas Middleton wrote *The Witch* (1616) he took much from Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, but he did not take the masque's seven-syllable lines. Middleton's witches speak in heroic and tetrameter couplets. Even in Hecate's metrically shifting address there are only three seven-syllable lines distributed through her speech. This suggests that if Middleton revised *Macbeth*, he did not contribute the play's seven-syllable lines. There is an irony of influence here. Some of Jonson's masques use the seven-syllable line more consistently than *The Masque of Queens*. *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Haddington Masque* (both 1608) feature moments of seven-syllable verse – in the former the song from the sea (295-300) and a song beginning 'Come away' (283-8) that bears a few resemblances to *Macbeth*; in the latter the speeches of the Three Graces and of Cupid (85-156, 165-182). Jonson's later masques incorporate even more seven-syllable lines. *A Masque of Her Majesties Love Freed From Ignorance and Folly* (1611) contains a Sphinx speaking in seven-syllable lines (6-231). *Oberon, The Faery Prince* (also 1611) has satyrs speaking in seven-syllable lines (6-290), with their 'crooked legs' (106) a visual accompaniment to their crooked metrical feet. When the satyrs turn to James, however, they conduct themselves in numerically even lines (300-13), perhaps as an appropriate deference to the author of the *Schort Treatise*.

It is possible that Jonson took the seven-syllable line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and/or *Macbeth*, using it in his masques for supernatural characters much as Shakespeare does in his plays. (Note that *The Alchemist's* Doll Tearsheet speaks only in pentameters when playing Doll Queen of Fairy; her pretence does not warrant Jonson's authentically supernatural seven-syllable

⁴² By 1611 Spenser's allegory was so transparent that Jonson could tell Drummond 'That in that paper S.W. Raleigh had of the Allegories of his *Faerie Queene*, by the Blatant Beast the Puritans were understood, by the false Duesse the Queen of Scots', p.17.

⁴³ Robert C. Evans, *Ben Jonson and the Poetics of Patronage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1989), p.61.

line. So in Shakespeare, when the unsupernatural Edgar uses words that will later appear in *Macbeth* – ‘aroint thee, witch, aroint thee’ (*Macbeth* 1.3.7) – he is given an additional monosyllable at the start of his verse line to create an unsupernatural tetrameter: ‘*And* aroint thee, witch, aroint thee’ (*Lear* 3.4.121).) Middleton, though borrowing from *The Masque of Queens* for *The Witch*, did not borrow the masque’s crucial Shakespearean component: the seven-syllable line. Then, if he revised *Macbeth*, Middleton supplied the witches with tetrameter couplets and pentameter lines, diluting the presence of the seven-syllable line in the play. In so doing he put into *Macbeth* the opposite of what Jonson might have taken from it: a set of numerically even lines. If this is a wheel of influence, it has not come full circle.

In 1611 Shakespeare wrote two plays that seem to mitigate the supernatural seven-syllable line.⁴⁴ When Paulina casts her spell at the end of *The Winter’s Tale*, she does so in carefully constructed pentameter:

’Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach;

Strike all that look upon with marvel. Come!

I’ll fill your grave up: stir, nay, come away:

Bequeath to death your numbness; for from him

Dear life redeems you. You perceive she stirs.

(5.3.99-103)

As in 5.3.101 Paulina fills up the grave, so Shakespeare fills up the line. In filling it up, the line becomes busy and vivacious – ‘stir, nay, come away’ implies a dialogue with someone (Hermione?) refusing to co-operate, of life outside the line. We also see life outside the borders

⁴⁴ After 1611, in collaboration with John Fletcher, Shakespeare returned to the line in two brief songs – one in *Henry VIII, or All Is True* (3.2.3-14) and one in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1.1.1-14), although only the scene in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is usually attributed to Shakespeare. But its status as a supernatural line ends with Shakespeare and Jonson. When Fletcher writes *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1608), for example, his seven-syllable lines are distributed between a range of characters (from priests to satyrs) with no obvious purpose.

of 5.3.102. In order to escape the numbness of ‘death’ we have to move over the line, enjamb into ‘Dear life’ and be redeemed. Pauses balance the verse. 5.3.99 is divided almost into its component feet: ‘Tis time / descend / be stone no more / approach’ (in Folio this is done by a profusion of colons). Caesuras fall exactly halfway through 5.3.101 and 5.3.103. It does not seem an accident of punctuation; rather, Paulina’s claim to legality and morality in her spellcasting – ‘You hear my spell is *lawful*’ (104) – is vindicated by her even-syllabled verse. Leontes agrees: ‘If this be magic, let it be an art / As *lawful* as eating’ (110-111).

In *The Tempest* (1611), Prospero’s renunciation of magic involves a renunciation of the seven-syllable line, a line Ariel had used to cast spells under Prospero’s command.

Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

(Epilogue 13-20)

There is a struggle here, most noticeable in Prospero’s ‘want’: is this ‘want’ the lack of spirits or the desire for spirits, or both? The epilogue wobbles between the two. The lack of spirits is mimicked in the catalectic (or headless) line 14, as though Shakespeare’s metrical art cannot make up for Prospero’s magical art. ‘And my ending is despair’ is a seven-syllable line (one in which the trochaic pulse distinctly flickers) but there is little risk that Prospero will renege on his renunciation – for ‘despair’ is relieved by the rhyme with ‘prayer’ over the line, ‘prayer’ being the

syllable which makes line 16 an even tetrameter (although if ‘prayer’ is treated as disyllabic, the line could tip into nine syllables). Prospero’s appeal to the audience (‘As you from crimes would pardoned be / Let your indulgence set me free’) is paced iambically across tetrameter lines, with a slight accentual hesitation over whether his imperative (‘Let’) or the audience’s presence (‘your’) should sport a stress. His final evenness, his refusal to despair and descend to the seven-syllable line, makes Prospero ‘most profound in his art and yet not damnable’ (*AYLI* 5.2.2301).

The seven-syllable line is never absent from these plays. Prospero slips into it, as though momentarily yielding to his tyrannical magic, and Ariel’s speeches buzz with it. Paulina risks it, by perpetrating a ‘lawful’ spell that must, like all Renaissance spellcasting, be always on the cusp of illegality. If Shakespeare’s blank verse gradually bleaches out the seven-syllable line, then it does so by becoming more and more akin to it. Shakespeare’s blanks increasingly possess a feminine ending – by the time of these later plays, every third or fourth verse line has an uneven eleven syllables. At these points, in these plays, the seven-syllable line is a ghost form (or a ‘ghost in the shell’ of Shakespeare’s blank verse).⁴⁵ It is the kind of undead verse line that Jonson and Holland would nervously celebrate; indeed, it has become the kind of supernatural entity it was previously spoken by.

When Jonson wrote of Shakespeare’s ‘living line’, he pre-empted the metaphor of a later classicist. In the *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope’s spider ‘Feels at each thread, and lives along the line’ (7.12). We hear the truth of that statement in the alliterative, assonant reach from ‘lives’ to ‘line’ where the sound is not so much a divisible echo of Pope’s sense as the spider’s experiential confirmation of it. Like Pope’s, Shakespeare’s self-drawing web is forever drawing and never finally ‘drawn’ (Nicholas Rowe’s deadening emendation to *Henry VIII* 1.1.63). The web is scuttling with life: with, in the remit of this essay alone, a seven-syllable verse that twists and gurns and contorts; that, in its putative deformities, is bound to the breadth of human

⁴⁵ Gavin Alexander, ‘On the Reuse of Poetic Form: The Ghost in the Shell’, pp.123-143 in *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

experience, moving, thinking, shaping and feeling ‘Till the bridge you will need, be form’d – till the ductile anchor hold’ and ‘Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul’.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Walt Whitman, ‘A Noiseless Patient Spider’ (ls. 9-10) in *Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855 Edition*, ed. Bliss Perry (New York: Dover Publications, 2007).

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