Refighting Carlo Ginzburg’s Night Battles

Richard Firth Green

Jorge Luis Borges, in a wonderful linguistic jeu d’esprit, envo k a certain Chinese encyclopedia, The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge, that divides all animals into “(a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) sucking pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s-hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, [and] (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.”¹ One does not have to be an unregenerate Sapir-Wharffist to appreciate how deeply this passage disturbs and threatens with collapse, in Michel Foucault’s words, “our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other,” exercising not only “the exotic charm of another system of thought” but demonstrating “the stark impossibility of thinking that.”² As Foucault himself suggested, however, not just spatial but temporal distance can occasion such categorical dislocations, and I want here to sketch out a way in which another of our fundamental same/other boundaries—that between the animate and the spiritual worlds—was, at least in one particular, construed slightly differently in premodern Europe, in literate circles at any rate.

On Saturday April 20th, 1610, the physician Simon Forman went to the Globe Theatre in London to see a performance of Macbeth. Here is how Forman describes the opening scenes:

Ther was to be obserued, firste, howe Mackbeth and Bancko, 2 noble men of Scotland, Ridinge thorowe a wod, the(r) stode before them 3 women feiries or Nimphes, And Saluted Mackbeth, sayinge, 3 tyms vnto him, haille Makcbeth, king of Codon; for thou shalt be a Kinge, but shalt beget No kinges, &c. then said Bancko, What all to mackbeth And nothinge to

me, yes, said the nimphes, Haille to thee, Banko, thou shalt beget kings, yet be no kinge. And so they departed & cam to the Courte of Scotland.³

Shakespeare scholars seem to have been much exercised by this passage’s apparent suggestion that there were horses on stage in the Globe theatre (might not Forman merely have thought that he saw them ‘printing their proud hooves i’ the receiving earth?’), but for me what is most striking about it is its apparent confusion of Macbeth’s witches with fairies. Witches, after all, are human beings; and fairies are not. How could Forman possibly have confused the two? Perhaps not quite so extreme a categorical gaffe as confusing embalmed animals with those belonging to the emperor, but curious nonetheless.

When Macbeth encounters the witches at the beginning of Act iv he addresses them as “secret, black, and midnight hags” (Macbeth, iv. i. 64), so we might begin by noting that in Sixteenth-Century English hags and fairies were regularly associated with one another.⁴ Thomas Elyot’s Dictionary (1538) defines larua as “a spyrite whiche apperethe in the nyght tyme. Some do call it a hegge, some a goblyn.” Thomas Cooper, in his Thesaurus linguæ Romanæ & Britannicæ (1565), glosses strix as “a shryche owle: a witche that chaungeth the fauour of children: an hegge or fairie;” and John Baret, echoing Cooper, writes, “A Heg, or fairie, a witch that chaungeth the fauour of children, strix;” in his Aluearie or triple dictionarie, in Englishe, Latin, and French (1574).⁵ Witches in this sense seem also to have been associated with the mare, a terrifying spirit that accosted people in their beds: “Wycch, clepyd nyȝte mare... epialtes,” writes the Promptorium Parvulorum (of ca. 1440),⁶ and John Higgins’ translation of

⁴ For a fuller account see Richard Firth Green, Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 194–6.
   All consulted 3 December, 2013.