Spells of Silence: or, How (Not) to Have a Conversation in the Supernatural World

By Marina Dossena

Rule no. 1: Haud yer wheesht!

Tam O'Shanter is probably one of the best-known characters in Scottish literature: everybody knows of his love of ae guid crack and ae guid dram, and his narrow escape from the clutches of enraged witches is a landmark moment in poetic story-telling. However, oor Tam has only himself to blame for the predicament in which he finds himself: not only has he stayed out late and drunk more than is good for him, but he has also interrupted a fiendish ceilidh with his appreciation of the dance moves of a rather scantily-clad young witch. Although he had gone unnoticed until then, the sound of his spontaneous "Weel done, Cutty-sark!" reveals his presence; a human voice is perceived clearly although it is the devil himself who is playing the bagpipes: the spell is broken … 'And in an instant all was dark'. In practice, his use of words has brought about a reversal of what is generally assumed to be the function of speech in a magic environment, i.e. to create something extraordinary. That is what witches and wizards do, but Tam is a 'muggle' (in Harry Potter terminology), and when he speaks, the supernatural events that he has witnessed take a very dangerous turn.

However, Tam could have known better: folk tales and even literary works are full of stories in which humans take the initiative addressing supernatural beings and find themselves in difficult (if not tragic) circumstances as a result. In Elizabethan times, for instance, we find Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and the protagonists of two of the best-known texts among Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Starting from the latter, we see that it is Banquo and Macbeth who address the weird sisters first, just like Horatio and Hamlet are the first to speak to the ghost who is seen to walk on the ramparts of Elsinore Castle; Horatio survives, but only because he is given the task to tell the story of what happened – see the quotations below, in which the directness of the speakers' turns

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The visions are therefore ambiguous, and a misinterpretation of visual data is also what causes Thomas the Rhymer to salute the Queen of Elfland, as he wrongly assumes that the 'ferlie' he sees is a heavenly apparition – see no. 37 in Francis James Child's collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898):

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"All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
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Interestingly, two of the quotations in DOST derive from Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, written in 1691 (according to Walter Scott's *Demonology and Witchcraft*, of 1830) and whose 1893 edition Andrew Lang dedicated to Robert Louis Stevenson. As is well-known, thanks to Scott's narration, Kirk may still be in Elfland, because a relation failed to recall him by throwing a dirk over his head when he re-appeared at the christening of his supposedly posthumous child: the claim was that he was not actually dead, but had fallen into a swoon while walking on a fairy-hill.[1]

When Lang dedicated the edition of Kirk's treatise to Stevenson, Tusitala was already in Samoa, and it would only be a short year until his death. However, the dedicatory poem evokes all the topics of Scottish folklore that had been so dear to Stevenson and which feature so valuably in his writings, often thanks again to evocative uses of words or indeed lack of words, such as in the case of the uncanny silences of Janet McClour, aka 'Thrawn Janet', or of Tod Lapraik's 'dwams'.[2] From a different perspective, it is also significant to see that one of the most notorious figures in Edinburgh folk lore, that of Major Thomas Weir, burnt at the stake together with his bewitched staff and whose story Stevenson tells in his *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes* (1878), was called 'Angelical Thomas' because he 'had a rare gift of supplication' – a possible warlock with a talent for pious and persuasive discourse, to the point of construing a diametrically different persona, just like Deacon Brodie and (again in a literary framework) Henry Jekyll or (at the intersection of literature and folk lore) Gil-Martin.[3]

Nicknames also play a very important part in the pragmatics of the supernatural. Explicit labels like *devil* and *fairies* are avoided and replaced with periphrastic forms like *Auld Nick* or *Auld Clootie* and the *Good People* – forms that are both euphemistic and reassuringly familiar.[4] In one case, the aim is to avoid a label that may imply summoning, while in the other the aim is to avoid the kind of offence which might have dire consequences if overheard, thus proving that 'the good people' may actually be far from good. Indeed, folk tales warn against labelling magical creatures with incorrect terms or – even worse – refuse them

small favours,[5] lest they cease to be helpers and become fierce opponents instead; and it doesn't matter if they are invisible: they may still overhear a disrespectful word and take offence.

Rule no. 3: Spinning yarns and weaving patterns (beyond words)

While Vladimir Propp outlined the typical narrative patterns (or morphology) of fairy and folk tales as many as ninety years ago, the importance of ritualized moves in this narrative context still seems a domain in which more research is required from the linguistic point of view. For instance, it might be interesting to see how protagonists ask for help either directly or indirectly, such as when they are sobbing to themselves about the impossibility of a certain task and then a friendly animal or brownie or other magical creature offers to solve the problem. Also expressions of disbelief might be worth analysing, as they need to be conveyed in such a way that readers may sympathize with the protagonists (and their scepticism), while knowing that in the end what the magical creature has promised will actually come to pass.

Moreover, the language of folk tales often shows an interesting blend of Christian and pagan beliefs, with blessings and prayers mingling with formulae, spells and charms. Finally, folk tales can display a multilingual and multicultural quality in which the coexistence of Scots, Gaelic and English vividly represent the complex framework in which stories borrow from different traditions. When nineteenth-century authors were busy compiling collections of ballads and stories in an increasingly anglicized world, the use of 'exotic' lexical items could function as both markers of antiquity and of distance from a reality that had less and less time and opportunity for magic, but which still longed for it.

In fact, the work of twentieth-century folklorists like Hamish Henderson also bears witness to the rich and lively tradition of songs and stories pertaining to magic and the supernatural. In the digitized resources currently made available in the website of *Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches*, which comprise songs, poems, stories and other recordings, a very simple search for fairies leads to 417 results, more than half of which (262) are in Gaelic and 121 of which are in Scots, whereas ghost(s) yields 437 results, 202 of which are in Gaelic and 140 are in Scots.

Nor are present-day audiences less intrigued by what is a perceived to be mysterious: standing stones have acquired a new appeal since they featured in Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* book series, now also a very successful TV series about time-travel between twentieth-century Britain, Jacobite Scotland, and late-eighteenth-century America. Similarly, museums do not disdain to organize exhibitions of manuscripts and other artefacts pertaining to magic, such as in 'Spellbound', which runs until January 2019 at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Indeed, they may display items among their permanent collections, such as in the case of the miniature coffins found on Arthur's Seat in 1836 and now at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.

Objects, however, can only address viewers by means of what tradition has associated with them. Their interpretation is not directly linguistic, but has to rely on layers of semantic values, the time-depth of which can hardly be fathomed. In this sense they are ineffable, which brings us back to where we began our journey – an adventure in the supernatural world typically begins when silence is broken, and often it is the human protagonist who takes that momentous step, whether verbally or through the interpretation of objects, contexts, and atmospheres.

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