

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

overcomes any hesitation they may have about the actual nature of what is before their eyes:

BANQUO

[] *What are these
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants of the earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question? [].*

MACBETH

Speak, if you can: what are you? (Macbeth I.iii.40-50)

HORATIO

*What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? By heaven, I charge thee,
speak. (Hamlet I.i.54-58)*

HAMLET

*Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, Father, Royal Dane. O, answer me! (Hamlet I.iv.44-50)*

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):

*True Thomas lay on Huntlie Bank,
A ferlie he spied wi' his eye []*

*True Thomas, he pulld aff his cap,
And louted low down to his knee*

*All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
For thy peer on earth I never did see.*

Uttering human words will be even more dangerous once the adventure has begun: Thomas will have to remain silent for the duration of his stay in Elfland, For, if you speak word in Elflyn land, /Ye ll neer get back to your ain countrie.

Rule no. 2: Words, words, words

Speech is therefore seen as a very powerful tool and, undeniably, magic is fascinating; so fascinating that it is virtually impossible to resist its charm, in more senses than one. Indeed, the etymologies and early uses of most lexical items used in the previous sentence point to a power that rests entirely on words themselves, whether written, spoken or sung; the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) provides the following information for charm and spell respectively:

charm, n1 [from] Middle English charme, < French charme charm < Latin carmen song, verse, oracular response, incantation.

a. orig. The chanting or recitation of a verse supposed to possess magic power or occult influence;

spell, n.1, [] 3. a. A set of words, a formula or verse, supposed to possess occult or magical powers; a charm or incantation; a means of accomplishing enchantment or exorcism.

1579 E. K. in Spenser Shepheardes Cal. Mar. 54 Gloss. Spell is a kinde of verse or charme, that in elder tymes they vsed often to say ouer euey thing, that they would haue preserued, as the Nightspel for theeues, and the woodspell.

The *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST) provides other examples:

charm, n1 Bell. Livy II. 211/22. [Livy's History of Rome, [] Translated into Scots by John Bellenden, 1533]

Makand charmys one his maner to the sacrifice of goddis;

spell, n.1b, A spell in magic, a charm.

1658 R. Moray Lett. fol. 248. I may light upon a spell [that] will do the turn when it is time, without casting cantripes for it;

Kirk Secr. Commonw. (1964) 402. That the good words in the spels, are but the

policy of the counterfeit angel of light;

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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 Cloutie* 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.

Nor are present-day audiences less intrigued by what is 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

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

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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.

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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.