

The Scottish/Classical Hybrid Witches in *Macbeth*

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he three witches in *Macbeth* play a significant, double role that has not been recognized or fully appreciated by critics. They are not only Scottish witches, who are comical; they are also, and primarily, the three “Weird Sisters,” that is, exemplars of the Roman *Parcae*, the three supernatural Fates of classical mythology and drama. Sometimes they switch roles in mid-scene. They begin as witches who perform outlandish, comic rituals, only to become the classical *Parcae*, the Fates who prophesy Macbeth’s future. Their deceptive prophecies, however, are ambiguous; they fuel his ambition to be king of Scotland but lead him to his downfall. Focused on his ambition, Macbeth hears from the Weird Sisters what he wants to hear. With their prophecies, they personify and dramatize his self-deception, misleading him to imagine that he can seize the throne and be an effective ruler. To a large extent, his willful self-deception and consequent failure to grasp the ambiguity of their prophecies are defining characteristics of his personality.

Macbeth’s self-deception was recognized long ago by two Shakespeare scholars whose insights have typically been long forgotten. Denton J. Snider, author of two volumes of essays on the Shakespeare plays, noted in 1877 that the “utterances,” that is, the prophecies of the Weird Sisters, “are the internal workings of Macbeth’s own mind in an imaginative form, which, however, he himself does not recognize as his own.”¹ And Albert H. Tolman of Ripon College suggested in 1906 that the Weird Sisters “are but a personification, a dramatizing, of those dark promptings which swarm in every soul that is secretly inclined to ‘evil.’”² Their insights about the dramatist’s intentions have not received the consideration they deserve.

Also generally underappreciated by modern critics is the significance of the comedic elements of the witchery scenes. The witches’ bawdy banter and comical antics are entertaining, but at the same time they subvert the reliability of their own alter egos as the prophesying Weird Sisters. The usual commentary on the comic role

of the witches misses their significance, diminishing the richness of the author's creation and his darker intention. Snider, however, did recognize how the comical witches can shape the audience perception of Macbeth's character. He observed of the witches/Weird Sisters and Macbeth that "when the audience stand above the hero and are made acquainted with all his complications, mistakes and weaknesses, the realm of Comedy begins."³ Through his weakness of discernment, Macbeth falls for the deceptive prophecies of the Weird Sisters, even though they are undermined by the antics of their alter egos, the comic witches. Othello is another foolish hero of a Shakespeare tragedy when that play is understood as inspired by *commedia dell'arte*.⁴

In like manner, the Porter scene in act 2, often called "comic relief," conveys a darker meaning. The Porter's drunken ramblings depict the gates to Macbeth's castle as the gates to Hell. In the hellish castle, Duncan and his grooms will be slain, Macbeth will suffer an agony of indecision and remorse, and Banquo's ghost will terrorize him. Critics rarely mention the ominous subtext of this farcical scene.

The significance of the witchery scenes in *Macbeth* arises from the duality of their personae. The comical witches' alter egos are the prophesying Weird Sisters, and the Weird Sisters' alter egos are the witches. They are the "other self" of themselves. This brilliant conflation drives Macbeth's fatal self-deception; he fails to recognize the folly of taking witchcraft seriously and acting on the prophecies of the Weird Sisters, who personify his dark, innermost impulses.

In their final words in the play, the Weird Sisters will merge with the Scottish witches to entertain Macbeth (and the audience) and solicit his gratitude for letting him be duped by their ambiguous prophecies. Their cynical sarcasm when they dance to music to "cheer we up his spirits" (4.1.127) can be devastating dramatic irony for discerning audiences watching Macbeth go to his doom.

Even the play's nomenclature conflates the Weird Sisters and the witches. The stage directions in the First Folio call them witches, and their speaker names (or speech headings) are *First Witch*, *Second Witch*, *Third Witch*, but they are never called witches in the dialogue. Macbeth and Banquo refer to them as the Weird Sisters, and they call themselves sisters. The Elizabethan audience would have heard the characters being called the Weird Sisters, not witches, but would have recognized them as witches when the same actors performed, albeit in parody, like contemporary witches were accused of acting. The word "witch" appears only once in the dialogue, when the First Witch quotes a sailor's wife telling her to go away: "Aroint thee, witch!" (1.3.6). If priority is given to the spoken words of the play, these characters are primarily the prophesying Weird Sisters with alter egos as Scottish witches.

The three Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* are the supernatural beings from Greek and Roman mythology who knew one's fate or destiny and could control it. In ancient Greece, they were the *Moirae*, three goddesses who controlled one's destiny. In Roman mythology, they were the three *Parcae* or *Fata* from *Fatum*, meaning a prophetic utterance; hence in English, the three Fates, who could prophesy.

"Weird" apparently was something of a rare word in Elizabethan English, at least for printers and probably for most readers. In the First Folio play text, they

are called the “wayward” or “weyard” sisters, but that must have been typesetters’ mistranscriptions of “weird,” and all editors change the two words to “weird,” as in the chronicles of Scotland. The word “weird” itself comes from the Old English, meaning “fate” or “destiny,” its primary meaning for Elizabethans, not today’s “strange” or “bizarre.”⁵ Chaucer (c.1343-1400) would write of “The Wirdes that we call destinies.”⁶ A decade or two later, Andrew of Wintoun (c.1350-c.1423), a Scottish poet, added the three prophesying “Werd Systyrs” to the story of Macbeth as it had been told in Latin in the first chronicle of Scotland, by John of Fordun (died c.1384). In his essay on “The Weird Sisters,” Tolman notes that “a passage in the Scotch translation of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, written about 1513 by Gawin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeid [Scotland], translates *Parcae* (Book III, 379) by the phrase ‘the werd sisteris.’”⁷

In the sixteenth century, Hector Boece’s chronicle of Scotland in Latin (1527) carried the Weird Sisters over from Wintoun’s Scottish vernacular chronicle, and Holinshed translated Boece into English for his chronicle of Scotland in the massive *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, first published in 1577. The Macbeth story, now more legend and serial invention than history, was essentially unchanged in the second edition of 1587. In Holinshed’s translation of Boece, Macbeth and Banquo suddenly meet three women resembling “creatures from the elder world,” that is, antiquity. “These women,” he continues, “were either the weird sisters, that is, (as you would say) the goddesses of destiny, or else some nymphs or fairies imbued with knowledge of prophesy by their necromantic science.”⁸

The story of Macbeth in the Holinshed edition of 1577 includes an illustration depicting the Weird Sisters as the supernatural Fates, not as witches. They are wearing fairly elaborate gowns, each with a different pattern, not the rags of witches. One wears a necklace. Another has a peaked cap with a decorative streamer attached as in some paintings of Elizabethan aristocratic women. The three are quite elegant in their personae as the Weird Sisters, who are about to prophesy to Macbeth and Banquo. The engraving is the only contemporary illustration of the scene, and it shows them as the Weird Sisters, the Fates.

Ultimately the word “weird” and the three supernatural sisters may also derive from the three sister Norns, the goddesses of destiny in Norse mythology. Tolman and other scholars suggest that “weird” comes from the name of the senior Norn, “Urthr.”⁹ The Norns may have been influenced by the Fates of classical Greece and Rome. Significantly, however, they could be harmful,¹⁰ as are the Weird Sisters, whose ambiguous prophecies ostensibly help Macbeth achieve his ambition but also lead him to his downfall. In *The Wheel of Fire*, G.K. Hunter says that “the Norns had been suggested by Fleay (1876) and by Miss Charlotte Carmichael (1879); later the suggestion was lent great authority, when it was adopted by Kittredge (1939).”¹¹ The good/evil duality of the three Weird Sisters suggests that the author of *Macbeth* was familiar with the good/evil nature of the three sister Norns in Norse mythology.

Although the Weird Sisters are essentially the Roman *Parcae*, or Fates, who can prophesy the future, a few commentators suggest associations with several other classical mythological figures, including the three Furies. The Furies were fierce and

ruthless goddesses who avenged crimes by pursuing the perpetrators to drive them mad. So the witches/Weird Sisters might be interpreted as Furies seeking revenge for Macbeth's victims, as suggested by Arthur R. McGee in his article, "*Macbeth and the Furies*."¹² The witches, however, do not express or demonstrate a desire for revenge, nor do the Weird Sisters. Nor did the Furies prophesy the future, as did the Fates in mythology and as the Weird Sisters do in *Macbeth*. McGee associates the witches solely with the Furies, not the Weird Sisters.¹³ The witches, however, are comical, entertaining characters lampooned by the dramatist.

For G. Wilson Knight the Weird Sisters, the Fates, become the Furies in their last scene, the apparition scene. In *The Wheel of Fire* he suggests: "The Weird Sisters who were formerly as the three *Parcae* or Fates, foretelling Macbeth's future, now, at this later stage of the story become the Erinyes [the Greek Furies], avengers of murder, symbols of the tormented soul. They delude and madden him with their apparitions and ghosts."¹⁴ Knight does not elaborate on this, his only comment on the Fates and the Furies in his book. He does recognize the deception of the Weird Sisters and some kind of duality with the witches but not their dual personae, as proposed in this article. Also, it is difficult to see how the *Erinyes*/Furies "madden" Macbeth. In their last scene together, he readily, almost joyfully, accepts the first three prophetic apparitions.

The play opens with the three witches preparing to meet Macbeth after his victory as the leader of the Scots against the invading Norwegians. Alone in the first scene, their launching the play calls attention to their significant role in it. The opening scene is often immensely important in Shakespeare's plays. In *Macbeth* it sets the tone of witchery and the theme of ambiguity and deception. "When the battle's lost and won," they say, and "Fair is foul and foul is fair." The witches identify Macbeth as their target, whom they will meet on the heath. The twelve-line scene tells the audience to pay attention to these witches and their alter egos, the Weird Sisters. At the end of the scene, the witches say they will "hover through the fog and filthy air," exiting by flying off stage, perhaps via ropes and pulleys and perhaps to the amusement of the audience. English witches, as it happens, did not fly, but witches on the Continent did.¹⁵ The dramatist knew about them.

There was, of course, nothing funny about witch hunts, witch torture, witch trials and witch executions in the sixteenth century -- all of it based on malice, hysteria, and coerced testimony. Thousands of unfortunate women (and a few men) were tortured, imprisoned and in many cases cruelly executed in a textbook illustration of social hysteria. Most of the witches were older, poor women, hags who were accused of witchcraft and outlandish behavior. Not a few probably suffered from mental problems. The reputation of the witches was not for prophetic powers. They allegedly cast malevolent spells or blights that were always harmful. In *Macbeth*, however, the dramatist's bawdy humor in the witchery scenes renders ridiculous the unfounded belief in witchcraft, which was fairly widespread, even among the upper classes.

Later in act 1, the three Weird Sisters appear in their alter egos as witches. As Scottish witches, they are having a good old raunchy time, which has no apparent

connection to prophecies, personal destiny, Macbeth, Banquo or the plot. The passage is a prime example of the bawdy in Shakespeare:

First Witch

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
And munched, and munched, and munched.
"Give me," quoth I.
"Aroint thee, witch!" the rump-fed ronyon cries.
Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master of the *Tiger*.
But in a sieve I'll thither sail,
And, like a rat without a tail,
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

Second Witch

I'll give thee a wind.

First Witch

Thou art kind.

Third Witch

And I another.

First Witch

I myself have all the other,
And the very ports they blow,
All the quarters that they know
In the shipman's card.
I will drain him dry as hay.

(1.3.3-18)

The passage is packed with bawdy innuendo. A chestnut has two large seeds in its husk, and "chestnuts" was almost certainly slang for testicles.¹⁶ "Munched" means chewed audibly by moving the jaws,¹⁷ but in Scottish it also meant mumbling with toothless gums,¹⁸ as might an old woman. The witch wanted the chestnuts from the sailor's wife, but the wife balked: "Aroint thee, witch!" the rump-fed ronyon cries." "Aroint" probably means "be gone." Its origin is unknown, and its first appearance is here and in *Lear*, also addressing a witch: "And, aroint thee witch, aroint" (3.4.124). This is the only time anyone in *Macbeth* says "witch," and it's the sailor's wife who's quoted as saying it. "Rump-fed" is fat-bottomed and well fed, and "to feed" was slang for grazing amorously.¹⁹ "Ronyon" is slang for the male sex organ.²⁰ It's also an abusive term for a woman in Shakespeare, here and in a wildly comic scene in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when an outraged Frank Ford shouts at Mistress Page: "Out of my door, you witch, you rag, you baggage, you polecat, you runnion" (4.2.184-86).

"Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master of the *Tiger*" is a topical reference to a 1583 voyage from London to Aleppo by merchants with a letter from the queen. The reference serves to date the play's composition, or more likely a rewrite of it, to shortly after that seemingly gratuitous reference, when it would still be topical for a court audience. It would be stale and forgotten in 1606, two decades later,

when conventional scholarship dates the composition of *Macbeth*. The First Witch continues:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,
And like a rat without a tail,
I'll do, I'll do and I'll do.

Scottish witches sailed the seas in sieves. English witches did not.²¹ *Newes from Scotland* (1591) reports testimony at a witchcraft trial describing two hundred witches going to sea, each in her own sieve with a bottle of wine, drinking and carousing, and after they landed near a church, dancing and singing.²²

A rat without a tail is probably a swimming rat with no tail for a rudder, but "tail" can also mean the sex organs, here probably the penis.²³ The repetition of "I'll do, I'll do and I'll do" given the bawdy context, probably means to have sex repeatedly to climax with the master of the *Tiger*.²⁴ "To do" could also mean "to exhaust."²⁵ Eight lines later she says, "I will drain him dry as hay," presumably through repeated sexual intercourse, cuckolding the sailor's wife in a gender reversal.

When the second Witch offers, "I'll give thee a wind," she continues the bawdy thread. A wind could be the kind of wind that fills the sailor's sails, as witches were reputed to do, but here "a wind" seems to also mean a fart.²⁶ The First Witch responds, no doubt sarcastically, "Thou art kind." And the Third Witch adds her own flatulence "And I another." Boys are notorious for showing how loudly they can break wind, and *Macbeth's* witches seem to be engaged in a similar bawdy contest.

This passage of bawdy comedy serves two dramatic purposes: It would get guffaws from an aristocratic audience at court, but more significantly it undermines the trustworthiness of the supernatural Weird Sisters, the alter egos of these vulgar witches. In the rest of the scene, the First Witch continues to tell what she will "do" to that sailor, but then they hear a drum; one of them cries, "A drum! A drum! Macbeth doth come." Together they chant, "The weird sisters, hand in hand.... Thus do go about, about" (1.3.32-34). They are chanting and dancing, as did witches in Scotland, but not in England.²⁷ "Peace!" they cry as Macbeth and Banquo are approaching. They stop their antic dancing and chanting as they await Macbeth and Banquo, and they morph into their alter egos as the supernatural Weird Sisters, the Fates of mythology who prophesy.

How the boy actors of the Elizabethan companies played the dual roles of the Weird Sisters/witches can only be conjectured. They could have worn some sort of reversible combination of Roman robes and witches' rags arranged so they could make the switch in mid-scene, from bawdy comedy to serious prophesying, without exiting to change costumes. For example, it would be consistent with their comical roles as witches for the boys to whisk their beards (1.3.46) off and on as they switch alter egos. Or they could do a quick change offstage.

The first Weird Sister welcomes Macbeth with his inherited title, Thane of Glamis. The second discloses what is as yet unknown to him, that he is also Thane of Cawdor, and the third predicts that he will be king of Scotland. Their knowledge of past, present and future (which is also in Holinshed and earlier chronicles) reflects

one of the distinguishing features of the three Norns, who themselves represent the past, present and future.²⁸

Ambiguously, they hail Banquo as lesser than Macbeth but also greater. He will not be king but will beget kings. Banquo, however, is suspicious. The Weird Sisters vanish, and Banquo says to Macbeth that if he believes the prophecies, he may be tempted (“enkindled”) to make a move for the crown, adding:

But tis strange;
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness [supernatural beings] tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us.
(1.3.122-25)

In contrast to Macbeth, blinded by his ambition, Banquo entertains rational doubts. Evildoing spirits from the dark underworld, he says, often betray us with “trifles,” seeming truths that are false and deceptive stories, an obsolete meaning of the word.²⁹ Naively unaware that Macbeth might eliminate him, he does not act on his doubts and suspicions. The all-knowing Weird Sisters, personifying the innate proclivities of Macbeth and now Banquo, have worked their deceptions on both of them.

Modern editions of *Macbeth* do not discuss the potential significance of the comical witches. In their journal articles, commentators wrestle briefly with the problem but then all but give up trying to make sense of the witches’ role in the play. Some consider it simply as an odd mixture. Others focus on the staging of the scenes in post-Reformation times. Harry Levin of Harvard calls it a mystery: “Their outlandish imminence seems elusive and amoral because of their mysterious connection with the machinery of fate.”³⁰ When critics do attempt to address the comedy of the witches in this tragedy, they stop short of discovering its significance. Janet Adelman of UC-Berkeley calls the witches “an odd mixture of the terrifying and the near comic” and finds that the ingredients for their cauldron “pass over toward grotesque comedy even while they create a (partly pleasurable) shiver of horror.”³¹ That’s all. Although Harry Berger of UC-Santa Cruz, in *Making Trifles of Terrors*, acknowledges that the witches “are as comical as they are sinister,”³² he, too, fails to elaborate or ask what that might mean. For Leslie A. Fiedler, the witches “are always on the verge of shifting from satanic to grotesque to fully comic.”³³ After taking the witches seriously, Edward H. Thompson of the University of Dundee acknowledges at the very end of his article a “surprising conclusion,” exclaiming that the witches in *Macbeth* provide “the comedy!”³⁴ Stephen Orgel of Stanford suggests an emphasis on the music, singing and dancing as entertainment for the audience. He even calls it a “move toward the court masque,”³⁵ short, theatrical entertainments for the monarch. He does not elaborate on this provocative idea. These commentators express surprise and puzzlement at the comic tone of the Weird Sister scenes. None asks what this juxtaposition of low comedy and supernatural prophesying might have meant for the Elizabethan and Jacobean audience.

Other critics suggest considering how the witchery scenes were performed as entertainments in the post-Reformation era, with more elaborate music, dancing and singing, apparently implying that directors of the late seventeenth century would have understood the dramatist's intention. Orgel asks, "What is the relation between tragedy and the antic quality of the witches?"³⁶ His answer is that we don't know but that productions decades later kept increasing the antic quality, seeming to imply that the comedy had special significance initially for the dramatist and his audiences. A. R. Braunmuller of UCLA notes that the witches "for much of the play's performance history [mainly later in the seventeenth century], have been comic figures" for their entertainment value,³⁷ but he does not address what the comedy might have meant for Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences. William Hazlitt gave up, writing simply in 1817 that they "are ridiculous on the modern stage."³⁸ For today's audiences, Stephen Greenblatt of Harvard says only that directors must decide whether the actors should be "made up to look grotesque or stately, perversely comical or terrifying."³⁹ The answer might well be all of the above, in order to depict their dual role as comical, outrageous witches whose antics undermine the prophecies of their Weird-Sister alter egos.

In act 3, scene 5, the supernatural Weird Sisters are lectured by an angry Hecate, goddess of the crossroads, the moon and many other things, including witchcraft. She chides them for not calling her to join in making the deceitful prophecies that are misleading Macbeth. She orders them to meet her in hell, "at the pit of Acheron" (3.5.15). She says she will "catch a vaporous drop" from the moon (3.5.25) and use it to "confuse" Macbeth, that is, deceive him, and she concludes that "security is mortal's chiefest enemy" (3.5.33). For Elizabethans, "security" could imply a false sense of security.⁴⁰ There is no witch behavior in this scene. Only the First Witch speaks, and she has only two lines.

In their final appearance, the three witches/Weird Sisters will again switch from one alter ego to the other, from contemporary witchery to supernatural prophesying. Act 4, scene 1, begins with the antic, Scottish witches dancing around a steaming cauldron: "Double, double toil and trouble / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble" (4.1.10-11). Cauldrons were a feature of witchcraft on the Continent. A cauldron appears only once in Scottish witchcraft and that is in a small part of a drawing in *Newes from Scotland*. It is one of six images in the sketch and is not mentioned in the text.⁴¹ The author of *Macbeth* almost certainly had learned about witches' cauldrons as well as flying witches who "hover" (1.1), both from witchcraft on the Continent, not England.

Into the cauldron go some of the most outlandish ingredients imaginable: a sweating toad, "eye of newt and toe of frog," a bat's fur, a dog's tongue, a lizard's leg, scales of dragon, a wolf's tooth, dried flesh from a corpse, the contents of a shark's stomach, a goat's gall bladder, a Turk's nose, a Tartar's lips, a Jew's liver, a tiger's guts, the finger of a stillborn baby and a piece of hemlock root—all cooled with the blood of a baboon.

Hecate arrives and takes charge. Known for her cauldron of sacred ingredients at a crossroads, she praises the witches with some gentle sarcasm for the evil brew in their cauldron, “Oh, well done! I commend your pains” (4.1.39). Three more witches join the first three, probably to enhance the entertainment, and Hecate orders them all, “and now about the cauldron sing / Like elves and fairies in a ring.” (4.1.41-42). The six boys in witches’ garb and wearing fake beards sing and dance like elves and fairies to accompanying music.

Macbeth arrives and sternly demands: “How now, you secret, black and midnight hags! What is it you do?” The hags stop dancing and prepare to morph into the dignified Weird Sisters. These crazy, risible antics by the contemporary witches, who do not have the power of prophecy, have prepared the audience to be properly skeptical when they become the Weird Sisters, the classical Fates who do prophesy.

The Weird Sisters conjure four apparitions for him. The first warns him to beware Macduff; but the second says that none of woman born will harm Macbeth, so Macduff is no problem. The third tells Macbeth he won’t be vanquished until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane, a most improbable event. Greedy for reassurance, Macbeth accepts these three prophecies at face value. They feed into his desperate ambition to prevail as king of Scotland despite an impending rebellion that might drive him from the throne. He believes what he wants to believe—what he has to believe—in the riddling prophecies of the Weird Sisters—a disastrous self-deception. Self-deception, personified by the Weird Sisters, is a defining characteristic of Macbeth’s personality.

The ambiguous prophecies appear to be true, but (as so often happened with the oracle at Delphi) turn out to be misleading. Macduff was not “of woman born” — by natural childbirth — but was delivered by Caesarean section. Birnam wood branches, carried by English soldiers as camouflage, will come to Dunsinane.

The fourth apparition shows him a parade of eight kings of Scotland and Banquo’s descendants in a mirror. If he believes the first three prophecies, this apparition must destroy his hopes for a dynasty. Banquo was ambushed and killed. His son and only descendant, Fleance, escaped, but he disappears from the play. Left unanswered is the question of whether his descendants will be kings of Scotland.

The apparition baffles Macbeth: “What? Is this so?” A Weird Sister answers with what is surely wickedly sly condescension:

Ay, sir, all this is so; but why
Stands Macbeth thus amazedly?
Come, sisters, cheer we up his spirits,
And show him the best of our delights.
I’ll charm the air to give a sound,
While you perform your antic round,
That this great king may kindly say,
Our duties did his welcome pay.
(4.1.125-32)

In these lines, their last in the play, the supernatural Weird Sisters finally merge with their personae as witches so they can dance and taunt the credulous Macbeth they have just duped with their ambiguous prophecies. With barely veiled sarcasm, one calls on the others to join her in cheering up Macbeth: "Come, sisters, cheer we up his spirits,/And show the best of our delights." The noun "delight" may be entirely innocent, that is, perhaps referring to their dancing, but that seems rather insipid. More apt for the witches would be something that is a source of great pleasure or joy.⁴² Given their gross behavior a few minutes earlier and their bawdy behavior in act 1, she may be urging that they "show the best of their delights" by exposing themselves. And when she says "I'll charm the air to give a sound," she could be giving a cue for music, but again a more pungent meaning would be a cue for flatulence, to "charm the air" noisomely.

Her final lines are loaded with cynical sarcasm: "That this great king may kindly say,/ Our duties did his welcome pay." That is, Macbeth welcomed us and solicited our knowledge of the future, and we repaid his welcoming credulity with our deceiving prophecies, which he should appreciate. It's a sarcastic farewell of dramatic irony if there ever was one. It's the end of the bitter comedy in this tragedy, and the pitiful Macbeth, victim of his self-deception, goes to his doom.

The author of *Macbeth* drew on his knowledge of classical and Norse mythology, witchcraft in Scotland and on the Continent, as well as the literature of rule and successful monarchy. In *We Three, the Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters*, Laura Shamas concludes: "Shakespeare had an excellent working knowledge of classical mythology. The Wyrdes, the Norns, the Fates, the Moirae, the Parcae and the Sibyls (with the nine Sibylline books) are all part of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters. The Muses and the Graces are related trios."⁴³ She doesn't include the Furies or the Gorgons in her summary but does discuss them a few times in earlier chapters. Nor does she speculate or explain how William of Stratford might have gained this "excellent working knowledge" of both classical and Indo-European mythology.

Oxfordians would suggest that the Elizabethan dramatist who fits these parameters was Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, now the leading candidate as the true author of the Shakespeare works, not William Shakspeare of Stratford. Oxford had ready access to Greek and Roman classics, and probably the Norse legends as well, in the libraries of his first tutor, the classical scholar Thomas Smith, and of his guardian, William Cecil, later Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's chief counselor. Burghley saw to the education of the teenage Oxford and the other aristocratic wards of the Court. His library, one of the largest in England, was rich in classical literature and mythology.

As might be expected, the witches in *Macbeth*, the "Scottish play" set in Scotland, act as Scottish witches, flying, dancing and sailing in sieves. Oxford served with the commanders of the English armies in Scotland for about half a year, and probably a few months longer, when he was nineteen.⁴⁴ In England he had close encounters with witchcraft at least three times. His home county of Essex was a center of witchcraft trials from the 1560s to the 1580s. He was sixteen years old when a major trial was held at Chelmsford, the county seat, less than twenty miles

from his ancestral home at Hedingham.⁴⁵ When he was thirty-two, another trial in Chelmsford took testimony against fourteen women from St. Osyth, a village next door to Wivenhoe, Oxford's principal country house when he was in his twenties and thirties.⁴⁶ In London, in 1581, he was accused by a bitter enemy of witchcraft, specifically copulating with a "female spirit" (a supernatural being) and conjuring up the Devil for a book of prophecies. The accusations were made by a friend turned bitter enemy, Charles Arundel, who listed several score, brief allegations,⁴⁷ most of them wildly incredible and none were supported by any evidence. They were ignored by the Crown, and no sanctions against Oxford are known. In any case, not only was Oxford exposed to witchcraft trials from an early age, he also personally experienced the annoyance, if not the peril, of being accused of witchcraft.

He traveled on the Continent for more than a year in his mid-twenties, and practices unique to witchcraft on the Continent appear in *Macbeth*. As noted above, in act 1, scene 1, the witches "hover through the fog and filthy air" and in act 4, scene 1, they cook up their brew in a cauldron. Cauldrons were in Continental witchcraft, not English, as were witches hovering, or flying. English witches did not fly.

Finally, Oxford was a leading, if controversial, nobleman in the court of Queen Elizabeth. He was perfectly placed to hear and read about the ongoing debates about the qualifications for Elizabeth's successor, who it should be, and how it should happen. He would have been among those who knew, long before it happened, that James VI was likely to become Elizabeth's successor at her death, as well as one interested in developing his own theories and principles of succession, a burning issue during almost the entire reign of Elizabeth. In *Macbeth* the Weird Sisters appear to incite regicide, which was the way to become king in eleventh century Scotland, and the murder of a rival (Banquo) to eliminate a rival dynasty. They then deceive Macbeth into believing he can prevail against armies seeking to overthrow him as a tyrant.

Regardless of the author's identity, a fuller appreciation of the contrasting but complementary roles of the hybrid Weird Sisters/Scottish witches can lead to a better understanding of the dramatist's intention. He debunks witchcraft with bitter burlesque, which undermines the credibility of the witches' alter egos, the supernatural Weird Sisters, who personify Macbeth's unexamined interior promptings with their ambiguous prophecies. It is Macbeth's self-deception about these interior promptings, not simply an overweening ambition, that leads to his tragic downfall and death.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Denton J. Snider, *System of Shakespeare's Dramas*, 2 vols. (St. Louis MO: Jones, 1877), 1:194.
- ² Albert H. Tolman, *The Views About Hamlet and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 102. In chapters 6 and 7 on *Macbeth*, Tolman suggested that the classical Weird Sisters were made to act like Elizabethan witches that the audience would recognize: "The usual manner in which the emissaries of Satan actually did lure men to evil was thought to be known, in a general way. If the weird sisters were to do that work, they would naturally do it in that way; they would use the apparatus of witchcraft. They must submit to dramatic necessity and be humanized; but they were humanized as witches" (102). But the Weird Sisters are not "the emissaries of Satan"; they are the Greek *Moirae*, the prophesying Roman *Fata*. They, not their witches alter egos, "lure men [Macbeth] to evil."
- ³ Snider, 178.
- ⁴ Richard Whalen, "Commedia dell'arte in *Othello*: A Satiric Comedy Ending in Tragedy," *Brief Chronicles III* (2011), 71-108. See also *Macbeth* in the Oxfordian Shakespeare Series, 2nd ed. incl. a new introduction to the play (Truro MA: Horatio Editions/Llumina Press, 2013).
- ⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first and earliest meaning of "weird."
- ⁶ Quoted by Tolman in his discussion of "weird," 89-91.
- ⁷ Tolman, 90.
- ⁸ *Macbeth Variorum* transcript, 387.
- ⁹ Tolman, 91-92.
- ¹⁰ Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Stuttgart: Kroner, 1984); trans. by Angela Hall (Rochester NY: Brewer, 1993 reprinted 1996, 2000), 79.
- ¹¹ G. K. Hunter, "Macbeth in the Twentieth Century," in *Shakespeare Survey 19 Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (Cambridge UP, 1966), 4.
- ¹² Arthur R. McGee, "Macbeth" and the Furies," in *Shakespeare Survey 19 Macbeth* (Cambridge UP, 1966). While surveying an exceedingly wide range of mythological and literary references that might have influenced *Macbeth*, McGee does not sufficiently recognize the difference between the personae of the witches and those of the Weird Sisters. He ignores the seemingly strong influence of the prophesying *Parcae* on the prophesying Weird Sisters, mentioning the the *Parcae* only once in passing (56).
- ¹³ McGee, 56-57.
- ¹⁴ G. Wilson Knight. *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), 2nd Routledge edition (2001), 176.
- ¹⁵ Edward H. Thompson, "Macbeth King James and the Witches," in *Studii de limbi si literature modern: studii de anglistica si americanistica*. Eds. Hortensia Parlog, Luminita Frentiu, Simona Rotariu. Timisoara (Romania) University Press, 1994. Also found by searching the Internet for "faculty.umb witchcraft grimoires Macbeth" (last viewed June 5, 2012). A well-researched, insightful paper first read at a conference on "Lancashire Witches – Law Literature and 17th Century Women" at the University of

Lancashire in 1993 and then at Timisoara University.

- ¹⁶ Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance* (London: Macmillan, 1989, 2nd ed.), 84. A compendium that extends the work of E. A. M. Colman's *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare* (1974) and Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1st ed. 1947). See also Pauline Kiernan's *Filthy Shakespeare* (2008).
- ¹⁷ *OED* 1. 2b.
- ¹⁸ Variorum footnote.
- ¹⁹ Rubinstein, 84.
- ²⁰ *OED* obsolete.
- ²¹ Thompson, 3.
- ²² James Carmichael (?), *Newes from Scotland*. (London: Wright, 1591. Reprint, London: Shakespeare Press, 1816, n.p.). An account of the 1590-91 witchcraft trial in North Berwick, Scotland, at which James VI of Scotland interrogated several defendants implicated in an alleged plot against him. It includes a sketch of Scottish witches with a cauldron, from Continental witchcraft; and a sketch of Macbeth and Banquo encountering the three Weird Sisters.
- ²³ *OED*, 5.c.
- ²⁴ *OED* 16.b, although without contemporary citations.
- ²⁵ *OED* 11.e.
- ²⁶ *OED* 10.a.
- ²⁷ Thompson, 4.
- ²⁸ Simek, 79.
- ²⁹ *OED*, its earliest and now obsolete meaning.
- ³⁰ Harry Levin, "Two Scenes from *Macbeth*" in *Shakespeare's Craft: Eight Lectures*, ed. Philip H. Highfill Jr. (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1982), 57.
- ³¹ Adelman, 99.
- ³² Harry Berger, *Making Trifles of Treasures: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare* (Stanford U. Press, 1997), 116.
- ³³ Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (London: Croom Helm, 1973), 66.
- ³⁴ Thompson, 8.
- ³⁵ Stephen Orgel, "*Macbeth* and the Antic Round" in *Shakespeare Survey 52* (Cambridge UP, 1999), 148.
- ³⁶ Orgel, 149.
- ³⁷ A. R. Braunmuller, ed. *Macbeth* in the New Cambridge Series (Cambridge UP, 1997), 30.
- ³⁸ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1817. Reprint London: Macmillan, 1920), 19.
- ³⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Norton Shakespeare* (1997), 2560.
- ⁴⁰ *OED*, 4, "a feeling of safety or freedom from or absence of danger."
- ⁴¹ Thompson, 4.
- ⁴² *OED*.
- ⁴³ Laura Shamas, *We Three: The Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters* (New York: Lang, 2007), 98.
- ⁴⁴ Bernard M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550-1564 from Contemporary Documents* (London: Murray, 1928), 40-49.
- ⁴⁵ William E. Burns, *Witch Hunts in Europe and America*. (Westport CT: Greenwood, 2003), 48.
- ⁴⁶ Burns, 49-50; Charles Wisner Barrell, "'Shake-speare's' Unknown Home on the River Avon Discovered," *The Shakespeare Fellowship News-Letter* (American), 4:1 (December

1942); reprinted by Ruth Loyd Miller in *Oxfordian Vistas*. 2:355-68 (Port Washington NY: Kennikat, 1975), 360; Charlton Ogburn, Jr., *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (McLean VA: EPM Publications, 1984), 410, 507, 561.

⁴⁷ Internet web site's transcription of: "Oxford-Arundel Libels 1580-81"; part 4, doc. 4.2.