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THE MISUNDERSTOOD WAYWARD SISTERS IN MACBETH: EVALUATION OF
WITCHCRAFT IN SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the existence and influence of supernatural beliefs encompassing witchcraft. This paper aims to critically evaluate the role, characters and the purposes of the weird sisters in the illustrious work of Shakespeare, 'Macbeth'. The main interest of this paper is to look beyond the already established interpretations of the purpose as well as the portrayal of the weird sisters and reach another possible version of the picture where it is evident that their presence was indeed inevitable and indispensable in bringing out the deep embedded malice inside the heart of the protagonist. The presence of the witches and their prophecies acts as a premonition to the downfall of the "Virtuous" Macbeth. In the contemporary society witches were believed to harbor innate evil and the ability to harm and destroy innocent people. The witches in Macbeth was seen under the same light as other accused witches of the time by the folks belonging to both common and royal strata of the society. They were condemned and was looked down upon with sheer resentment and abhorrence. This article will argue that witches, apart from setting the events of the play into motion, has no major involvement in the ruination and undoing of Macbeth as is believed, but rather plays a pivotal and a decisive role in the entire course of the play and helps illuminate the innate evil ambitions in every human when exposed to temptation through Macbeth.

INTRODUCTION

Belief in witchcraft is the most extravagant and sensational aspect of Elizabethan superstition. The very idea of "witches" and "witchcraft" impregnated the minds of the Elizabethan orthodox society. In Renaissance England, witches were regarded as men or women who had made the link, the so-called "pact" or "contract," with evil powers. A "witch" ordinarily was a decrepit old hag whom people thought to be in league with Satan. The devil, it was believed, had bestowed them with unearthly powers and abilities. The witches were believed to be able to fly, vanish in thin air, raise storms and tempests, and inflict people and animals with unfamiliar and foreign diseases. Miss Agnes Murray, while interpreting the craft as a Dianic cult says that it was "practiced by many of the community, chiefly, however, by the more ignorant or those in the less thickly populated parts of the country". Scholar Theodore Roszak impeccably underscored that the occult "has become an integral part of the counterculture". The occult was the central part of the Renaissance culture. England was going through a phase of political and religious upheaval at the time of the advent of its Renaissance. Despite the revival of the

classical learning, classical forms and classical themes, the English society was still soaked with the supernatural beliefs about witches and their sinister ways to disrupt human life. During the rule of Elizabeth, the English society saw some terrifying effects of the very craft on the monarch herself. At the court of Elizabeth I there was a lingering fear that image magic was used against the Queen. Prof. Carol Levine, in her article "Witchcraft in Shakespeare's England", mentions that the image magic is a craft that deals with harming someone by creating a picture or a wax doll and then attacking the image or doll stabbing it in the heart with bristles or sticks. While Elizabeth was on progress in East Anglia, Prof. Levine elucidates further that the queen fell extremely ill with an unknown ailment. Later, three wax images or dolls of each about twelve inches tall, were found in a dung heap in Lincoln's Inn Feds. One was clearly perceived to represent the queen as it had the name "Elizabeth" on the forehead; the other two apparently appeared as two of her closest advisors. It was assumed that whoever made those images nursed malicious intentions for the queen and desperately wanted to cause her agony by intending the images to melt in the warmth of the dung heap causing excruciating pain, distress and eventually death of the monarch along with the wax effigies represented. Prof Levine says in her article that "Elizabeth's illness and her severe dental problems were later associated with the wax 'poppets' and to take due care of the matter, the magus and astrologer John Dee who happened to be one of the monarch's close acquaintance was sent to Norwich to perform counter magic" in order to reverse the adverse effects of the image magic. Performing witchcraft became a statutory crime during this era. There were peculiar ways of identifying witches during the trials and one of the methods was the presence of the 'witch-mark' on a woman's body which was supposed to have been put by the devil himself. The existence of a familiar was another way of identifying the craft practitioner. Familiars were demonic creatures which might appear to be any small animal be it a dog or a rat used mainly to do the witches' bidding or sometimes it was believed that the familiars were the devil in disguise. A very dubious way to point out a witch was by using water. Water was believed to be the purest and most pristine than anything and everything on earth, the suspected witch would be tied up and flung into a pond or a lake; if the suspect sank it was believed that the water 'accepted' her and therefore she cannot be a witch, but if she floated, then it would be believed that the water has 'rejected' her and she was presumed to be a witch. As Prof Levine observe, "one of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers Sir Walter Raleigh, described witches as women controlled by the devil. But others such as Reginald Scott, author of 'Discoverie of Witchcraft' were far more skeptical; Scott argued against the very existence of supernatural witchcraft and claimed that some accused witches were women who did not have a stable mental disposition". At that time witch trials were reaching its zenith and the majority of the accused were vulnerable women belonging to a weak and poor socio-economic background. Witchcraft and credulous beliefs were not exclusive to only England, it was one of the main and dreaded concern all over the continent. As Howell V. Calhoun states, "Continental witchcraft had been formalized, partly through the influence of church which identified it with the Gnostic and Manichaeic heresies which believes that the two realms of light and darkness, good and evil, peace and strife are eternally opposed to each other; and God and Satan", Similar to that of the ancient Persian Ormazd and Ahriman, rule over these realms respectively. Howell V Calhoun further claims that "The Church found a good congruence of the aforementioned beliefs with an elaborate demonical science, with ceremonial worship of the Evil one, regular meetings or "Sabbats" to pay homage and indulge in Saturnalian orgies and exercise of elaborate evil powers on the part of the devotees of the cult". English witchcraft on the other hand was a very primitive and primordial affair which predominantly stems from the domestic life of the classes belonging to the lower strata of the English society. By comparison, the English Witchcraft practice manifested absolutely no signs or trace of Sabbath. The practice was devoid of the exotic continental features. Maybe the witchcraft practices in England was not as alien and intense as the continental witchcraft practices, but the sheer knowledge of the existence of something unknown and its dealings with the diabolical creatures of the netherworld was enough to instill fright and terror in the minds of the common masses. The paranoia that a witch could use her powers for the benefit, or the destruction of her community was spread like a forest fire in England during sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.

WITCHCRAFT IN JACOBAN ERA

James IV of Scotland, who eventually in his later years came to be known as James I of England was brought up in a country that was obsessed with superstitions and sorcery. James had a hands on experience with the menacing and baleful activities of witches and left a careful account of his experiences in his pamphlet 'Newes From Scotland declaring the damnable life and death of Doctor Fian, a notable sorcerer', which was brought to light in the year 1591. Howell V Calhoun describes that the pivotal subject of the whole affair was the evil activities of Dr. Fian, Agnis Sampson and the north Berwick Witches in their attempt to destroy the ship king James was on along with his bride on their way to Denmark. Howell V. Calhoun further delineates, "King James and his officials were successful in getting hold of Agnis Sampson and Dr.Fian who were later subjected to the most unspeakable gut wrenching and horrendous tortures to facilitate their confessions. Agnis's head was wrenched with a rope, pilliwinks were led on her fingers and pins inserted to the heads beneath what was left of them. Even more harrowing tortured followed as the torturers were not content with the brutalities, they crushed both Fian's legs in iron boots until "the bloud and marrow sprouted forth in great abundance, whereby they were made unseuerable forever" after enduring such unbearable agony, the story that was patched together from various confessions is something astonishing. "Agnis affirmed her participation in the act by christening a cat and bounding portions of a dead man's body to it. Later she along with the other witches threw this cat into the sea and this was supposedly the reason why James encountered a storm on his way back home from Denmark that almost liquidated him and his bride. Agnis, along with the other accused witches were subjected to tremendous tortures which were gut wrenching, harrowing and gruesome in nature and to escape being tortured any further, they chose to finally accept all the accusation and embrace death than enduring tortures on a regular basis. James's sheer fear for such dark acts led him to compose his classic work, The 'Daemonologie' which first appeared in Scotland in 1597 but was not published in England until 1603 when he ascended the throne. According to Calhoun, in this work James allies himself with Bodin and those authorities who believed fully in the malevolent, malign and supernatural nature of witchcraft. The book is divided into three parts, the first part includes the subject of magic, necromancy and all sorts of occult dealings, the second part deals with the subject of witchcraft, sorcery and black magic and the third part expatiated on all kinds of spirits, spectre, spirits and wraith. The king's intention in this work was to shed light on two things, "the one, that such diueish artes haue bene and are and the other, what exact trial and seure punishment they merit". The monarch betrays a singular gullibility with respect to the diabolical powers attributed to witches and definitely says that they "ought to be put to death according to the law of God, the ciuill and imperial law and municipall law of all Christian nations". According to Calhoun, James's work is a statement of personal beliefs, rather than a scholarly study of the subject and consequently was respected in that light by all those who sought to ingratiate themselves into the favor of the king. There exists yet another aspect to king James' belief for the extramundane and occult practices. Women were associated with most of these other-worldly crafts than men were. Women were considered weaker both in brute and emotional strength as well as were without a voice. Hence it was believed that women were more vulnerable and susceptible to fall prey to such unreflective urges to gain some class of power and thus ended up performing witchcraft. According to Stephanie Irene Spoto's research, it is documented that during the witch trials of the Essex county in England, only 23 out of 291 accused were male and that women became increasingly involved in the witchcraft trials as their percentages grew exponentially from the final years of Elizabeth's reign and was nearly 53% during the Restoration. Spoto believes that one of the possibilities for such an unbalanced participation maybe that witchcraft served to grant a modicum of power and a possible voice to the women swept up in what came to be known as the "witch-craze". Women were not allowed to voice out their opinions as well as their fantasies and were expected to stay confined in their households. Indulging into such uncanny crafts resulted in them being taken to the courts during trials where they could finally speak and explain themselves and this proved to be the only way a woman could speak up in that era. Spoto says that "Though their voices were largely filtered through the ink of the magistrates and male court attendants, they are among the only women in early modern history whose fantasies and words have been written down and is documented". Images of witches were in stark contrast with the typical female domestic roles, and it is no surprise that some women would voluntarily choose to identify themselves with the witch figure which was causing fear and alarm in their society, as witch trials were often

the only way that women's issues were given a stage and a public outlet. In a way, the self-identification of "witch" helped impoverished women gain power and respect owing to the fear of chaos they can cause, in their community; all the while witchcraft trials were bringing women and women's issues to the courtroom and the spotlight for perhaps the first time in history. Spoto also mentions Diane Purkiss's book and says "in opening her book, 'The Witch in History' argues "that in Early Modern England, the witch was a woman's fantasy and not simply a male's nightmare. Because women were thought to have a better insight of the craft and its consequences, participation of prosecution opened the door of the courtroom for them". The issues that were spoken about by the convicted witches were given attentive and ardent ear when encased in the problem of local witch lore and the widely spreading satanic anarchy. Issues which were never paid any attention to were voiced out in the courtroom, such female populations that previously did not have any outlet to vent and pour out their frustrations were finally addressing concerns which were otherwise neglected. Issues such as infant mortality rate and loaning were coming to light. Spoto mentions that "Mothers grieving for the death of their infant children lacked possible medical explanations and thus the midwives were an easy target and scapegoats and the allegation of witchcraft helped the mourning parents place blame in a legal setting". Since the allegations surrounding witchcraft were taken up with utmost priority and urgency during the Jacobean era, any case related to such accusation would have been prioritized. It was easy to accuse anyone of witchcraft as it was the most believable and tended to accusation at that time and would never fall on deaf ear and would never go unnoticed. The concept encompassing this craft was not only restricted to the courtrooms and in a legal domain. The position of these practitioners was very dicey and uncertain. Prof. Spoto says that "In early modern European villages, some women performed the role of healers and were often known as wise-women" who fell back on a whole tradition of folk remedies consisting of ancient herbs and ointments in the treatment of their townspeople and since these women performed noble deeds according to their community by healing and saving lives, they were tolerated by their neighbors and were never questioned. However, these women were vulnerable in their craft. If someone who they have tended to or even came into contact with a disease or fell ill, these "wise women" were blamed blatantly and was open to charges of witchcraft and "maleficia". Also, it is not a coincidence that the tools witches use largely is associated with household. Many critics have managed to establish a connection between the domestic aspect of a woman's life and the malicious craft. This particular craft has been observed accompanied by domestic and household items and since women were considered more often to be associated with the items belonging in a household, the domestic tools were transformed into malicious tools for diabolical magic. These items, normally categorized within this domestic and private space of the home, were often attributed to witchcraft or to being exposed to witchcraft. It is no mere coincidence that witches were depicted with the company of a cauldron which was very much a domestic tool used for the creation of food and contributes to the nourishment of the entire family. It would become a vessel in which many components of sorcery were concocted and a vessel in which poison would be brewed. The cauldron, household pets and of course the broomstick, each of them are figure prominent items in the folklore of witchcraft. Women in this era who worked in this domestic space were often open to suspicions of sorcery and were pointed out if they demonstrated behaviors thought to be unbecoming of a woman: a refusal to marry, senility, a harsh temper or promiscuity. Any woman whose beliefs deferred from any widely accepted beliefs, whose appearance and physical attributes were different from the generally accepted attributes; having a different hair color or a birthmark, were singled out and was labeled as a witch. A witch was identified through her visible rejection of a societal norm and widely accepted societal moral code and her actions against commonly held standards for women among which promiscuity was considered most dangerous and a subversive activity for a woman to engage in during the witch-hunts. The most common attribute in the portrayals of witches is their exaggerated sexuality. Spoto mentions that "The fear of witches and their power links directly to their sexuality and was often accused of establishing sexual relations with the devil who was believed to appear in different forms such as a cat or a goat and would associate itself with perverted rituals of sexual nature along with the witch". The witches were not only identified on the basis of their demonstrated behavior but was also singled out by the presence of "witch marks" which were, "incriminating marks found in very secret places". James I in his work, "Daemonologie", lays out a description of witch's mark as a "mark vpon some secreit of their bodie which remaines soare vnhealed"—these soares resided in genital regions and very

frequently the symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases which were conceived as diabolical and demonic marks. Hence, a woman's tendency of hyper sexuality was condemned and looked down upon. The fear lay on the belief that a witch, who is certainly a woman, has the ability to make any man impotent. Even in *Daemonologie*, King James elucidates his credence that a witch can cast diseases and make men inadequate for women by enervating their vitality. Along with the behavioral, physical and sexual images of the witches, the visual representation of the witchcraft also holds much importance. Hans Baldung Grien, among other painters, engravers, woodcutters of this period, stressed the sexuality which was feared the most even by the monarch himself along with their supernatural powers. In one of the portraits of Grein, namely "Two Witches" (1523), the images of the two female figures are sexualized with exaggerated voluptuousness. In the portrait one could easily get inclined towards the menacing unsurprised woman who seems to invite the voyeurism but eventually would move his glance to the other image of a child at the back who appears frightened and crouches uncomfortably, looking with uncertainty at the viewer. Here Grien sketches two female figures, one which faces away from the viewer's glance and the other who is open to the viewer's eyes. The two feminine figures illustrated, having extremely voluptuous and attractive physique but is devoid of any form of coyness or diffidence, rather appears extremely confident and frighteningly inviting and with a child hiding at the back. This image by Hans Baldung Grein gives a portrayal of how traditional witches were perceived in the early modern era. Furthermore, the fearful and petrified child sends a grim depiction of cannibalistic infanticide which was common in the folklore surrounding witch's sabbath and was highly believed to be a connatural ritual in witchcraft in this age. In more such paintings, household items were commonly illustrated. And not only the household tools and items were specified but also quite a few household pets turned diabolical familiars were depicted. Animals played an indispensable role in a witch's life. It was staunchly believed that whether a witch is at the Sabbath or in her home, she is either surrounded by animals or becomes one of them. The witch's ability to communicate with, or even transform herself into an animal is testimony to her mystical and occult powers. James I was especially concerned with this relationship of animals and witches as he was paranoid when his ship was nearly wrecked and as he later found that along with other diabolical elements that were used to conjure up the tempest was a christened cat. According to Prof Spoto "The association of small animals with the witches has been religiously mentioned by many scholars and have claimed that the witch's relation to the animal makes her subhuman based on man's superiority over animals. In many pre-Christian pagan faiths in Europe, a relation to the animal placed the witch among the sacred or divine. Ulrich Molitor's collection of treaties on witches were titled "De Lamis et Pythonicis Mulieribus" (1489) which translates to 'Of Witches and Diviner Women.'" Here it is evident that witches were indeed equated with divinity or often seen as 'soothsayers' and in one of his images, "Witches Riding to the Sabbath", as Prof Spoto observes, "the witches more or less resemble the anthropomorphic Egyptian Gods". As mentioned earlier, the practice of this occult craft was not limited to the womankind, it was practiced among some males as well, but they were admired and was far from being identified with anything ominous. The female witch as promiscuous poisoner and rebellious anarchist stands in sharp contrast to the vision of the male practitioner of magic: the magician. The image of the witches in many ways differ from that of the image of the magician. "Often" Prof Spoto explains "as in the case of more famous magical occultists, like John Dee, Edward Kelley or Cornelius Agrippa, they worked to reinforce the political order rather than disrupt it. John Dee was an astrologer to Elizabeth 1; Edward Kelley travelled to Bohemia to practice the occult with Emperor Rudolf II; and Agrippa was an accomplished lecturer and lawyer. However, with the transition from Elizabeth to James, John Dee's status as a natural philosopher and a "good" magician fell into jeopardy as James had a less flexible view of witchcraft and magic, and also the famous school of the Night—which included Christopher Marlowe, Henry Percy and Simon Forman—was investigated by Robert Cecil, a minister under James, for activities of blasphemy and treason". Thus, it can be concluded that before James I came into power by ascending the throne of England, the discrimination between the female and the male occult practitioners were pronounced. With James's ascension to the throne, however, the marked inequity between the two sets of practitioners started to dissolve and the high ground that was assumed by the male preternatural practitioners received a noticeable blow to some extent. Needless to say, the baleful and sinister image of a female arcane practitioner as witches did not face any alterations and they still remained threatening to the society. Accusing a woman of witchcraft was fueled either by the rising power of the witches and the belief as

well as fear of the ultimate destruction that they were capable of doing or the very fact that societal patriarchy was in question and the societal hierarchy was somewhat being inverted. The latter possibility is as much credible as the former possibility. It was believed that every household should be governed by a male figure and he would be equated with the monarch himself. This very belief was challenged by a woman in the year 1645. Prof Spoto explicates that “not long after the end of James’s reign, one of the very few cases in England of a witch being burned at stake was published, when witchcraft was punishable by hanging. Mother Lakeland used witchcraft to kill her husband. Since witchcraft was amalgamated with murder and that too of the male head of the household, it was seen under the light of treason as James I asserted that a household is microcosmic version of a state and eliminating the head of the household is equivalent to eliminating the monarch. Any revolt against the existing hierarchy threatened the monarchy hence Mother Lakeland’s actions were perceived as a rebellion against that hierarchy”. Whenever a woman was perceived to be dogmatic, assertive and domineering she was accused of witchcraft as it was the only way to suppress both the rise of the ominous craft and the inversion of hierarchy. It is absolutely no coincidence that many queens and female rulers were accused of being witches for their fearless demeanor and it is needless to say that the first tetralogy of Shakespeare (the three parts of Henry VI and Richard III that dealt with the ending of the war) focuses on the connection between witchcraft accusations and politically powerful women including Joan la Pucelle or Joan of Arc and Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester. Even James I was a believer that women were more susceptible to this tempting craft than men and claims in his ‘Daemonologie’ that women are the weaker sex “so it is easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the deuell, as was ouer well proued to be true, by the serpents decieuing of Eua at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine”(Ch. 5,43-45). James I, by linking women and witchcraft, concluded that witchcraft and magic has become disobedience to the earthly authority and a disruption of his benign and God-sanctioned reign. James ruled by Divine Right and claimed to be chasing witches not because of his position as the ruling monarch and harbors the power to command thousands “but because God hath made me a king and judge to judge righteous judgement”. He connected his witch-hunts with his powers as king.

WAYWARD SISTERS IN ‘MACBETH’

All the beliefs and credence regarding witches and their crafts were ever pervasive in the works of the then scholars. James positioned himself as the father of the family politically as well as religiously. He demanded a divinely sanctioned authority with absolute power. His self-appointed position as the father, king and god of the state made many playwrights of his time construct their works in accordance with the fantasies of the king because the works were officially sponsored by the court and was expected to cater to the monarch’s beliefs. Therefore, the works served as the key role when attempting to understand James’s mind. One of the most notable playwrights of the time, Ben Jonson, eagerly wanted to gain patronage. To stay in royal favors, he incorporated his extensive knowledge of demonology and occult, classical knowledge and popular folklore in his play, ‘The Alchemist’ and few of his masques including the Masque of Queens and the Masque of Beauty. Since James I was inclined towards occult beliefs and their credibility, Jonson frequently mentions the presence of the uncanny elements and agents in his masques as he believed it would cater to the monarch’s taste for supernatural. In both his masques, he brings Hecate—who, amongst many roles assumed, was the goddess of witches and moon. In his ‘Masque of Queens’ the witches describe raising a storm in reference to Hecate.

“You that have seen me ride when Hecate
Durst not take chariot, when the boisterous sea
Without a breath of wind hath knocked the sky,
And that hath thundered, Jove not knowing why. (1. 222-25)”

Jonson, here, very accurately and favorably delineated the tempest which is being conjured up by the witches in the masque in order to help the monarch find a relatability with the tempest he had witnessed on his voyage to Denmark for his wedding. By doing so he may have been able to incite a sense of familiarity inside James which in turn may have aroused a sense of fascination in him. Thus successfully, the playwright was able to present his work in keeping with the king’s beliefs.

Shakespeare was indeed the greatest dramatist of all time. He was bestowed with the capability to convey the impeccability of all his characters in the most dramatic yet acceptable manner. He too, like Ben Jonson, preferred to be in a desirable position under the rule of James I. His unimpeachable knowledge over the witch lore is excellently portrayed in Macbeth. His use of quite a few elements of Scottish and continental witch lore like ceremonial dancing, concocting foul brew and conjuring up spirits in Macbeth has its origin in Daemonologie. Shakespeare very intricately made inclusions of elements which were closely related to the monarch's beliefs and experiences. The poisonous concoction of the witches in Act II scene IV had "liver of blaspheming Jew", "nose of Turk and tartar's lips", as well as the "finger of birth-strangled babe" as its ingredients, all of which has been specifically mentioned in James's Daemonologie as forbidden since Dr Fian confessed that she had used parts of a dead man in raising the storm that nearly destroyed James's ship. Also, the belief that the animal familiars are indispensable for every witch has been comprehensibly mentioned in Act I Scene 1 of Macbeth

Witch 1: I come Graymalkin

Witch 2: Paddock calls.

All the attributes that were attested to all the Scottish and English witches in general like the ability to fly, to conjure tempest and spirits were attested to the three witches in Macbeth as well. Thus, it is certain that the atmosphere in Macbeth and the character of the three sisters were also designated to appeal to the monarch's tastes and opinions on the subject of witchcraft. But a reader with scholastic disposition would readily find the character of the witches investigative and it goes beyond the veil of the established witch-figure of the time. In the first read, it is inevitable for any reader to place the blame of Macbeth's fall on the three witches as they were the first agents who brought to Macbeth's knowledge the events in the future. One might rightly argue that had the witches not appeared and showered the knowledge of the future on Macbeth, he would not have ventured onward and commit the sins he had committed, but taking into consideration the superficial happenings and conclude that the witches paved the way to Macbeth's ruination would not do justice to Shakespeare's proficiency as a capable dramatist. The weird sisters externally appeared familiar to the generic image of witches. As Walter Clyde Curry said, "As dramatic symbols, Shakespeare's Weird Sister seem to be pre-eminently adequate and successful. In appearance, speech and action they seem intended to suggest accurately such witches and witchcraft as were familiar to the Elizabethan public. They are desiccated, hag-like creatures with choppy fingers, skinny lips and beard who dwell preferably in the murk of desert places and rejoice in upheavals of nature." But Shakespeare being the genius he is, very insightfully constructed their character. Since the early modern period was saturated with different negative beliefs surrounding the witches, the weird sisters were perceived the way other witches of the time were perceived. Hence the preconceived notion about the weird sisters that came to existence from Shakespeare's time and was widely believed of being the center of all mishaps that happens with Macbeth, is prevalent till date. As Walter Clyde Curry observes, they are more of oracles than ominous creatures. "Compacts with the devil and his angels assure them a certain prophetic power". Most critics believe that they are not merely witches. Witches were believed to harm, cause disruption and were blamed to be the perpetrator of all things evil. They were believed to have deviated from all human attributes and were considered threatening and dangerous to humanity as was discussed earlier. Shakespeare's Weird Sisters do not seem to fit well into that role, and Walter Clyde Curry perceives them as creatures possessing "a curious majesty and even sublimity". They seem to hold the knowledge of past, present and future. Holinshed describes the three women who were met with Macbeth and Banquo when travelling through the forest on their horses as "three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of the elder world...either the weird sisters, that is(as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesies by their necromanticall science.". Most of Shakespeare's critics keep themselves from associating the three women with the gruesome description and beliefs encompassing the witch-lore. Simon Forman, who was a medical practitioner with connection to the highest elites of London society, describes 'Macbeth' as: "In Macbeth at the Globe...there was to be observed first how Macbeth and Banquo, two noble men of Scotland, riding through the wood, there stood before them, three women, fairies or nymphs, and saluted Macbeth, saying three times unto: 'Hail Macbeth, king of Codon, for thou shall be a king, but shall beget no kings, etc.' He too does not address the three women who 'ambush' Macbeth witches, as they

clearly are not in keeping with the traditional credence surrounding a typical witch. As a matter of fact, no one in the play calls them witches. The word is used once in dialogue when the First Witch explains where she has been and reports that a sailor's wife, refusing her request for food, called out 'Aroint thee, witch' (act 1 scene III). Terry Eagleton perceives the witches to be 'no longer the despised demons of critical and theatrical tradition'. The word the witches most often use of themselves is 'sister', suggesting a female solidarity that is rarely found in the early modern culture outside of religious order.

"Witch 1. Ay, sir all this is so. But why stands Macbeth thus amazedly? Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprites,

And show the best of our delights" (act IV scene I).

Some critics identified the weird sisters with divinity, for them the weird sisters seem to have properties in common with Urda, Verdandi and Skulda, the Nornes of Norse mythology and the Greek Moirai and the Roman Parcae. The weird sisters are enigmatic, possessing a certain dignity and mysterious quality. More than emanating an aura of evil, they inspire awe in the beholder and compels contemplation. Shakespeare, with his artistic imagination, has woven the weird sisters in a way that would stimulate the imagination of the reader to the "point of grasping some underlying emotional, moral or intellectual content", as stated by W. C. Curry. The role of the wayward sisters does not go beyond uttering the prophecies to Macbeth. They are not seen manipulating him in any way or using him as a puppet to fulfil their evil motives. But the fact that something evil, something malign has plagued the mind of Macbeth cannot be disregarded. As W. C. Curry says, "All hands seems to be convinced that the weird sisters symbolize or represent evil in its most malignant form, though there is to be found little unanimity of opinion regarding the precise nature of that evil, whether it is subjective or objective or both, whether mental or metaphysical". Some modernists are of the opinion that the sisters are the physical manifestation of Macbeth's evil passion and desire, "they are simply the embodiment of inward temptation; they come in storm and vanish in air, like corporeal impulses, which, originating in the blood, cast up bubbles of sin and ambition in the soul". A. W. Schlegel finds that these "repulsive things... are here the symbol of the hostile powers which operates in nature". Frederick Boas believes that "theirs is an independent vitality of evil whirling through the universe till it finds asylum in the soul where germs of sin lie ready to be quickened to life". A. C. Bradley says that they "they must represent not only the evil slumbering in the hero's soul, but all those obscurer influences of evil around him in the world which...are as certain, momentous and terrifying facts as the presence of inchoate evil in the soul itself". Macbeth is a play that may raise different interpretation and while reviewing, many commentators get excited and stimulated through instrumentality of different dramatic symbols. The time in which Shakespeare lived considered evil to be "both subjective and objective and the fact that evil manifested itself subjectively in the spirits of men and objectively in the metaphysical world" was highly credible. "this objective realm of evil was not governed by mere vague or irrational forces; it was peopled and controlled by malignant wills of intelligences-evil spirits". Macbeth was barely exposed to the prophecies of the three sisters and it was sufficient for his innermost and deepest desires to get stirred to the point of no return. According to W. C. Curry, the sisters are not merely witches in league with the devil but rather the devil itself. Adhering to the Christian theology, W. C. Curry argues that the fallen angels, even after their fall, still retains their uncorrupted intellect and "they still belong to the original orders of angel from which they fell". He believes that the devil and his agents are God's executioner and punisher. He says that "lest demons should cease to be of service in the natural order, God disposes that they provide opposition to the good in man, so that, through exercise in fighting against evil, the human soul may indirectly be perfected unto salvation. Their place of punishment is twofold: in hell, where they serve as the executioners of God's wrath upon wicked men; and in the darksome atmosphere of this world, where they act as God's minister". These intellectual substances acts as an indispensable part in the working out of man's fate, "Indeed, the function of demonic powers in the cosmic order is to participate in the working out of man's destiny". He observed that "everything that happens outwardly among men is known to them" and "Understanding the causes of things, they know the future development of events conjecturally though not absolutely". They are unable to discern the inmost thoughts of the human mind except through interpretation of outward bodily signs. Similarly, the weird sisters were unable to read the deepest desires residing in Macbeth but whatever happens

outwardly among men is immediately known to them as they look upon the distant battle in which Macbeth came out victorious from a desert place and conjectures that it will be lost and won before the day ends. Their prophecies are solely speculative yet impeccable as “by the virtue of their spiritual substances they are acquainted with the causes of things and through the application of wisdom gained by long experience are able to prognosticate future events” (Curry). Even though they are well equipped with prophetic powers, they are unable to perceive the inmost thoughts of an individual—only God is able to do that but according to W.C. Curry, “They surmise with comparative accuracy what passions drive him and what dark desires of his await their fostering”.

Realizing that Macbeth desires the kingdom, they accordingly make a prophecy. The expression of disappointment, resentment and anger on Macbeth’s face, towards king Duncan for completely turning a blind eye to his valor, vigor and loyalty for his king and country, and making Malcolm the next ruler was discernible and perceptible to the three sisters. The prophecies somewhat acted as an assurance to Macbeth’s passions, an affirmation that he was in search of. Banquo on the other hand assumed a calm and rational state of mind which helped him in disregarding every word that was spoken by the sisters even though one of the prophecies included him. Macbeth allowed himself to be engulfed by his inordinate passion and desires which got stirred by his interpretation of the witch’s prophecies and let to regicide. Initially he resisted, his conscience was still intact but not for long. It was his wife, Lady Macbeth who provided the final nail in the coffin, by questioning his ‘manhood’. One cannot fully conclude that Lady Macbeth was indeed malicious as half of her ambition was driven by her love and well wishes for her husband. Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy (act I scene IV) attest to her innate loyalty and attachment with her husband. She invited the unclean spirits into her, ridding her off of all human kindness, she knows also that these spiritual substances study eagerly the effects of the mental activity upon the human body, waiting patiently for any traces of evil thought which will permit them entrance past the barriers of the human will into the body to possess it. Similarly, these spirits find asylum in Macbeth’s psyche as his will and rationale becomes transparent and penetrable. Every human being is invested with a sublime dignity, unlike other creatures he is endowed with a rationale soul having two god-like capabilities: namely intellect or understanding with which he discovers truth and will, with which he desires truth. God has placed humans in the middle, he has conferred on him the freewill to either rise to holiness or degrade to bestiality. W. C. Curry says that “the will is that power of the soul which desires ultimate ends, good and happiness; free will is that same power in the act of choosing appropriate means to those ends. Freewill is, therefore, a faculty of both will and reason, since both powers are involved in any act of free choice. No power can move the human will directly except the necessity of end”, hence it is not possible for neither human being nor devil to coerce or directly compel the free will of man unless he himself deliberately wills that unclean spirits would invade his body and seize upon his minds and thoughts. A man with a weaker will and resistance and harboring ill desires are more susceptible to get captivated by these evil ministers. Macbeth, on his first encounter with the weird sisters seemed suspicious and remained unfazed to some extent after being the audience to their prophecies, it was after Duncan announced Malcolm to be his successor that compelled him to resort to his darkest desires and pave the way for the evil ministers to corrupt his mind. As Robert Bossler states, “Macbeth had been unjustly frustrated. King Duncan, who, according to tradition, should have been in the most dangerous places leading his men, stayed in safety. Macbeth and Duncan had both been candidates to the throne. When Duncan was elected, he proved to be such a weak ruler that successful revolt seemed possible. It also made conquest seem likely to the king of Norway, and he was able to gain co-operation among Duncan’s own personal advisers. Both these threats were broken by Macbeth.” Macbeth came out to be a more rightful ruler than Duncan, he was the man who fought like a warrior in a time that called for a warrior unlike Duncan who portrays his incompetence on several occasions. Duncan, being in power, announced his elder son to be in line ignoring the most competent executive. This added to Macbeth’s frustration and the remembrance of the prophecies made by the witches stirred up rage and detest against Duncan. Macbeth was indeed silent throughout but deep within his fury and seethe embittered him and slowly had the better of him. With his overtaxed and unstrung condition, he went forward with the plan constructed by Lady Macbeth of liquidating Duncan in his most vulnerable state. While plunging the poniard into the body of the sleeping sovereign, he did feel compunctious and his moral scruple seemed to resurface, but his psyche was corrupted and blighted enough by his own tainted desires that it kept

the guilt from reemerging. Now, with blood in his hands, Macbeth did go through a phase of perturbation but rather than redirecting him to the path of righteousness and virtue, it only made him cold and ruthless. Macbeth's sins originate from his self-love and a desire to achieve a mutable goal. According to W. C. Curry, the inordinate disposition coupled with an expression of self-will is responsible for individual sin in human heart. He further delineates this theory by elucidating Thomas Aquinas's take on individual sin. He explains that "the direct cause of sin is the adherence to a mutable good, and every sinful act proceeds from an inordinate desire for some temporal good; and that one desires a temporal good inordinately is due to the fact that he loves himself inordinately. Thus, love of self is the fundamental cause of sin". Hence Macbeth's self-love and his love for a temporal good made him choose deliberately the path of spiritual evil, owing to which he may come to sin through certain malice. After executing his first crime, Macbeth became disposed by his sinful act to commit more readily another similar vicious act. He loses himself to a train of crimes and the murder of Duncan disposes him to commit more crimes easily. Macbeth ends up normalizing his murderous intents, thus commencing his train of rampant homicides. Curry explains it this way; "a sin may be the efficient, material, and final cause of other sins. For when man through one sinful act loses honor, charity, or shame, or anything else that withdraws him from evil, he thereby falls into another sin, the first being the accidental cause of the second. Or since actions cause dispositions and habits in the will inclining to like actions, a man is disposed by one sinful act to commit more readily another like act". Thus, falling from one sin to the other happens uncontrollably and inevitably and Macbeth's sins were not the result of the witch's utterances or in any way was it the consequence of his brush with the weird sisters. He voluntarily yet inescapably perpetrated one sin after the other, eventually paving the way of his own ruination. After doing away with Duncan, Macbeth directed his vicious eyes at Banquo as, according to the prophecy, he would be the father to the future kings. Macbeth was entirely engulfed by his interpretation of the prophecies and he completely gave away to his paranoia. He was so enraptured in his self-love that he turned a blind eye to reasons and went forward with his gruesome plan of assassinating Banquo and his son Fleance. The appearance of Banquo's ghost at the banquet is entirely subjective as it was only Macbeth who was able to see it and the ghost is only visible to his eyes. The ghost, can be argued, is nothing but the product of Macbeth's deteriorating psyche and a physical manifestation of his deepest fear. Even after hearing the news of Banquo's demise, he could not help but fall prey to his paranoia about losing his throne to Banquo and his offspring and his fear was aggravated when he saw the ghost of Banquo sitting on his empty throne. He suffered from psychological anomalies after Banquo's successful liquidation and the rational exhaustion eventually took the better of him. His unsettled mind feared of losing what he gained. Macbeth's fear and insecurities led him to seek answers from the witches. From the beginning, Macbeth harbored a self-constructed assurance that the witches would assist him to preserve his throne by making further prophecies. He thought that the witches would guide him through by making prophecies in accordance to his own desires, since initially they spoke what Macbeth secretly desired. Macbeth relied on the three sisters for answers and this time it was him who walked the path that led to their abode and not they who approached Macbeth. With the end of the show and the prophecies that followed the emergence of each spirit, the witches did try to ease Macbeth's unsettled and patently frightful mind. They meant no harm and held no intentions of assisting Macbeth in fulfilling the prognoses. Macbeth himself resorted to them as he was fearful of his life and possessions. He was inundated with the two most strong human feelings, insecurities and pride, that led him to perceive the prophecies of the spirits in a superficial manner, only taking into consideration the surface meanings of the predictions. He irrationally acted upon his misinterpretation and went on a rampage, exterminating the entire family of Macduff as he posed a threat to Macbeth according to the first prediction by the spirit in the form of an armed head. As W. C. Curry comments, "without immediate rational cause, for example, he surprises the castle of Macduff, sizes upon Fife, and gives to the edge of the sword his wife, his children, and all unfortunate souls that trace him in his line". His gruesome act did not trigger his conscience as he was already stripped off all human emotions. His previous actions did root out the natural good in his nature which rouses conscience as a counter force to acts of condemnation, "All the kingly graces," as Curry says "such as, justice, verity, temperance, stableness, honesty, mercy, devotions and patience, fall away from him" and Macbeth finally becomes, as Malcolm says, not only bloody but "luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin that has a name". Macbeth's tainted desires could not escape the eyes of Hecate

as well, the goddess acknowledges Macbeth as a “wayward son, spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do, loves for his own ends”. Hence one can say that none of Macbeth’s actions were driven by the witches, Macbeth’s misinterpretations of the prophecies inevitably brought about his ruination. He suffered the consequences of his own poor choices and led himself to the path of eternal damnation. He had the choice of not allowing himself to get completely swallowed by his indignation and not act upon his misinterpretations of the prophecies. His eternal damnation could have been averted if, like Banquo, he resisted the temptation. Temptation is the yardstick to measure a human’s inclination to his natural good. Even Eve was tempted which resulted in the loss of her innocence, Adam too got tempted by Eve which, in the due course of time, caused humanity to lose their gifts and liberties. Thus, temptations are meant to draw a mortal mind towards it but resistance to those temptations is expected of us all which would lead one to its redemption. Macbeth fell for the temptation that stemmed from the prophecies which eventually sealed his fate. It was further fueled by his own disproportionate desires. The weird sisters have never advertently driven Macbeth to the path of damnation neither they exercised their malicious wants through Macbeth. They only gave the divine and unimpeachable prophecies a voice since it was evident that Macbeth’s fall was inevitable. In Edward Tomarken’s words “the witches are therefore seen to function as catalytic agents, making manifest the latent criminal ambition of Macbeth”. The mystical agents have not influenced Macbeth but rather acted as mirrors reflecting his already harbored inordinate desires. They perform more like oracles and prognosticator, prophesying Macbeth’s possible conclusion. Macbeth always could have stood up strong and not succumb to the tempting predictions, but he nonetheless does as the predictions resonated strongly with his own darkest hidden desires. Shakespeare’s audience was people who fostered the notion of witches being malicious entities. They associated the witches with evil and strongly believed that the witches would not think twice before bringing destruction and noxious events upon people who they perceive to be their enemy or simply for fun. And since the audience were preconditioned to perceive witches in a certain way, they equated the witches in Macbeth with the generic witches that led them and their following generations to accuse the witches for the downfall of Macbeth. But the three sisters never persuaded Macbeth to commit the sins he committed neither did they appear before him the second time, but it was Macbeth who willfully approached them in order to seek answers. No force is great enough to move a man’s will if he himself does not allow it to be moved, no evil entity can fuse itself with the soul of a man, only God can do that, “the unclean spirits” as Curry elucidates, “overwhelm the intellectual of man only when they are permitted to seize upon those members in which the vitality of the soul resides.” The weird sisters do not seem to be in league with any malicious being, rather, the demonic forces symbolized by the witches as W. C. Curry explains, “represents one aspect Fate in that they, along with other instruments, are designed as executors of the reason of order. They are, in strictest sense, one element in that Fate which God in his providence has ordained to rule over the bodies and, it is possible, over the spirits of men and the essence of this whole metaphysical world of evil intelligences is distilled by Shakespeare’s imagination and concentrated in those marvelous dramatic symbols, the Weird Sisters.”

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the evil resides in everyone, and so does the innate natural good, the inclination towards any one of these determines the fate of a human. A will of a person is what keeps him from falling prey to his avarices and it does not get affected by the pursuance of any external agent if one does not allow oneself to get affected. Allowing the will to get corrupted, tainted and besmirched with his own acquisitiveness will make his fall imminent. As C. F. Bradley rightly observes, “Evil exhibits itself everywhere as something negative, barren, weakening, destructive, a principle of death, It isolates, disunites, and tends to annihilate not only its opposite but itself”.

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