



UNIVERSITÀ
DI PADOVA

Università di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

*The 'Weird Sisters' in Shakespeare's
'Macbeth': Between Early Modern
Witchcraft, Mythology and Linguistic Power.*

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Anno Accademico 2025 / 2026

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Abstract

La presente tesi analizza la natura e la funzione delle “weird sisters” in Macbeth di William Shakespeare, con l’obiettivo di dimostrare come siano molto più che streghe della tradizione inglese, oppure personaggi correlati al destino. A tal fine, il lavoro si sviluppa in tre capitoli, strettamente correlati tra loro. In primo luogo, la tesi si apre con un’analisi storica, sociale e giuridica, perlopiù in forma descrittiva, del fenomeno della stregoneria tra il XVI secolo e gli inizi del XVII. Si prosegue poi con un’analisi sulle influenze mitologiche alla base dell’ideazione delle “weird sisters” e del loro rapporto con il destino. Insieme a ciò, viene presa in considerazione la loro dimensione drammatica, che le colloca in un punto intermedio tra mitologia e magia. Infine, nel terzo capitolo si analizza il loro linguaggio. Attraverso lo studio di ritmo, ripetizione, numerologia, ambiguità ed equivoco, si mostra come la parola sia il metodo principale d’azione delle “weird sisters”. Esse non impongono un destino, ma con la parola influenzano la percezione della realtà di Macbeth, fino alla sua corruzione morale e psicologica. L’analisi proposta quindi suggerisce che le “weird sisters” costituiscano una costruzione drammatica complessa, in cui confluiscono elementi differenti. La loro funzione, pertanto, non si limita alla sfera della stregoneria e della profezia, ma si sviluppa entro una serie di elementi mitologici, linguistici e simbolici che contribuiscono alla creazione e sviluppo dell’universo tragico di Macbeth.

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is one of the best known English tragedies and has obviously generated a lot of interest among scholars. Its characters are memorable, but three of them certainly stand out; these are the "weird sisters". They are the first characters mentioned in the play and they are closely linked to Macbeth's rise and downfall. Moreover, they are portrayed using ambiguous elements, which have let critics interpret the "weird sisters" as witches, embodiments of evil or supernatural beings linked with fate. However, due to their ambiguity giving a categorical interpretation remains difficult. The complexity of these figures becomes even more obvious considering the historical and cultural context in which the play was written. Indeed, Early Modern England was distinguished by a widespread belief in witchcraft, fostered by religious tensions and social anxieties, which even led to legal acts against witches. Moreover, in this era a strong interest in classical and local heritage arises, giving authors a rich background, from which they could be inspired to write their works, and it is exactly in this cultural frame that the "weird sisters" are inscribed, as chimeras combining elements from different backgrounds.

Consequently, this dissertation tries to investigate the nature and function of the "weird sisters" in *Macbeth* by adopting an multi-layered approach. Instead of considering them merely as witches prophesying about the future, this study tries to demonstrate that they are the result of a far more complex dramatic construction transcending the idea of ordinary characters within the play, an effect created by blending historical beliefs, mythological archetypes and linguistic strategies. Likewise, particular attention will be given to the importance of speech, as the witches' influence and intrinsic purpose seems

to act mainly through ambiguous discourse, prophecies and equivocations rather than through direct action.

In order to achieve this, the dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first one examines the phenomenon of witchcraft in Early Modern England, briefly analysing its origins and further investigating its social, cultural and judicial dimensions. Hence, it creates the historical framework necessary as a means to comprehend the context in which Shakespeare writes *Macbeth*, and thus as a first stage to fathom the “weird sisters” nature.

The second chapter will pivot on analysing the sisters’ mythological background, by focusing on their collective name’s etymological complication, resulting in their intrinsic connection with multicultural mythological threesomes related to destiny, such as the Norns, the Fates and more. Even their connection with Hecate will be briefly examined, a figure appearing as their master in *Macbeth*. Ultimately, the chapter will examine their dramatic realization, highlighting how they incarnate various elements from heterogeneous backgrounds.

Finally, the third chapter will investigate the linguistic dimension of the play by first examining their singular rhythm and metre and then by discussing repetition and recurring images. Then, I will analyse how the “weird sisters” manage to influence Macbeth, leading but not forcing him to his corruption and lastly paradox, ambiguity, equivocation in their prophecies will be discussed, showing how they overcome the status of ordinary characters within the play.

Through this analysis, the dissertation aims to show that the “weird sisters” occupy a liminal position between witchcraft and mythology, functioning not only as supernatural characters, but also as figures whose discourse shapes the symbolic

framework in which the tragedy initiates and then unfolds. Thus, their ambiguity, rather than constituting a limiting factor to their interpretation is the pivotal elements allowing these characters to undoubtably generate fascination nowadays.

Chapter 1 Witchcraft in Early Modern England: historical and cultural framework.

1.1 Witchcraft as a social phenomenon in Early Modern England.

Early modern witchcraft, although its importance and its bloody consequences, encounters first of all the peculiar problem of definition. Indeed, it is difficult to understand witchcraft as a single, clearly defined phenomenon, but it is certainly a complex concept shaped by social and cultural context.¹ Nevertheless, a generally accepted definition could be:

supernatural activity, believed to be the result of power given by some external force (for instance, the Devil) and to result in physical injury to the person or object attacked by it. There is not necessarily any outward action or spoken words on the part of the 'witch'. It is basically an internal power. The opposite is "white witchcraft" which is the reverse, both because its ends are "good", rather than "bad", healing rather than hurting and because it employs outward means.²

It is important to stress this point because, even though both attitudes were repressed, authorities dealt with them differently, as the punishments for people who practiced white witchcraft or its counterpart were different.³

Another peculiar aspect regards the origin of witchcraft as a phenomenon that lacks well-defined contours. The existence of witchcraft and magic in general had long been known in Europe,⁴ but in Medieval times, it acquired its obscure traits. As a matter of fact, it may be considered that the attention and preoccupation on the matter can be traced back to the beginning of the 14th century.⁵ Moreover, it is true that the first connection between witches and the Devil dates back 15th century Switzerland and nearby

¹ John Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 5.

² MacFarlane, p. 4.

³ MacFarlane, p. 311.

⁴ Sharpe, p. 4.

⁵ Nachman Ben-Yehuda, 'The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective', *American Journal of Sociology*, 86, (1980), p. 4.

territories.⁶ This shift did not emerge autonomously, but it was the result of a gradual process. Indeed, it answered the beliefs of Dominican theologians who opposed Christianity to a demonic counter-religion, thus witchcraft. The witch, indeed, was no longer seen as an individual practitioner of magic, but rather as a part of an organised anti-Christian system centred on the Devil.⁷ Certainly, the pivotal agents in spreading this conception were Dominican inquisitors who pushed these ideas, even through literary works such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* by Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, which is to these days the most famous work about witchcraft.⁸

In Early Modern England however, the matter is more complex. England had been a Protestant state since 1559, but there were widespread tensions between Catholics and Protestants.⁹ In such context, the latter group feared the presence of lurking Catholics and began proposing an idea of the Devil connected to them, thus contributing to establishing an equation between Catholicism and evil.¹⁰ Not only that, but witch hunts mirrored a weakening presence of the Catholic Church in society, due to the Reformation.¹¹ The already widespread beliefs on the Devil and the empowerment of them, because of the aforementioned tensions and fears, can easily explain how supernatural evil became so embedded in the minds of English people that legal action against it began to be taken. In fact, in 1563, an Elizabethan statute against witchcraft was published,¹² but the matter will be further discussed later.

⁶ Sharpe, p. 4.

⁷ Ben-Yehuda, p. 6.

⁸ Sharpe, p. 4.

⁹ Charlotte Rose Millar, *Witchcraft, The Devil, and Emotions in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 3.

¹⁰ Millar, p. 3.

¹¹ Ben-Yehuda, p. 16.

¹² Millar, p. 3.

To comprehend better the rise of magic as a phenomenon in this period, it is important to analyse how society was formed. Most of the episodes of witchcraft known from pamphlets and other texts are “from below” or else, the lower strata of society, and there are reasons for this.

Indeed, the basis of Early Modern English society was the village, populated mainly by simple workers operating in rural areas.¹³ Poverty was widespread and it was an internal, deeply rooted phenomenon. Scholars agree that the most significant reasons for the situation are the rapid demographic growth, together with related economic pressures. As a matter of fact, between 1530 and 1630 the population in England almost doubled, food production could not keep up with the increasing demand, and the flooded job market could not grant occupation or an acceptable wage.¹⁴ In such a situation, which inevitably led many into a proletariat without land,¹⁵ it is true that paradoxically a small minority of farmworkers still managed to possess territories and was able to profit from the new commercial possibilities of the age, climbing up into the yeomanry.¹⁶

Therefore, the existence and reinforcement of this social class suggests that modern English society was not fixed, but there was a small chance for upward mobility. Nevertheless, most of the population was still vulnerable, causing tensions within communities and creating the perfect conditions for the emergence of witchcraft accusations. However, this point is particularly significant, as it highlights how lower strata of the population were not directly the cause of the rise in concern about witchcraft: rather, the conflicts were inflamed by the rising difference in conditions. This suggests

¹³ Everitt, p.56.

¹⁴ Sharpe, p. 31.

¹⁵ Everitt, p.58.

¹⁶ Everitt, p. 58.

that reputation in the village, certainly connected with social status, was crucial in accusations of witchcraft.

Indeed, the vast majority of people lived in little villages, where people knew each other very well and where respectability was a matter of concern. As a matter of fact, most of the charges of witchcraft in early modern England, came from neighbours of the accused people¹⁷ supporting the idea that most of the cases occurred within well-delimited communities, even though exceptions existed. Moreover, it was not uncommon that accusations on witchcraft resulted in very contrasting opinions in the same village¹⁸. Indeed, even actions perceived as unusually generous, or inconsistent with an individual's social status, could be considered acts of witchcraft.¹⁹ Certainly, the phenomenon can be explained bearing in mind the vulnerability of the lower strata of society and how an action, even the most innocent one, yet suspicious, could arouse fear between neighbours. Indeed, the facts presented support again the subjective nature of accusations.

Moreover, all this data show how the community's emotional sphere was most of the times crucial in determining who was a witch. Supporting this view, some pamphlets show that even sons and daughters sometimes condemned their mothers as witches, as they were pressed by the villagers; not to forget that there was the possibility for them to be charged of witchcraft just to have defended their mothers, as witchcraft was believed to be hereditary.²⁰ Therefore, it is certain that in Early Modern England magic was deeply embedded in communal life and therefore relevant for society. A curious, yet explanatory example regarding this capillary belief is the strong bond between sleep and demonic

¹⁷ Sharpe, p. 30.

¹⁸ Sharpe, p. 42.

¹⁹ MacFarlane, p. 172.

²⁰ MacFarlane, p. 170.

activities. Indeed, in Early Modern England, night was the time when evil forces were most powerful²¹, and therefore, to have some protection, people usually prayed or did some rituals.²² Clear evidence on this matter can be found in many pamphlets and examinations on witches and undoubtedly, Joan Prentice's case is relevant. She was an average English woman who was accused of witchcraft between 1588 and 1589.²³ In her confession, she described a familiar spirit, a ferret named Bidd, who presented himself as Satan and appeared in her bedroom, when she was about to go to sleep, to suck blood from her left cheek; she asked him to harm the daughter of a woman who refused to give charity to Joan Prentice but the spirit killed the child.²⁴ This highlights how even the most simple parts of everyday life were soaked in magic and superstition and once again underlines how accusations were built over tensions within the community.

Moreover, the given example shows some elements typical of the popular belief about witches. It was believed that men and women had an intrinsic tendency to become slaves of Satan,²⁵ therefore witches and male witches. Furthermore, a contractual relationship between such people and the Devil was thought to exist, thus explaining how witches were granted their powers and requests of harm,²⁶ not to mention that they were considered as “servantes onelie, and slaues to the Devil”.²⁷ However, the relationship between witches and Satan, was a subordinate one, thus the witch lacked autonomous

²¹ Charlotte Rose Millar, ‘Dangers of the Night: The Witch, the Devil and the “Nightmare” in Early Modern England’, *Preternature*, 7 (2018), p. 155.

²² Millar, ‘Dangers of the Night’, p. 158.

²³ ‘*The apprehension and confession of three notorious witches.*’ in University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, (London: E. Allde, 1589) <<http://name.umd.umich.edu/A18586.0001.001>> [Accessed April 8, 2026], B. 3.

²⁴ ‘*The apprehension and confession of three notorious witches.*’, B.3.

²⁵ Millar, ‘Witchcraft, the Devil and Emotions’, p. 34.

²⁶ King James I, *Daemonologie*, ed. by G.B. Harrison (London, New York: John Lane, E.P. Dutton, 1924) p. 19-20.

²⁷ King James I, p. 9.

power, she asked for evil agency, but it was the Devil who decided how to act. This distinction is essential to understand early modern witchcraft, as the witch was punished due to her or his dependence to evil spirits.

Another important aspect is certainly the familiar spirit. These entities are found in almost every pamphlet, they are bestial creatures, usually domestic or common animals, but sometimes even mythical ones, and they are described to be linked or to essentially be the Devil himself.²⁸ Often witches made pacts with these entities to have their powers, and the deed was considered to be a ‘necessary prerequisite for becoming a witch.’²⁹ Furthermore, in the examined case, the familiar spirit acted as a channel for Prentice’s anger and desire of vengeance. This is far from being unusual, as demonstrated by English witchcraft narratives, where often the element of channelling negative thoughts and emotion through that devilish entity is present.³⁰

The last element to consider is the act of harming through witchcraft, or the so-called maleficium.³¹ Firstly, it seems true that maleficium, because it was done to people living in the same community, had not a very long range, thus rarely did the victim and the witch live in different villages.³² Nevertheless, scholars agree that identifying how the mischievous deed was done is an arduous task³³, however it is possible to identify some ways in which the maleficium was carried on. Indeed, the victim could be bewitched through an object acquired by the witch from him/her,³⁴ and secondly, maleficium could be caused by goods given by the witch to the victim: for example, in several Essex cases,

²⁸ Millar, ‘Witchcraft, The Devil, and Emotions’, p. 48.

²⁹ Millar, ‘Witchcraft, The Devil, and Emotions’, p. 56.

³⁰ Millar, ‘Witchcraft, The Devil, and Emotions’, p. 104.

³¹ Sharpe, p. 35.

³² MacFarlane, p. 168.

³³ Sharpe, p. 58.

³⁴ Sharpe, p. 59.

gifts offered by suspected witches were believed to result in the misfortune of the individuals involved, despite the lack of direct evidence.³⁵ Yet, words were more often the means used to carry on the maleficium, usually mumbled threats against people who refused to help the supposed witch.³⁶ Closing the circle on witchcraft as a peasant phenomenon would be too superficial. To give a further look into the matter, one must not forget that magic in the Early Modern era permeated the minds of everyone, including the erudite and the elite class. Indeed, the idea of “witchcraft from above” was initiated thanks to the rise of interest in Neoplatonism during the sixteenth century, which considered magic a higher form of knowledge and creating an inseparable bond between science, medicine and witchcraft.³⁷ Even the renewed interest connected to classicism contributed to this phenomenon and continental demonologists made references between Classical culture and magic.³⁸

All these elements suggest that witchcraft and magic in Early Modern England should not be considered as marginal or irrational phenomena, but rather as the reflection of social, cultural and intellectual beliefs of that time.

³⁵ MacFarlane, p. 105.

³⁶ Sharpe, p. 59.

³⁷ Sharpe, p.19.

³⁸ Sharpe, p. 20.

1.2 A comprehensive analysis on the identity of witches.

Having established a social and historical framework, it is now crucial to examine more closely the identity of those accused of witchcraft and the beliefs around them. It is customary to think of witches as ugly, old and evil women, often living in the outskirts of society. While the latter has been challenged by recent academic studies, other elements of this popular image require further explanation.

It is true that the vast majority of witchcraft accusations were against women³⁹, but rare cases of male witches existed.⁴⁰ Women were considered weak of intellect and weaker than men against the Devil's temptations, thus justifying, for people at that time, the link between womanhood and witchcraft.⁴¹ Nevertheless, just examining the religious or superstitious element would be too superficial to explain the complex reasons creating this gender gap in accusations.

The situation, indeed, would be further explained by examining the Early Modern England society. Even in a strong patriarchal context, women had a central role in local social networks, as they carried intimate knowledge about members of the community. For instance, they were considered the glueing agent in village communities, and when social groups tended to separate or to take distance from each other, due to conflicts or issues, their words were the most dreaded.⁴² As a matter of fact, they were more acquainted with gossip and it is obvious to think that, in a society where reputation was a crucial trait, their words could be powerful and consequently could arise fear among

³⁹ Alison Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe', ed. by Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 449.

⁴⁰ MacFarlane, p. 161.

⁴¹ Sharpe, p. 38.

⁴² MacFarlane, p. 161.

people. Early Modern England society was made of little microcosms, where people always told stories about each other and by doing so, inhabitants were always evaluating each other's conduct.⁴³ Needless to say, an unfortunate gossip could be a powerful charge for witchcraft.

Modern English women usually worked in low-intensive jobs, such as knitting, dairying and baking and, differently than men, usually conceived work as a social activity.⁴⁴ Reuniting in groups, however, was dangerous. Indeed, when misfortune occurred, suspicion among neighbours could arise.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the conception of a non-existing boundary between work and social networking could mean that conflicts in one sphere could influence the other, creating negative emotions between women and thus fuelling witchcraft accusations,⁴⁶ highlighting how they were not passive but rather active in reading the events.⁴⁷ Thus, the type of jobs typically considered to be adequate for women contributed to their prevalence in witchcraft suspects and accusations.⁴⁸

Another interesting point regards pregnancy. Indeed, having a child was perilous in the Early Modern England period, and one in five newborns died before the first year of age.⁴⁹ The anxiety connected to the situation fostered motherly apprehension in child-caring, which, in unfortunate cases, could result in suspicions of witchcraft.⁵⁰ Furthermore, in Early Modern England, illness was common, thus anguish in a mother initiated before birth; moreover, it was thought that a woman's negative thoughts could

⁴³ Sharpe, p. 40.

⁴⁴ Carter, p. 103.

⁴⁵ Carter, p. 103.

⁴⁶ Carter, p. 103.

⁴⁷ Diane Purkiss, 'Women's Stories of Witchcraft in Early Modern England: The House, The Body, The Child', in *Gender & History*, 7 (1995), p. 416.

⁴⁸ Carter, p. 104.

⁴⁹ Carter, p. 98.

⁵⁰ Carter, p. 99.

influence the success of the birth of a desired child, thus contributing to viewing miscarriage as a malicious act committed by a witch.⁵¹ If such unfortunate event happened, mothers should not lose their temper, a trait often related to witchcraft accusations,⁵² bearing in mind that the witch was considered the dark other of the socially accepted woman figure, expressing repressed fantasies, desires, and emotions.⁵³ Indeed, society wanted women to be humble and grateful, and if they cursed or expressed anger, they could be imagined as witches who would use magic to gain revenge against other villagers.⁵⁴

They also were the housekeepers and provided to the family essential goods and were judged according to how qualitative and quantitative the provided products were,⁵⁵ thus increasing their vulnerability to suspicion, when expectations were not fulfilled. Moreover, the idea of housekeeping deeply connects the woman figure to the sphere of the home, to an extent where contacts with the external world, such as events and markets, could disrupt the preserved order of the house.⁵⁶ Not to mention that exchange of goods was a normal activity in everyday life,⁵⁷ both acting as a glueing factor in the community but also as a fuel for women's vulnerability, in this context.

To further narrow the circle of people accused of witchcraft, it is untrue that every woman was in the same danger of accusation. Indeed, richer women were far less likely to be accused, together with the most vulnerable people, already living in the outskirts of

⁵¹ Purkiss, p. 417.

⁵² Purkiss, p. 417.

⁵³ Purkiss, p. 417.

⁵⁴ Rowlands, p. 462.

⁵⁵ Carter, p. 95.

⁵⁶ Purkiss, pp. 415-416.

⁵⁷ Purkiss, p. 416.

society.⁵⁸ Secondly, villages in already troubled economic conditions had very few witchcraft cases,⁵⁹ suggesting that most accusations regarded moderately poor women,⁶⁰ who could maintain and build social interactions, because, as mentioned before, this was crucial. Social networking and exchange in goods meant also dependency on other people, and this is crucial, as explained by the 'charity refused' model. Endorsed even by recent scholarship, it clarifies many points regarding individuals accused of witchcraft. Alan MacFarlane, in its study on Essex, affirms that, when a person begged for charity and his or her request was refused, if some misfortune happened to the person who refused it, that was considered an act of witchcraft. The idea is backed by many cases, such as that of Mother Cunny who, in 1579 Essex, supposedly needed milk and asked for it from a neighbour, who refused to give her any, and the next day the refuser started suffering from deep pain.⁶¹ Furthermore, even accepting charity or goods exchanges could be dangerous, if done with suspects of witchcraft,⁶² thus stressing how delicate were the ties and relationships between neighbours.

Summing up, women's centrality and relevance in domestic and social life made them particularly vulnerable to accusation, as their everyday life and roles placed them in constant interaction with others, where conflict, expectation and misfortune could easily be interpreted as witchcraft.

⁵⁸ MacFarlane, p. 151.

⁵⁹ MacFarlane, p. 156.

⁶⁰ MacFarlane, p. 151.

⁶¹ MacFarlane, p. 159.

⁶² Purkiss, p. 416.

1.3 Persecutions: witch hunting and repression.

As discussed in the previous section, accusations of witchcraft originated mainly within the social tissue of village communities and everyday social relationships. However, these suspicions did not remain confined to informal tensions, but could escalate into formal legal processes, transforming social conflict into judicial persecution.

Witchcraft was seen as a special crime, like poisoning for example.⁶³ Therefore, when a suspect was found guilty, he or she could usually be tried for witchcraft at the assizes, held in every English county, purposely reunited into six groups, where twice a year two judges for each group arrived from Westminster to prove the cases.⁶⁴ These were trained and expert figures, distant from the quarrels in village communities that so often led to witchcraft accusations, and this characteristic made English trials different from the rest of the European ones, often held in local courts.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the peculiarity of this crime cannot trick us into presuming it as a rare occasion, because prosecutions occurred regularly in the village community. For example, in Essex Assizes it was the second most frequent crime, only after theft.⁶⁶ However, proving someone guilty with tangible or actual proof was difficult, because witchcraft was understood as an activity done in secrecy, therefore judges would usually rely on testimony.⁶⁷ This was certainly a limiting factor; indeed, in a large number of cases, the accused was discharged due to the jury not being sufficiently sure of guiltiness.⁶⁸

⁶³ MacFarlane, p. 17.

⁶⁴ Sharpe, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Sharpe, p. 22.

⁶⁶ MacFarlane, p. 30.

⁶⁷ Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England, Past and Present* (2008), p. 39.

⁶⁸ Gaskill, p. 40.

Moreover, the context in which witchcraft accusations developed contributed to blurring the limits between proof and suspicion. Proof and evidence were usually built over a casual concatenation of events and misfortune, such as a woman giving an apple to a child, with whom there is not a good relationship, resulting in his death afterwards.⁶⁹

Supporting this point, the aforementioned crucial role of neighbours and reputation in society can extensively explain the context of accusations. Yet this does not mean that witchcraft was not believed to be true; on the contrary, it suggests that in courts, the individual accused of being a witch was put on trial, not the popular belief.⁷⁰ Indeed, witchcraft trials should not be understood as a mere legal event, but as complex events where links between social issues, cultural beliefs, and judicial practices are shown.

The complexity of the phenomenon is also proportional to its countering, as shown by the interest of the Crown in the matter.⁷¹ Indeed, in 1563 the Elizabethan “Act agaynst Inchantments and Witchecraftes” was published, condemning not only acts of harming or killing connected to devilish spirits and practices⁷², but more importantly, it established a link between state jurisdiction and witchcraft⁷³, between suspicion in the village community and legal recognition.

The statute was then replaced in 1604 by James IV, establishing a new and more repressive one, stressing the bond between the Devil and witches and strengthening

⁶⁹ MacFarlane, p. 18.

⁷⁰ Gaskill, p. 40.

⁷¹ Millar, ‘Witchcraft, the Devil and Emotions’, p. 4.

⁷² MacFarlane, p. 14.

⁷³ Millar, ‘Witchcraft, the Devil and Emotions’, p. 3.

punishments.⁷⁴ In this period, precisely in 1606, Shakespeare wrote one of his most famous plays, *Macbeth*⁷⁵, probably influenced by the concern about the theme.

Overall, witchcraft in early modern England emerges not merely as a bloody legal phenomenon, but as the byproduct of complex interactions between social tensions, beliefs, and juridical intervention. These dynamics, backed by folklore, not only created fearful prosecutions and trials but also contributed to the soaring spread of the witch as an imaginative and archetypal character, which found expression in contemporary literature, most notably in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

⁷⁴ Millar, 'Witchcraft, the Devil and Emotions', p. 3.

⁷⁵ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2015), p. 13.

Chapter 2 ‘The Weird Sisters’ in *Macbeth* between myth and drama

2.1 Defining ‘the weird sisters’: the etymological issue.

Having examined the historical and cultural framework of witchcraft in early modern England, it is now necessary to consider how the beliefs on witchcraft were reworked in the literary sphere, specifically in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where the figure of the witch undergoes a significant transformation.

As mentioned earlier, it was believed that witches were servants of Satan and worked for him to do a variety of hazardous actions, such as killing and causing illnesses. But there is an important point to examine when it comes to studying these figures. Indeed, before looking into the supernatural and evil ideas connected to witchcraft, derived mainly from fear, anxiety and folklore, there is the common and simple human, as examined also in the previous chapter. This is quite crucial when observing the subject of the dissertation, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

Before further analysing the figure of the “weird sisters” it is useful to introduce the plot of the play. Written around 1606⁷⁶ and first published in the first folio, presumably in 1623⁷⁷, the tragedy is about the rise and downfall of Macbeth, a Scottish warrior and nobleman. After encountering three mysterious and supernatural figures together with his fellow Banquo, Macbeth receives a prophecy about his future as king of Scotland, while Banquo is told that his heirs will become kings. As the plot develops, Macbeth becomes increasingly corrupted by ambition, to such an extent that he even kills King Duncan in order to take control of the throne. From that moment, the play carries on with his

⁷⁶ Shakespeare, p. 13.

⁷⁷ Shakespeare, p. 322.

progressive inner degradation, reaching its apex with his downfall and death. In the play, the “weird sisters” occupy an important place as their prophecy sparks the chain of events that will be dealt with in the play.

As a matter of fact, when the “weird sisters” appear for the first time to Macbeth and Banquo, they are mentioned by the latter as not looking as ‘inhabitants o’ th’ earth’⁷⁸ and then Macbeth while inquiring about their identity does not use the term “who”, rather he asks them ‘what are you?’.⁷⁹ Just these two elements highlight how Shakespeare breaks the condition of the witch being a human who made a pact with the Devil. These characters seem to overlap the traditional concept of the witch and are built to convey the idea of ‘a complex feminine trinitarian mythological construction, a unique amalgamation of classical, folkloric, and sociopolitical elements.’⁸⁰

To further examine the matter, it may be useful to analyse the etymology behind their name. Indeed, in *Macbeth*’s 1623 first folio, the presented characters are called “weyward sisters / weyard sisters”, only to be then transformed into “weird sisters” in later editions.⁸¹ Not only that, but in the text, they are called “witches” only in the stage directions, while being mentioned by the other characters with the first presented names.⁸² Yet, the use of different words to describe these characters is not a casual mistake or an imprecision. Indeed, by looking at the meanings of the word “weird” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in addition to its most known meaning, there is the additional “having the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings, etc.; later, claiming the

⁷⁸ Shakespeare, I.iii.41.

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, I.iii.47.

⁸⁰ Laura Shamas, *We Three: The Mythology of Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 3.

⁸¹ Karen Bek-Pedersen, ‘Macbeth and “The Weird Sisters” on Fates and Witches’, *Scottish Studies*, 39 (2022), p. 58.

⁸² Bek-Pedersen, p. 58.

supernatural power of dealing with fate or destiny.” The notes on the etymology of this word even highlights how the evolution of its use from Shakespeare goes from “weyrd to weyard” in Acts III and IV of the First Folio and “wayward” in Acts I and III.

Curiously, apart from underlining its use in *Macbeth* the information on the dictionary highlights how this meaning is used for “the Fates”,⁸³ highlighting their mythological background.

Again, while looking at the word “wayward”, it is seen as a variant of “weird”, but also of “wayward” and it means ‘disposed to go against the wishes or advice of others or what is proper or reasonable’, but also ‘of a thing, condition, etc.: contrary to what is expected or desired, [...] chiefly used of fortune, destiny.’ Therefore an intrinsic connection with fate and destiny is clear and it is undeniable that the trio has got powerful prophetic abilities and they follow a track of their own.⁸⁴ Moreover, these name variations foster an atmosphere of independence and otherworldliness to the sisters, and it means that they are active, supernatural, ethereal female figures.⁸⁵

This amalgamation can also explain how unusually their powers are portrayed. Indeed, traditionally witches had the power to kill humans or livestock, or spread diseases, but the “weird sisters” just seem to know facts about the past, the present and the future.⁸⁶ Therefore, it might not be absurd to think that this trio with their supernatural and ethereal presence inherit features from numerous mythological figures from various cultures, as will be discussed later on.

⁸³ Shamas, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Shamas p. 15.

⁸⁵ Shamas, p. 16.

⁸⁶ Walter Clyde Curry, ‘The Demonic Metaphysics of “Macbeth”’, *Studies in Philology*, 30, (1933), p. 396.

Therefore, just by glancing at the etymology of the witches' collective name, it is certain that the social and historical interpretation of witchcraft is not enough to explain the nature of these complex figures. Certainly, there are some characteristics intended to suggest the idea of witches and witchcraft, which find a prolific ground as the Elizabethan public was well acquainted with this matter,⁸⁷ but surely Shakespeare in *Macbeth* tries to create liminal characters with both mythological and witchcraft-related features, which will be examined in the next paragraphs.

2.2 The mythological trio: an analysis of the 'Weird Sisters' background

The etymological analysis of the term "weird" has already suggested that the "weird sisters" are deeply connected to the notion of fate rather than to the historical figure of the witch. Nevertheless, this linguistic insight must now be supported by a broader mythological examination. As mentioned in the previous paragraph the "weird sisters" appear to originate from a complex network of traditions, which include not only witchcraft beliefs, but also classical and northern mythologies. It appears that the trio shares a connection with figures such as the Fates, the Parcae, the Moirae and the Scandinavian Norns⁸⁸. These goddesses are all related to destiny and, apart from being threesomes, they were known to determine the human course of life. In Greek mythology they were called Moirai, more specifically Clotho, Lachesis and Anthropos; in Roman mythology Parcae, while in Scandinavian mythology they were known as Norns.⁸⁹ Moreover, the English fates were usually identified as Anglo-Saxons figures closely

⁸⁷ Clyde Curry, p. 395.

⁸⁸ Shamas, p.4.

⁸⁹ 'Fate', *Oxford English Dictionary*, <
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fate_n?tab=meaning_and_use#4488942> [Accessed 9 June 2026].

related to the Norns and were named Wyrdes, directly descendants of Wyrð, the goddess of Fate.⁹⁰ These figures, though not being perfectly identical and related to different cultures, certainly represent the same concept and therefore serve the same function; they were spinning goddesses who spun the thread of someone's life at birth, therefore determining his or her fate.⁹¹ This connection, suggests that they should be interpreted not merely as witches, but as entities regarding destiny. Therefore, this section will focus on the mythological background of the three witches, analysing how Shakespeare reworks such information into liminal and dramatic characters. To start, the link between Norse mythology and these characters is clear, even in their dramatic realisation. Indeed, the three mythological figures have three distinct characteristics: the first one, called Urd has got knowledge about the past, the second one, Verdhandi, knows about the present, particularly in matters about humanity and the last one, Skadi, has got prophetic abilities.⁹² It is important to stress this point, taking into account the fact that they usually speak in a tripartite order, suggesting that they do not share the same features but answer to different functions. An example can be given by the "Hails" found in the First Act:

1st WITCH: All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.
 2nd WITCH: All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.
 3rd WITCH: All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter.⁹³

Certainly, at the beginning of the play Macbeth was Thane of Glamis,⁹⁴ but shortly after encountering the "weird sisters" he became Thane of Cawdor, due to the death of

⁹⁰ Shamas, p. 10.

⁹¹ Shamas, p. 73-75.

⁹² Charlotte Carmichael, 'The "*Macbeth*" Witches and Scandinavian Norns, *The Academy*, 15, (1879), p.127.

⁹³ Shakespeare, I.iii.48-50. The same example is given by Carmichael, p. 127.

⁹⁴ 'In medieval Scotland: a man, often the chief of a clan, who holds land from a Scottish king, ranking with an earl's son.' In the play it refers to the sovereignty of Glamis, a geographical space in Scotland. 'Thane', *Oxford English Dictionary*, < <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3943847270> > [Accessed 1 June 2026].

the previous count and then he will become King, following the murder of King Duncan, thus underlining how the three witches share the same features of the Norns. Moreover, following this and many other possible examples, the three witches can be individually identified with the Norns; the first witch indeed resembles Urd, the second one Verdandi, and the third shares its powers with Skadi.⁹⁵ Additionally, in Norse mythology, the Norns shared the same dubious ontology as the weird sisters, as they were sometimes believed to be positive entities, but they are primarily conceived to be evil since in folklore they were thought to nurture deep and dark desires in human beings.⁹⁶

Another possible and probable reference to mythology can be the one with the Fates, the Parcae and the Moirae from Roman and Greek tradition, representing the same archetype relative to destiny, adapted to the aforementioned cultures, as explained earlier. Their power is shown mostly at the beginning and at the end of major events, as these are their preferred moments⁹⁷ and the connection with *Macbeth* is clear. Indeed, the play begins with a thunderstorm atmosphere, in a non-specified place where the sisters appear as the first characters. The setting is crucial because it highlights their supernatural and mysterious nature, but furthermore it gives the idea of three spinning figures, almost blended with the wind itself⁹⁸. Moreover, the word “thunder”, accompanies these characters every time they play, highlighting this theme. Not to mention that this *tópos* is also present in the first encounter with Banquo and Macbeth, where the witches disappear into the air.⁹⁹ Though not establishing a direct equivalence, the presented imagery suggests a symbolic link between the “weird sisters” and the Fates as spinning figures,

⁹⁵ Shamas, p. 73.

⁹⁶ Shamas, p. 73.

⁹⁷ Shamas, p. 75.

⁹⁸ In Shamas, p. 75, a similar idea is pointed out but briefly and differently developed.

⁹⁹ Shakespeare, I. iii. 79-83.

highlighting the idea of destiny as a fluid, unstable and ever-changing component. To close the circle of this mythological parallel, the last encounter with the trio takes place in Act IV, where they show the final obscure prophecy to Macbeth, unfolding his end through enigmas and symbols.

These equivalences present, few among many others, suggest that Shakespeare builds these characters not only as prophets, but tries to create powerful and otherworldly entities, which can be identified as Fate itself.

There is another point to examine, the one concerning Hecate, another peculiar character, linking the Weird Sisters to the tradition of the triple goddess. She is most known as a Greek goddess, but in reality, her origins can be traced back to Asia Minor.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, she is thought as a triple goddess and is strictly related to magic;¹⁰¹ she is a figure connected to darkness, and can teach magic to humans, apart from releasing demons and spirits during the night.¹⁰² Furthermore, she is seen as deity of crossroads, which in ancient Greece were points where three ways met.¹⁰³ While she appears to occupy a superior position, as the witches' master, her presence does not simply subordinate the "weird sisters" but rather reinforces their archetypal nature. Indeed, the trio can be seen in this context as the embodiment of a broader Hecatean framework, connected to night, magic and liminality.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, in the play Hecate appears briefly in III.v.2-36, where she reproaches the witches for having dealt with Macbeth without consulting her and in IV.i.39-44 during the witches' ritual, preceding the three apparitions.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Ronan 'Introduction', in *The Goddess Hekate: Studies in Ancient Pagan and Christian Religion & Philosophy*, ed. by Stephen Ronan, vol. 1 (Hastings: Chthonios Books, 1992), pp. 5–9, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ J.E. Loewe, 'Magical Hekate', in *The Goddess Hekate: Studies in Ancient Pagan and Christian Religion & Philosophy*, ed. by Stephen Ronan (Hastings: Chthonios Books, 1992), pp. 11–15, p. 11.

¹⁰² Loewe, p.15.

¹⁰³ Ronan, p.5 summarizing Farnell's interpretation of the triple Hecate.

¹⁰⁴ Shamas, p. 42-43.

What is crucial though, is how Macbeth describes her: at first she is defined as “pale” in the lines ‘[...] Witchcraft celebrates / Pale Hecate’s offerings [...]’¹⁰⁵, then she is mentioned in the line ‘His cloistered flight, ere to black Hecate’s summon’¹⁰⁶ as “black”.¹⁰⁷ Certainly, this is not casual and, apart from the mythological point of view, it can be inscribed even in early modern witchcraft beliefs. Indeed, the power to prophesize the future was thought to be connected with witchcraft, and it was somewhat dangerous, because the prophecy of the fall of a king, could result in high treason,¹⁰⁸ although this ability most of the time was considered as ‘white witchcraft’.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, Hecate starts as merely a prophetic figure, the witches’ master, but later on acquires darker traits, as “black Hecate” is the name given to her when the play has obtained its obscure traits and when Macbeth becomes obsessed with the witches’ prophecies.¹¹⁰ Moreover, this last version of Hecate even recalls the god’s genealogy born from Nyx, the deity of the night in Greek tradition, living in Hades.¹¹¹

Thus, even the shapeshifting aspect of Hecate suggests that the plot of the play and the triple goddess, together with the three witches, are deeply intertwined, reinforcing the idea of them embodying destiny and, in a Hecatean context, their liminal and magical characterization is underlined. In this context, the figure of the triple goddess is crucial, because it links the “weird sisters” to a broader mythological spectrum, thus enhancing their supernatural nature and lastly creating ambiguous figures, between folklore and myth. All these parallels demonstrate that the “weird sisters” transcend the boundaries of

¹⁰⁵ Shakespeare, II.i.51-52.

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, III.ii.42.

¹⁰⁷ Shamas, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ Sharpe, p. 51.

¹⁰⁹ Shamas, p.42.

¹¹⁰ Shamas, p. 42.

¹¹¹ Shamas, p. 41.

historical witchcraft, emerging instead as hybrid figures shaped by multiple mythological traditions. As embodiments of fate and liminality, their importance lies not only in what they represent, but in how these elements are translated into the play, a matter that will be explored in the following section.

2.3 The trio's dramatic realization

Having explored the mythological background underlying the “weird sisters”, it is now necessary to examine how these elements are translated into dramatic representation. Indeed, Shakespeare does not simply figure abstract characters representing fate, but stages them in a way that makes them recognisable and functional in the context of *Macbeth*'s theatrical realization. Their representation is therefore characterised by the tension between their mythological heritage and their appearance as witches, a choice by Shakespeare useful to reach audience expectations and to give incredible relevance to the trio.

From their very first appearance, the “weird sisters” are introduced in a liminal and unstable environment, as the play starts with a stormy weather, immediately associating them with disorder, chaos and forces beyond human control. Indeed, this setting establishes their presence as disruptive and evokes their connection to a supernatural dimension and highlights how the witches in *Macbeth* operate within a sphere that ‘transcends the ordinary framework of human action’.¹¹² However, Shakespeare is able to depict them within a recognisable cultural framework, that of the witch, familiar to an early modern audience. Indeed, it is said in the first Act that the time

¹¹² Curry, p. 396.

the three sisters will meet again '[...] will be ere the set of sun',¹¹³ recalling twilight, thus the time of the day when, according to folklore, people could be deceived by evil spirits, considering that in this moment powers from darkness arise.¹¹⁴ As previously explained, the night was the most dangerous time of the day, filled with wicked entities, and when witches' powers were at their apex. Thus, even the setting scene catches the audience's attention thanks to details and features proper to their tradition. Moreover, they are depicted as fearsome and powerful characters, able to control elements¹¹⁵ such as the winds as shown by the lines:

2nd WITCH: I'll give thee a wind.
1st WITCH: Th'art kind.
3rd WITCH: And I another
1st WITCH: I myself have all the other,
 And the very ports they blow,
 All the quarters that they know,¹¹⁶

Not only that, but according to folklore, among witches' most precious possessions were parts of corpses, which could enhance the power of their enchantments.¹¹⁷ This idea was probably well-known to Shakespeare and indeed he inscribes it in the scene as highlighted by the line from the first witch 'Here I have a pilot's thumb'.¹¹⁸ This contributes to creating memorable and fearsome characters who certainly would have been dreaded by the audience.

Their link with witchcraft is further reinforced through their physical representation. In the first Act, Banquo's observation that the witches do not belong to earth, yet they are there in front of him and Macbeth, highlights their ambiguous nature.

¹¹³ Shakespeare, I.i.5.

¹¹⁴ Mary Gleeson, 'Three Scenes of Sorcery: An Analysis of Witchcraft in "Macbeth"', *SEDERI, Sociedad Española de Estudios Renacentistas Ingleses*, 3 (1992), 111-121, p. 112.

¹¹⁵ Gleeson, p. 113.

¹¹⁶ Shakespeare, I.iii.11-16.

¹¹⁷ Gleeson, p. 113.

¹¹⁸ Shakespeare, I.iii.28.

Moreover, the reference to some physical features, as shown in the lines ‘[...] You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so’,¹¹⁹ introduce an element of gender ambiguity, which draws another difference from the conventional representations of women in Early Modern England. The reason for this is that early modern witches were often imagined as figures who disrupted traditional roles and embodied a form of social and symbolic inversion.¹²⁰ In addition to this, when suspicion against a witch arouse, after looking into actions and behaviour, it was not uncommon to focus on the physical aspect, highlighting oddities or protuberances or other imperfections as a “witch mark”, sometimes placed in private areas of the body.¹²¹

Despite these elements respecting beliefs about early modern witches, there are also differences. Indeed, the trio’s powers differ significantly from those attributed to their historical counterparts. Indeed, their role is not centred on maleficium, but rather on the revelation of hidden truths and future events.¹²² This change relates them closer to mythological figures such as the Fates and the Norns, previously discussed, thus reinforcing their connection with destiny.

The decision to portray them as witches rather than as purely mythological entities is particularly significant. While figures such as the Fates or the Norns operate at a symbolic level, early modern witches were deeply embedded in the cultural imagination of Shakespeare’s audience.¹²³ By characterizing the “weird sisters” as witches, Shakespeare provides spectators with an immediate interpretative framework, allowing them to recognise these figures through familiar cultural codes. At the same time,

¹¹⁹ Shakespeare, I.iii.45-47.

¹²⁰ Purkiss, p. 416.

¹²¹ MacFarlane, p. 158.

¹²² Curry, p. 396.

¹²³ Sharpe, p. 20.

however, he goes beyond, as their powers are primarily prophetic rather than destructive, thus eroding the expectations associated with witchcraft.

A particularly important moment in their dramatic construction is the cauldron scene in Act IV. Here, the “weird sisters” engage in a ritual that strongly recalls contemporary representations of witchcraft, involving the preparation of a potion through horrific and unnatural ingredients.¹²⁴ Some of them are even connected with religion, such as the ‘Liver of blaspheming Jew’¹²⁵, or the ‘Nose of Turk and Tartar’s lips, / Finger of birth-strangled babe’¹²⁶. Indeed, the populations mentioned above ‘denied the divinity of Christ’,¹²⁷ while the baby was probably killed or died at birth, thus it was not baptized.¹²⁸ These ingredients serve a deeper purpose; indeed, they highlight the demonic nature of the “weird sisters”, thus bringing them close to the common Early Modern English conception of witches as servants of Satan. Moreover, the chant ‘Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble’¹²⁹ evokes the rhythm of incantation and ritual, underlining their witch status. This scene draws heavily on popular imagery, as Shakespeare incorporates elements from folklore and society into the construction of these figures.¹³⁰ However, even in this context, they keep a distinct function; as a matter of fact, the ritual does not produce physical harm but serves to summon apparitions and reveal further prophecies to Macbeth, thus maintaining their connection to the sphere of destiny rather than to that of direct action, the latter more related to witches.

¹²⁴ Curry, p. 395.

¹²⁵ Shakespeare, IV.i.26.

¹²⁶ Shakespeare, IV.i.29-30.

¹²⁷ Shakespeare, IV.i.26 footnote.

¹²⁸ Shakespeare, IV.i.30 footnote.

¹²⁹ Shakespeare, IV.i.34-35.

¹³⁰ Shamas, p. 3.

Therefore, their role in the play further complicates their identity, as the trio does not act directly upon the world, but influences events through hints and revelations. They are the beginning of Macbeth's rise and downfall, hailing him with a vision of his future, yet they do not order him to act. Indeed, the witches' discourse constitutes a form of agency operating through language rather than through physical intervention.¹³¹ This indirect mode of influence aligns them more closely with mythological figures of fate, who shape events without directly determining them.

Ultimately, the "weird sisters" resist any fixed categorisation. They are characterized as witches in order to be recognisable within the cultural context of early modern England, yet their actions and functions consistently exceed this imagery. The reason for their bond with witchcraft may also lie in the social ideology of the play's patron. Indeed, *Macbeth* was likely created by Shakespeare, due to James I's royal commission, who was known for his open antagonism against witches, even writing *Daemonologie*, condemning these figures.¹³² In this context, Shakespeare creates liminal figures operating between myth and popular belief, thus adding another layer of ambiguity to them, also in their origin as characters. Their portrayal reflects this nature, presenting them as both familiar and fundamentally ambiguous. This element will be crucial in the following chapter, where their role will be further examined through a linguistic analysis of their discourse and the impact it has on the development of the pla

¹³¹ Dhurjjati Sarma, 'Agency of the Witches and Language Play in Shakespeare's "*Macbeth*"', *Transcript*, 1 (2021), 93-119 (95-96).

¹³² Shamas, pp. 18-19.

Chapter 3 Imperfect speakers; a linguistic analysis of Macbeth

3.1. Linguistic patterns: rhythm and repetition

Following the analysis of the historical, mythological and dramatic dimensions of the “weird sisters”, it is now crucial to shift the focus to the linguistic level, where their presence acquires its most influential form. Indeed, in *Macbeth*, the power of the trio does not reside in direct action, rather in the effect of their discourse, acting as a catalyst for what will occur in the play. Their speech, characterized by ambiguity, repetition and rhythmic irregularity, evokes many interpretations.

This chapter aims to explore the linguistic mechanisms and features underlying the trio’s speech, examining how these characteristics contribute to the construction of their authority in the play, together with their role in the unfolding of the tragic action. By doing so, it will emerge how the witches’ language is not merely prophetic, but warps reality itself, positioning them as pivotal agents in the play. More specifically, section 3.1 analyses rhythmic and repetitive patterns in the witches’ discourse, focusing on meter, sound repetitions and an introduction to numerical imagery. Section 3.2 examines how the “weird sisters” will influence Macbeth, progressively shaping his perception of reality and leading to his corruption. Ultimately, section 3.3 investigates ambiguity, paradox, equivocation and prophecy as the principal elements regarding the witches’ function in the play.

First of all, the rhythm of the “weird sisters” speech is important, as it differs from that of the other characters, thus creating a further ontological distance, highlighting the trio’s ethereal and otherworldly nature. Indeed, their language is inscribed within an almost ever-present trochaic tetrameter catalectic, mixed with what could resemble

iambic meter.¹³³ The choice is not casual, as the trochaic meter is strictly related to repetition of sounds, creating a hammering rhythm, as noticed in the lines:

1st WITCH: Here I have a pilot's thumb,
 Wrecked as homeward he did come. *Drum within*
3rd WITCH: A drum, a drum:
 Macbeth doth come.¹³⁴

The trochaic meter as shown, is composed by feet composed by two syllables in a **strong-weak** pattern¹³⁵ (**Here I Have a Pilot's Thumb**) but is catalectic as the last foot remains incomplete. Moreover, in the given example, the first two lines follow the aforementioned meter, but the scheme is interrupted by the stage direction together with the following repetition, only to be later reestablished. This highlights how Shakespeare makes a free use of the pattern, not adhering strictly to it, but rather reinventing it, thus fostering the hammering effect proper to this kind of meter. In the given example due to the rhythm cut, a sense of urgency and anticipation is created, maybe recalling the “weird sisters” role. Another example could be the famous line “Fair is foul and foul is fair”,¹³⁶ where the author creates a first part recalling the trochaic rhythm and a second part resembling iambic rhythm, suggesting ambiguity, paradox, thus successfully unveiling some elements of the trio.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the dynamism in the witches’ speech is shown even in other occasions, such as their first encounter with Banquo and Macbeth. Indeed, the trio articulate their sentences with a less intricate language than before, due to their simulating humans.¹³⁸

¹³³ David L. Kranz, ‘The Sounds of Supernatural Soliciting in “Macbeth”’, *Studies in Philology*, 100 (2003), 346-383, p. 396.

¹³⁴ Shakespeare, I.iii.28-31.

¹³⁵ Jonathan Hope and Michael Whitmore, ‘The Language of Macbeth’, *Macbeth: The State of Play*, ed. By Ann Thompson (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 183-208, p. 185.

¹³⁶ Shakespeare I.i.9.

¹³⁷ Kranz, p. 353.

¹³⁸ Kranz, p. 353.

Notably, Macbeth in this encounter describes the sisters as “imperfect speakers”, suggesting in this context that their speech here does not mirror their true nature, underlining the ambiguous effect proper to the characters. Moreover, in Act IV for example, the enchanting speech of the “weird sisters”, in lines such as ‘Double, double, toil and trouble;/Fire burn, and cauldron bubble’¹³⁹ resembles a nursery rhyme but only on the surface; indeed, it is not crude or irregular, but rather skilfully constructed through dynamic use of different meters and rhetoric patterns, such as repetitions and caesuras.¹⁴⁰ The term used by Macbeth, could also recall the catalectic structure of the tetrameter used by the witches, which may appear “incomplete”, yet purposely, as it highlights how the disruptive and chaotic forces that will unfold during the play are ‘prefigured in the very metrical forms of the language.’¹⁴¹

Another significant pattern is repetition. The author recurs to this undeniably simple rhetoric figure very often in the play, but in an intricate manner. Indeed, *Macbeth* is a short play and in such a limited space, the extensive use of repetition makes it reverberate throughout; indeed, consonants, vowels, rhythm configurations and images are continuously reiterated.¹⁴² As an example, when Macbeth first appears in the play, he utters the significant words “So fair and foul a day I have not seen”,¹⁴³ thus echoing the weird sisters’ line in the first scene of the first Act by reversing it. If one considers simple sounds, even the reiterate use of “bubbling” sounds in “Double, double, toil and trouble;/Fire burn and cauldron bubble”¹⁴⁴ takes the reader back to the first Act, where Banquo affirms that “The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, /And these are of them.

¹³⁹ Shakespeare IV.i.20-21.

¹⁴⁰ Kranz, p. 351.

¹⁴¹ Hope and Whitmore, p. 186.

¹⁴² McDonald, Russ, *Shakespeare's Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 47.

¹⁴³ Shakespeare, I.iii.38.

¹⁴⁴ Shakespeare, IV.i.10-11.

Whither are they vanished?¹⁴⁵ Moreover, Banquo's utterance reinforces the aerial theme, introduced in the setting scene by the repetition of fricative sounds in "Fair is foul, and foul is fair, /Hover through the fog and filthy air",¹⁴⁶ suggesting the otherworldly ontology of the three witches. Therefore, it can be considered that this rhetoric device is not ornamental but, accompanied with a perfectly suited rhythmic structure, emphasizes the enchanting and obscure nature of these characters, associating them 'with music, with poetry, and later with spectacle'.¹⁴⁷

Undoubtably, Shakespeare skilfully recurs to the repetition device, but what is most notable is the reiteration of numeric imagery. *Macbeth* contains an astoundingly high number of images, scenes and elements related to number three.¹⁴⁸ Clearly, they have a hidden meaning and an intrinsic importance. Indeed, in many folklores the number three exist to point out the sphere of the divine, the otherworldly, the Holy Trinity in Christian culture.¹⁴⁹ The number three is repeated on many occasions and in different manners during the play. As a matter of fact, the "weird sisters" embody a triadic essence, embedded in their mythological background and in their appearance as characters. Not only that, but the number three was thought to be the number of the witch¹⁵⁰, thus underlining this concept. The triadic theme is also introduced by semantic repetitions, such as "I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do", but even with enchanting formulas as "Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine, /and thrice again, to make up nine.". The latter is particularly significant as it plays with the number three, in a unique way. Indeed, by giving each other the triadic characteristic, apart from underlining their magic nature, they foster their eery

¹⁴⁵ Shakespeare, I.iii.79-80.

¹⁴⁶ Shakespeare, I.i.9-10.

¹⁴⁷ McDonald, p. 51.

¹⁴⁸ Similar statement in Shamas, p. 94.

¹⁴⁹ Shamas, p. 94-95.

¹⁵⁰ Shamas, p. 95.

and divine nature, even recalling the figure of Hecate or else, the triple goddess.¹⁵¹ The author chooses to composing these lines in what could resemble a spell, which impacts the reader due to the abrupt interruption in the next line, breaking the rhyme scheme, shifting the focus to Macbeth and Banquo. Another reference to the number three can be traced in the first scene of Act IV, or else the cauldron scene. Here the witches are caught performing a ritual, through which they produce three apparitions. These are metaphors for Macbeth's life, including the last prophecy regarding his death in the final act. In this context, it is not a coincidence to find the line 'Had I three ears, I'd hear thee'¹⁵², pronounced by Macbeth while hearing the prophecy, thus echoing the triadic essence of the witches.

Ultimately, the linguistic patterns characterizing the "weird sisters" transform their speech into something that exceeds ordinary communication. Rhythm, repetition and numeric structures contribute to creating an incantatory and unstable discourse, through which the author reinforces the trio's liminal nature and anticipates the disruptive influence they will have throughout the tragedy.¹⁵³

3.2. The power of discourse: the 'weird sisters' influence on Macbeth

The linguistic patterns characterizing the "weird sisters" are not confined to their own discourse but are progressively spread throughout the tragedy. For instance, Shakespeare presents language itself as a destabilizing force, capable of reshaping Macbeth's imagination and influencing his perception of reality. In this context, the

¹⁵¹ Shamas, p. 96.

¹⁵² Shakespeare, IV.i.77.

¹⁵³ Hope and Whitmore, p. 186.

witches' discourse is not merely a prophetic act but is a form of psychological and linguistic solicitation. First of all, it is important to say that, apparently, the witches' agency in the play infiltrates reality on various levels. For instance, right at the beginning of the play they seem to predict what will happen later, as is shown by the lines:

2nd WITCH: When the hutly-burly's done,
 When the battle's lost, and won.
3rd WITCH: That will be ere the set of sun.
1st WITCH: Where the place?
2nd WITCH: Upon the heath.
3rd WITCH: There to meet with Macbeth.¹⁵⁴

These lines seem to indeed point out events that are yet to happen, they anticipate their encounter with Macbeth, maybe hinting at the battle fought by the latter character in which he won serving King Duncan; however, it will be the beginning of the king's demise.¹⁵⁵

Yet, the first link between the figure of the three witches and Macbeth lies in the repetition of the line 'fair is foul and foul is fair'¹⁵⁶. Indeed, the latter character even prior to meeting the sisters recalls that line by inverting it, uttering 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'¹⁵⁷. It can be assumed that it is impossible for Macbeth to have heard this sentence, therefore it may be possible that the witches' agency extends beyond physical presence, infiltrating language, perception and perhaps reality itself. Focusing on the influence on Macbeth, it is clear that the witches with the prophecy in Act I, seduce his mind into thinking on how to be King. Indeed, initially he is described as a hero, a courageous warrior, even capable of 'Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel'.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Shakespeare, I.i.3-8, similar analysis in Sarma, p. 95.

¹⁵⁵ Shakespeare, this interpretation can be found in I.i.4 footnote.

¹⁵⁶ Shakespeare, I.i.9.

¹⁵⁷ Shakespeare, I.i.38.

¹⁵⁸ Shakespeare, I.ii.17.

Yet, the encounter with the three sisters seem to move something inside of him, as showed by Banquo's different approach to the news. Indeed, he seems more reasonable and cautious, even alerting Macbeth, when the prophecy begins to unfold, uttering '[...] But 'tis strange:/And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, /The instrument of darkness tell us truths, /Win us with honest trifles, to betray's/In deepest consequence'.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Macbeth is visibly shaken, full of doubts and in a subtle state of shock, for the images of murder that come to his mind. Thus, this shift can be explained by the deeply rooted ambition in his character, which is sparked by the promise of great fortune and a glorious future by the witches' prophecy.¹⁶⁰ This fact can be proven even by other lines such as: 'Stars hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires'.¹⁶¹ Moreover, it can also undeniably link the figure of the "weird sisters" to their mythological background, as shown in the previous chapter. However, the lines serve another important purpose, as it underlines Macbeth's corruption. Indeed, every time he acts negatively, he becomes more corrupted,¹⁶² a fact that is shown not only in concrete agency, as his actions gradually acquire more brutality, but also in language, as Macbeth progressively obtains characteristics proper to the "weird sisters'" speech. Actually, in the shown line, he employs imagery connected to darkness and hiding, characteristics associated with the witches' speech. Not only that but the author in this point creates a line that starts with a stressed rhythm, recalling the witches' cadence, only to then shift into an iambic structure typical of Macbeth, maybe to signal the beginning of the character's corruption.

¹⁵⁹ Shakespeare, I.iii.124-128.

¹⁶⁰ Roy Amit, 'Ambition and Its Consequences: A Study of *Macbeth*', *International Journal Of Language Literature and Culture*, 5 (2025), 63-68, p. 65.

¹⁶¹ Shakespeare, I.iv.50-51.

¹⁶² Amit, p. 64.

Moreover, the line ‘False face must hide what the false heart doth know’,¹⁶³ echoes the structure and sounds of the ‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’¹⁶⁴ line.

As the play goes on, the contamination becomes more evident. Specifically, in Act III, when Hecate appears to the witches mentioning that: ‘[...] all you have done / Hath been but for a wayward son’.¹⁶⁵ The figure of Hecate is pivotal in this interpretation, as she is connected to childbirth, due to ‘her own original right as an earth-goddess, or because her torches suggested the torches of Eileithyia’.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, in Greek mythology, the aforementioned goddess, was the deity of childbirth, invoked by women in labour for protection and assistance during delivery,¹⁶⁷ thus further reinforcing this link. Therefore, the progressive corruption can be interpreted as a figurative rebirth, where the “weird sisters”, considered in this context as Macbeth’s metaphoric surrogate mothers, guiding him to his destiny.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, this deeply connects these characters to the witchcraft tradition, as childbirth and childcaring were sometimes moments in which accusations happened, usually due to miscarriage or unlucky events happening to the child, as mentioned in the first chapter.

This bond is even recalled in the cauldron scene. The witches, after having prepared a potion, recognize that ‘Something wicked this way comes’,¹⁶⁹ suggesting that they are sensing the subsequent arrival of Macbeth. They define him as “wicked”, hinting that their influence has got to the very deepest parts of the character’s soul, recognizing

¹⁶³ Shakespeare, I.vii.83.

¹⁶⁴ Shakespeare, I.i.9.

¹⁶⁵ Shakespeare, III.v.10-11.

¹⁶⁶ Farnell, L.R. “Hekate’s Cult.” *The Goddess Hekate: Studies in Ancient Pagan and Christian Religion & Philosophy*, vol. I., ed. by Stephen Ronan, (Hasting: Chthonios Books, 1992), 17-35, p. 35.

¹⁶⁷ Alexandra Smith, *Virginity and Childbirth: A Case Study on Ancient Greek Religion and Social Perception* (Ohio State University, 2023), p. 10.

¹⁶⁸ Shamas, p. 56.

¹⁶⁹ Shakespeare, IV.i.45.

him as corrupted, almost sharing this characteristic with them, considering how Banquo detaches himself from their predictions after their first meeting.

The influence reaches its apex in the final Act, with the lines ‘Life’s but a walking shadow [...]’¹⁷⁰ and ‘[...] It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing.’,¹⁷¹ where Macbeth totally loses his emotional and mental stability, recognizing his world as inconsistent. Here Macbeth’s corruption is complete and his interior world is annihilated.¹⁷²

3.3. Ambiguity, Paradox and Prophecy

The previous section has shown how the language of the “weird sisters” gradually influences Macbeth, to the point that his inner integrity totally collapses. However, the effectiveness of this influence does not solely depend on repetition or imitation, indeed it derives also from some features of the “weird sisters” speech such as paradox, ambiguity and equivocation, that challenge steady perception of reality and blur the boundaries between truth and deceit. Therefore, an analysis of these elements is required to thoroughly comprehend the nature of the witches’ prophecy.

First of all, the “weird sisters” are indeed ambiguous characters, as it appears in their attire and nature, as previously demonstrated. To realize this effect in the play, often Shakespeare uses paradoxical and deceitful imagery, even augmenting the mysterious aura circling these characters. This is shown even at the beginning of the play, with the

¹⁷⁰ Shakespeare, V.v.23.

¹⁷¹ Shakespeare, V.v.25-26.

¹⁷² Scott, p. 174.

‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’¹⁷³ line, which somehow traces how the deeds performed by the other characters can be interpreted. This element is embraced by Macbeth, even before the witches’ encounter, who suddenly echoes the previously introduced paradoxical logic, as shown by the ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’¹⁷⁴ line. This could refer to the battle he won with blood and fatigue but certainly reiterates the witches’ previously set interpretation. Thus, paradox perfectly recalls the “weird sisters” ambiguity, revealing that for every action, there is a double meaning. Indeed, when the prophecy of his regency of Cawdor becomes reality, even the traditional association between truth and good deteriorates, as his mind fills with negative images¹⁷⁵, following his lines ‘This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good [...]’¹⁷⁶, thus highlighting ambiguity. This explains how the regency Macbeth rips from Duncan through murder, appears as a victory, but catalyses his inner degradation. Yet, while the new King ignores this scheme, the nearest person to him, Lady Macbeth, seems to acknowledge the situation they have reached as shown by her lines ‘Nought’s had, all’s spent, / where our desire is got without content’¹⁷⁷, making this concept explicit to the audience. It is also crucial to add that the paradoxical/ambiguous feature mirrors Macbeth’s inner deterioration, leaving the spectator to see a hero capable of ‘disdaining Fortune’, being completely transformed by destiny itself into an unrecognizable tyrant, able to even kill his nearest companion, Banquo. Moreover, the presence of paradoxical imagery seems to also reflect the witches’ nature as disruptive characters, creating what could resemble a cosmological disorder.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Shakespeare, I.i.9.

¹⁷⁴ Shakespeare, I.iii.38.

¹⁷⁵ William O. Scott, ‘Macbeth’s - and Our - Self Equivocations’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37, (1986), 160-174, p. 163.

¹⁷⁶ Shakespeare, I.iii.132-133.

¹⁷⁷ Shakespeare, III.ii.5-6.

¹⁷⁸ Kranz, p. 350.

Certainly, their prophecies share this chaotic nature, managed through the wise use of equivocation. This rhetorical feature is used by various characters to hide their real intentions, but more importantly is deeply linked to the “weird sisters” speech, as they resort to it to ignite Macbeth’s ambition and to daze him, leading him to his demise.¹⁷⁹ In this context, the witches use deceitful language even in the first encounter with the future tyrant and Banquo. They predict indeed things that cannot be possible at the moment of speech, such as the Macbeth’s sovereignty of Glamis and Scotland, but more crucial are the words reserved to Banquo, which are:

1st WITCH: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

2nd WITCH: Not so happy, yet much happier.

3rd WITCH: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
So all hail Macbeth, and Banquo.¹⁸⁰

These lines show exactly how paradox is crucial in creating equivocation, thus enhancing the ambiguity linked to the “weird sisters” characters. Indeed, the witches juxtapose contradicting images that appear to be nonsensical or impossible. In reality, in Act IV, when Banquo is already dead, there is a scene recalling these lines. For instance, after the prophecy’s unfolding to Macbeth, the witches disappear, leaving a show of eight kings, where the last has got a glass in his hand, and Banquo.¹⁸¹ Therefore, the latter character, though murdered, manages to escape the corruption brought by Macbeth and even creates a lineage of kings, highlighting how even if the tyrant tried to escape fate by killing his friend, he still fell victim of the unavoidable picture drawn by the witches. This scene serves also a political function, as Shakespeare deliberately links James I to Banquo’s line through the procession of kings, thus glorifying the Stuart dynasty and

¹⁷⁹ Sarma, p. 101.

¹⁸⁰ Shakespeare, I.iii.65-68.

¹⁸¹ Shamas, p. 23.

underlining the legitimacy of the monarch¹⁸², who was likely the patron of the play, as mentioned before. Moreover, the cauldron scene can be considered the peaking point of equivocation. In fact, here the witches disclose Macbeth final destiny through three cryptic apparitions. In this context, the second and the third ones are crucial. Indeed, after the first apparition, the witches show Macbeth a child covered in blood announcing that ‘[...] none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth’,¹⁸³ while the third one, a crowned child grasping a tree, reveals that ‘Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birnam Wood to High Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against Him.’¹⁸⁴ This scene is filled with equivocal elements, from the apparitions, which carry more than one meaning, to the premonitions told to him, which constitute the greatest of all tricks to Macbeth’s mind.¹⁸⁵ Indeed, the urgency to beware Macduff, the Thane of Fife, expressed by the first apparition is greatly increased following Macbeth’s order to slaughter the fiend’s family, after knowing that Macduff has fled to England, leaving them unprotected. This fact proves to be against another suggestion from the witches to ‘[...] laugh to scorn / The power of man [...]’,¹⁸⁶ though these warnings are inscribed in the aforementioned paradoxical imagery.¹⁸⁷ Thus, Macbeth, though being continuously denied intervention or speech during the three apparitions, mistakes the premonitions and warnings’ meaning and fulfils the destiny he decides for his own, just by taking account the impossibility of what the witches told him.¹⁸⁸ For instance, at the end of the play, in the final battle to defeat Macbeth, the “weird sisters”’ prophecies come true. Indeed, Malcolm, King

¹⁸² Shamas, p. 23.

¹⁸³ Shakespeare, IV.i.79-80.

¹⁸⁴ Shakespeare, IV.i.91-93.

¹⁸⁵ Scott, p. 171.

¹⁸⁶ Shakespeare, IV.i.78-79.

¹⁸⁷ Scott, p. 172-173.

¹⁸⁸ Scott, p. 173.

Duncan's son, orders his soldiers to take a branch from Birnam Wood's trees, in order to hide the real number of troops gathered and thus, overwhelm Macbeth. A sentry warns the latter that he '[...] looked toward Birnam, and anon methought / The wood began to move'¹⁸⁹. Following this, during the fight with Macduff, Macbeth discovers that his fiend is born through caesarean section, as showed in the lines '[...] Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped.'¹⁹⁰, therefore he was not born from a woman in the traditional way. It is in this point that what seemed impossible to the eyes of Macbeth, at the end becomes reality. In this context, he is not simply a spectator of his destiny but rather a catalyser for the witches' prophecies. In this context, ambiguity, paradox and equivocation, work together to create 'initially false but self-fulfilling prophecies'.¹⁹¹

These elements, the double meanings, paradoxes, ambiguities and prophecies, seem to highlight another peculiarity of this play. As mentioned earlier, Shakespeare does wise use of numerology and indeed the repetition of the number three in all its forms is clear. But in this context, there is another number which is strictly related to the play, which is number two. This number further reinforces the term of dualism, and it was usually considered a negative number, for the fact that it symbolized division, preventing the unity recalled by number one.¹⁹² The traces of this can be found in many ways in the play. Indeed, it can be traced in the structure of the witches' discourse as they seem to use mostly rhyming couplets. As an example:

1st WITCH: Round about the cauldron go;
 In the poisoned entrails throw.
 Toad, that under cold stone
 Days and nights has thirty-one,
 Sweltered venom sleeping got,

¹⁸⁹ Shakespeare, V.v.32-33.

¹⁹⁰ Shakespeare, V.viii.15-16.

¹⁹¹ Scott, p. 174.

¹⁹² Kranz, p. 376.

Boil thou first i'th' charmed pot.¹⁹³

The rhyme scheme is indeed AA, BB, CC, and it ensures an enchanting effect in the witches' speech. Not only that, but it is true that, although appearing more times in the play, Macbeth meets the "weird sisters" only twice, the first time in the first Act, at the beginning of his rise and fall, and the last time in the fourth Act where his downfall unfolds¹⁹⁴. The detail intertwines these three figures to their mythological background, as described in the previous chapter. Moreover, the scheme of prophecy and its fulfilment that can be seen in the play creates a symmetric structure, further recalling number two, as images and events echo twice. As an example, the witches' lines in Act 1 'I'll drain him dry as hay: / Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid: / He shall live a man forbid',¹⁹⁵ are symmetrically echoed later on, particularly after the murder of King Duncan, in Macbeth's lines 'Still it cried, "Sleep no more" to all the house; / Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more'.¹⁹⁶

Not only that, but the dyadic scheme is entwined with the triadic one, creating a system through which prophecies and deeds take place. Proofs of this can be traced in various elements in the play, such as the opening battle, won twice on the field and a third time with Cawdor's death, or in Macbeth's defeat by two noble sons, Malcolm and Macduff, and following the lineage, by a third, Fleance¹⁹⁷. Even Hecate recalls this system of symbols as she embodies both the triadic characteristic, being the triple goddess and also the dualism, recalling the two distinct shapes in which she is mentioned: "black" and

¹⁹³ Shakespeare, IV.i.4-9.

¹⁹⁴ Shamas, p. 96.

¹⁹⁵ Shakespeare, I.iii.18-21.

¹⁹⁶ Shakespeare, II.ii.42-44.

¹⁹⁷ Kranz, p. 379.

“white” Hecate. In this context, it can be assumed that Shakespeare embraces numerology and has some knowledge about the occult, fostering deep and hidden meanings in these numbers.¹⁹⁸ Concerning this interpretation, the “weird sisters” play a pivotal role. Indeed, through symmetry, repetitions and rhythm they are somehow omnipresent in the play, not physically certainly, but through linguistic patterns and repeated images. Indeed, the witches' tune and words are recalled, in almost every scene, and can be traced even in characters such as Malcolm at the end of the play, suggesting that these patterns represent powers going beyond witchcraft or the demonic.¹⁹⁹ Indeed, the other characters welcome him as the new king through hails, linking this scene to when the “weird sisters” first saluted Macbeth. Thus, the “weird sisters” are not merely characters, as various elements suggest. Through prophecies, equivocations and repeating symbolic patterns, these characters establish structures and events that recurs multiple times during the play. Moreover, their agency does not rely on concrete acts, but on their ability to create multiple interpretative schemes through which reality can be perceived and understood. In this context, Shakespeare rethinks the historical image of the witch into a more complex figure, situated between fate, magic and mythology. This, together with their omnipresence and numerological connection shape the “weird sisters” as transcendental figures, which guide both the characters and the audience through the unfolding of the tragedy, thus constituting the frame through which the characters pursue their actions

¹⁹⁸ Kranz, p. 373.

¹⁹⁹ Kranz, p. 349.

Conclusion

Throughout the dissertation, the “weird sisters” have emerged as eerie characters, capable of overcoming any simple categorization. Certainly, in these characters there are influences regarding the cultural and historical figure of the Early Modern witch, evident in the characters’ dramatic realization. Probably, Shakespeare decides to depict them in this manner, to present the audience with characters carrying a recognizable imagery. However, the play constantly tries to give them a deeper role and nature than mere witchcraft practitioners. In this context, their connection with a variety of backgrounds, ranging from magic to Greek, Roman and Norse mythology linking them with fate and their characteristic linguistic patterns, inscribe the “weird sisters” in a point where various symbolic systems meet. Undeniably, it is this ambiguity and lack of defined nature that raises them as one of the most intriguing characters of all time.

However, there is much more to be said. Indeed, in the aforementioned symbolic intersection, destiny is an important and complex detail. As demonstrated, they do not act directly on it, rather they tend to operate through suggestion, ambiguity and equivocation. For instance, their prophecies never impose a precise destiny. They rather offer seducing possibilities that come reality only through Macbeth’s response to them and in this context, the play tries not to present fate as an omnipotent force, yet its power derives from suggestion, which provokes human spirit and thus altering free will. As a matter of fact, the “weird sisters” provide Macbeth with possible images about his future, yet through their deceiving abilities they spark his ambition to an extent where he materializes those possibilities. In this sense, their linguistic strategies further reinforce this argument; indeed, through paradox, repetition and equivocation, they manage to blur the traditional boundaries between truth and falsehood, appearance and reality. As demonstrated, they

do not simply predict events but through their characteristic and enchanting speech, they shape how those events are understood.

Yet, they manage to overcome even this categorization. Indeed, the “weird sisters” represent much more than the supernatural and magical masters of suggestion. Indeed, other characters in the play seem to echo the witches’ linguistic patterns, even if they do not directly meet them. Moreover, the dramatic structure seems to follow a symmetric dynamic managed through the prophecy-materialization scheme, which recalls the witches’ presence in various moments. These characteristics, enriched by the numerology hidden in the play, present the witches as permeating characters in the play and I think that they can be understood not only as mere characters in the play, but rather they constitute the framework within which the dramatic action becomes possible. In this sense, their words further overcome simple suggestion, becoming the dramatic and symbolic centre of *Macbeth*, from which action is sparked and the tragedy unfolds.

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