

**THE SHAKESPEAREAN COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF SUPPOSED
SORCERESSES IN *MACBETH***

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to interpret the witches of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" as supernatural forces working for the overall good who are trying to stop the tyrant, and not as evil entities bent upon destruction, as conventionally understood. As a background study, this article provides a short summary of the history behind the myth of witches and how it resulted in widespread witch-hysteria.

Keywords: Three witches, Macbeth, Shakespeare, supernatural, misunderstood, evil, good, witch hunting, Lady Macbeth, fourth witch

Introduction

With a prayer to the Muse of Theatre, the study on the supposed sorceresses of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" commences with the understanding that the three characters who open Shakespeare's "Macbeth" are known to be unknown- entities whose identities

are as cryptic as their intentions. Are they the embodiment of demons within Macbeth or are they tempters without? Are they independent and unaffiliated individuals trifling with lives, agents of Fate or the direct personification of Destiny? Do they influence the future or are they just foretellers? Perhaps they are humans employing supernatural powers, or could they be supernatural elements in human form?

Background and Social Scenario

The word “witch” in “Exodus” is a translation of the Hebrew word “kashaph”, which comes from the root meaning “to whisper”. The word, as used in “Exodus”, probably thus, means “one who whispers a spell”. World history has witnessed witchcraft being blamed for random misfortunes ranging from sickness to crop failures, while the so-called witches provided an image of evil trying to harm humanity. This belief led to periodic occurrences of witch-hunts: triggered by the outbreak of an epidemic, about 5000 people were killed in Rome between 185-180 BC, and an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 executions took place between the 15th and 18th centuries in Europe and North America. Today, witchcraft is legally punishable by death in Saudi Arabia.

The process of “correcting, imprisoning, punishing and chastising” the alleged threat to Christendom, to the kings, and to humanity has a long history behind it: The “Exodus” and The “Leviticus”, two Old Testament books, written in the sixth century B. C. note:

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." (Exodus 22:18)

"A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them." (Leviticus 20:27)

One of the key instigations behind the fervour of witch-hunts is the treatise “Malleus Maleficarum”, authored by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, which, true to its name, dealt a hammer to those accused of maleficium, that is, the use of malevolent magic for causing damage and death. Reprinted about thirty times in about 180 years, it held that Christians were obliged to hunt down and kill witches, alongside arousing

secular governments to participate in the extirpation of this menace, before going on to prescribe the methods for their systematic identification, persecution, and torture.

Another notable name in this regard is that of the Stuart King James I, who, going beyond sorcery, added a political dimension to the witch hysteria to address his morbid fear of getting murdered through means of magic for political reasons. A summarised account behind his paranoia goes as such: while returning from his honeymoon in Denmark, (a place where the theory of demonic pact was widely accepted and consequently, witches were actively hunted) the royal couple encountered terrible seas- a phenomenon which was blamed on witches. Prior to this, Princess Anne's voyage for the wedding had met with a rough storm too. After some women confessed to attempting regicide- by calling up the storm in an attempt to drown James, in addition to melting a wax-effigy of him, so as to bring about his demise, the fear-struck ruler began to take matters seriously by authorising torture of suspected witches in future, in addition to other measures, including authoring a book on witchcraft titled "Daemonologie".

In a society where belief in magic was as popular as the dichotomy of good and evil, the clergy, indirectly but indisputably, influenced the foundations of witch-hunting. The Christian clergy, in the late thirteenth century, asserted that only they possessed legitimate magical powers- derived from the holy sacraments, meant for the exorcism of demons. Since magical powers are beyond the grasp of common humans, it was assumed that they came from either the benevolent God or the malevolent Devil, and thus, magic done without the blessings of the Church was considered to be from "pacts" made with the second source. While heresy, as a heinous crime against religion, was almost always punishable with the penalty of burning, sorcery, on the other hand, as the milder and debated civil offence, carried the comparatively merciful punishment of hanging, that too only in certain cases. Thus, it is the compounding of these two charges that gave the European witch hunt its unique proportions and consequences.

It has been rightly said by Milton Paulo de Lacerda that ignorance leads to suspicion, suspicion leads to insecurity, and insecurity leads to aggressiveness. A changing patriarchal society, fed by fear of subversion and revolt by women, ensured that the

cancerous growth of witch-hysteria happened no differently. The height of the persecutions occurred when and where the central authority had broken down. The Reformation witnessed some of the worst horrors with the shattering of the formerly unified Christian Church into the two sects, because the people were forced to do what they viewed as a “cleansing operation”- that is, chasing, trying, and executing the perceived threat, in the face of a weakened traditional religious protection. Furthermore, the Catholics and the Protestants, though divided by confessional differences, were united by a common fear of witchcraft, and they thus, indulged in the diligent burning of witches of both creeds while “Leonardo painted, Palestrina composed, and Shakespeare wrote”.

Regardless of variations in date and place, an almost certainly common feature of the accused was that they were females- not unusually those who were lonely, old, poor and quarrelsome. Defenceless against spiteful neighbours, compelled by unfortunate socio-economic traits and unprotected by the culture of the learned and the powerful, such “old women of melancholic nature and small brains”, as from the words of Johann Weyer’s “De praestigiis daemonum”, were more likely than men to take recourse to the perhaps only available method of protecting and empowering themselves- by laying claim to the mantle of supernatural powers that made them influential within their communities. It is, however, the other side of the coin that created a suitably dangerous argument against them: recourse to bodily retribution was beyond their physical power, legal means were outside their economic power, and so, it took little time for common sense to dictate that for them, harming or killing through devilish magic was only address for their grievances.

The slow but sure merging through the catalyst of fancy of the ancient folklore about the night-flying female cannibals or “strigae”, and the originally separate tradition of the malevolent sorceress, or “malecea”, who uses herbs and spells, created the image of what Renaissance Europe finally came to know as witches- those who ride to demonic meetings, also known as the witches’ “sabbats” on flying broomsticks, worship the Devil, and eat boiled babies. Another characteristic feature of the witch was the apparent ambiguity of gender, and literature has done its fair share in propagating it. This point

may perhaps be ascribed to notable women like France's Joan of Arc, Italy's Caterina Sforza, and England's Elizabeth I, who combined in themselves the then differentiated terms of "female" and "leader". Elizabeth, in an attempt to win support, projected androgynous images of her role, and referred to herself as a "prince" with the body of a woman and the heart of a king.

A phenomenon of considerable concern to the Church was that the experiences of the so-called saints were not entirely dissimilar to those of the so-called witches: they both reported paranormal sensations and visitations; they both, through a special relationship with a higher power, performed miracles- the difference being that one did pious miracles while the other indulged in impious ones. The Eucharist had special significance for both: as an object of adoration or defilement. In an attempt to answer doubts, an autopsy was carried out on the body of the blessed Colomba da Rieti to determine whether she was a saint or a witch.

Witches could easily be, and indeed often were, confused with healers and saints. In villages, though the self-proclaimed person with "powers" was consulted for matters like pregnancy, abortion, conception, as well as for common ills, the catch was that her powers were considered benign only as long as the treatments were effective, but as menacing when it was not. A common example of this was the habit of blaming midwives in case of still-births and other complications.

"Witches who are Midwives in Various Ways Kill the Child Conceived in the Womb, and Procure an Abortion; or if they do not this Offer New-born Children to Devils". (Malleus Maleficarum Part I, Question XI)

A much summarised case study of one Bellezza Orsini should help in better understanding how little time it took to establish many village healers as village demons. As one known to cure with the sign of the Cross, and resolve issues of love, she naturally denied all charges of witchcraft when accused for the first time. But under repeated torture-a standard procedure of the investigation, the terrified woman pleaded guilty to all of the mounting allegations. Her son initiated an appeal to a higher court, but before long, she confessed how she and her fellow witches take a "creature who was born dead, or a

heathen, who had not been baptised... and cut off the head”, chop the body in pieces, ‘and put all of it in the kettle” to boil so that “it all separates”. Then they “stir it two or three times”, before burying it for a period of forty days, after which, the Devil graces them with his presence once they have anointed themselves with the mixture. Orsini, while awaiting her sentence, in an apparently gruesome but more so than that, very painfully, “with a nail or key she struck herself in the throat with two thrusts with a tremendously abundant effusion of blood”, in her successful attempt at freedom through suicide.

As illustrated in the aforementioned instance, it is “valid to claim that torture, in a certain sense, ‘created’ witchcraft”: its plentiful misuse created a vicious cycle which actually fuelled itself. The availability of sufficient literature on witches and their trials educated the judges about precisely what confessions were required to convict her (or him). During and after torture, the suspected were asked not if they were witches, but for how long they had been one, how they obtained their evil powers, and who all fell prey to their magic. Charges were luxuriously piled, and if the torture did not draw out a satisfactory profession, the accused woman was tortured again, and repeatedly, until she either completely confessed to her witchcraft, or made plain her guilt by her obstinacy (it was believed that those aided by the Devil did not cry under torment).

In most cases, the victims were encouraged—either under threat of further torture, or under assurances of freedom, to name other witches. Many did so, hoping either for relief, or to frame those against whom they held grudges, thereby ensuring the discovery of more so-called criminals. Often trials by ordeal were ordered, an example of which is the “ordeal by water”, wherein, by theory, an accused who sank was acquitted, while the one who floated was convicted. This particular test is mentioned in King James VI of Scotland’s “*Daemonologie*”: he wrote that water is so pure an element that it repels the guilty.

Portrayal in Holinshed’s Chronicles

Conceived initially on the ambitious idea of creating a “Universal Cosmography of the whole world, and there with also particular histories of every known nation”, and later focussed down to the chronology of just the British Isles, Raphael Holinshed’s work is

titled as “The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland”, or simply as “Holinshed’s Chronicles”: this collaborative work, published in several volumes and two editions has served to influence playwrights like Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. While Marlowe drew inspiration for his play “The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England, with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer”, Shakespeare used the “rich material” as a source variedly, as per need, for his “Macbeth”, “King Lear”, “Cymbeline”, and for the histories like “Henry V”, “Henry VIII”, “King John”, amongst others.

While Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” restricts the “witches” to the secondary role of foretellers, Holinshed’s “wizzards”, on the other hand, are portrayed as contractual murderers, in a manner not dissimilar to the plot on King James VI of Scotland’s life, in addition to be shown as prophesiers who are “more fair than foul”.

Herein, the noble King Duff externally appears to be “fresh and faire to behold” with “liveliness of looks”, and an adequate appetite for food and administration, but underneath the “outward signs and tokens”, he is a helpless patient to ever-worsening insomania and night-sweats.

“The king fell into a languishing disease, not so gréuous as strange, that none of his physicians could perceiue what to make of it. For there was séene in him no token, that either choler, melancholie, flegme, or any other vicious humor did any thing abound, whereby his bodie should be brought into such decaie and consumption (so as there remained vnneth anie thing vpon him saue skin and bone.) (Holinshed’s Chronicles, Volume V: Scotland)

As in most cases, “magicall art” comes in when medicine backs out, and before long, the King’s men discover one of the sorceresses of Forres (the same place that is home to Shakespeare’s witches), “roasting vpon a wooden broch an image of wax at the fire, resembling in each feature the kings person, made and deuised (as is to be thought) by craft and art of the diuell: an other of them sat reciting certeine words of inchantment, and still basted the image with a certeine liquor verie busilie .”

Under interrogation, they confess, before death by burning, that the enchantment kept him awake, and while the image burned, so did the King's flesh, as he continued to "breake fourth in sweat"- so that "when the wax was cleane consumed, the death of the king should immediatlie follow". The conspiracy against the king is unveiled, and once the latter is restored to full health, he pursues the rebels "into Rosse, and from Rosse into Cathnesse"- names which both feature in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" as well.

A later account tells of the infamous meeting between "Makbeth and Banquho", and "three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world". Under the tag of "common opinion", Holinshed says:

"these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, bicause euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken." (Holinshed's Chronicles, Volume V: Scotland)

Holinshed's Duncan is shown to be a younger, but a weaker king, whose administration was "feeble and slouthfull". When Makbeth became ruler, he made "manie wholesome laws and statutes for the publike weale of his subiets": for ten years under him, many "misdoers" were punished and "tamed in such sort, that manie years after all theft and reiffings were little heard of, the people inioieng the blissefull benefit of good peace and tranquillitie". While both Holinshed and Shakespeare accuse Macbeth of killing Duncan, the former shows Donwald committing regicide as well, with the support of his wife, in a manner not unlike Shakespeare's protagonist.

Portrayal in Shakespeare's Macbeth

The character of Shakespeare's Macbeth is inspired by the Scottish King Mac Bethad mac Findlaích, who ruled from 1040-1057, in a manner that is completely contrary to the Macbeth of the play: Marianus Scotus tells that the king once gave money to the poor as if it were seed. According to Nicholas Aitchison, the name "Mac Bethad" (or, in modern Gaelic, "MacBheatha"), means "son of life".

Convention dictates that the overwhelming amount of despair and distress echoed in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" is because of the three mysterious witches who open the play. Their blameworthiness is, quite arguably, not entirely unjustified: they are infamous as the embodiment of instinctive evil, known for enticing Macbeth and Banquo towards regicide, in conjunction with fuelling the inferno of ambition within the protagonist that ultimately consumes him, his near ones, and his country.

As mentioned in the sections above, the ever-altering patriarchal society, especially that of the Renaissance period, was afraid of subversion and revolt- by women, and basically anything that threatened to challenge, change and turn upside down the conventions and what was considered as a representation of natural order. It takes little to understand that the three followers of Hecate also symbolize the same theme: they underline the idea of inversion- for them, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"; they revel in "filth" and gore which is commonly considered repulsive, all the while playing the part of agents and witnesses to chaos and conflict, thereby contributing to the ominous tone of the play. The "instruments of darkness", "midnight hags", "juggling fiends" and "oracles" take the form of women with "choppy fingers", "skinny lips" and beards in "withered" and "wild" attires when they sport with the hamartia of their unsuspecting interlocutor; they "double toil" for double "trouble", through the employment of sorcery and subtlety in a manner not dissimilar to subconscious thoughts and dark temptations, to exercise control and effect the end of Macbeth.

An undeniable point is the fact that Macbeth primarily plays the role of a genuine antagonist with a penchant for violence: he is a "wayward" and "spiteful" mass murderer who combines in himself "Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself/ And falls on th' other", with the error of bearing his "hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear." Selfish to the point of being treacherous, he begins harbouring thoughts about committing regicide as soon as he learns of his fate. Is it entirely impossible to take into consideration that the King, in due course of time, might have appointed him as a successor to the crown as a failsafe in the event of any mishap to the royal family?

Although the son of Sinel does possess certain redeemable traits, and is unremittingly anguished by the pangs of guilt and regret, they can hardly suffice to excuse the heinous atrocities of the man whose name is one that the “devil himself could not pronounce a title/ More hateful”. His activities demonstrate the pits of his wickedness: after assassinating the two people- Duncan and Banquo, whose deaths were supposed to “be the be-all and the end-all”, he calls himself “young in deed”; upon learning about Macduff’s escape, without mercy or reason, he decides to “give to th’ edge o’ th’ sword/ His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls/ That trace him in his line”; and once he secures himself behind the prophecies, he tyrannically unleashes such a reign of terror that:

“Each new morn

New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows

Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds

As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out

Like syllable of dolor.” (Act IV, scene III)

Simple is to deduce from the witches’ first proclamations that they also held the knowledge of the crimes that he was going to commit in the future- crimes which only went from bad to worse after he attained the crown, as much uncomplicated is it to accept the fact that fear, and by extension, hatred, stem from failure to comprehend, and as the witches almost always mystify matters, they are easily classified as forces of evil. The union of these two points is capable of giving birth to an entirely different perspective about the weird sisters: of them not as evil witches, but as sorceresses who work at least neutrally, if not for the good side, from behind the silhouettes. From here, it is difficult, but not impossible, to assume that they orchestrate Macbeth’s fall only because they had little doubt that the longer he reigns, the more Scotland “sinks beneath the yoke./ It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash/ Is added to her wounds.” The quotes “trade and traffic with Macbeth/ In riddles and affairs of death” (Act III, scene V), “raise such artificial sprites... Shall draw him on to his confusion” (Act III, scene V), and “Macbeth/

Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above/ Put on their instruments” (Act IV, scene III) only serve to supply strength to this supposition.

The witches have magic at their disposal- magic that is unquestionably potent, although it involves the use of less than likeable materials, such as an “Eye of newt and toe of frog,/ Wool of bat and tongue of dog,/ Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,/ Lizard's leg and owlet's wing”: with this, they are capable, by their own admission, of shapeshifting and weather manipulation, and therefore, it is quite arguable that it is the supernatural sorceresses who should be held accountable for the widespread occurrence of supernatural phenomena in the play. Quite a few “things strange” use Macbeth and his actions as the epicentre: Macbeth sees the “fatal vision” of the “dagger of the mind, a false creation”; his wife hears “the owl scream and the crickets cry”; very mysteriously, the drugged guards cry and laugh in sleep- as if lamenting and mocking Macbeth for his foolish decision, and say their prayers, maybe in an supernaturally induced foreknowledge of the future; and lastly, but most evidently, is what happens as a prelude to Duncan’s death,

“A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place,

Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed” and “And Duncan’s horses—a thing most strange and certain—

Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,

Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,

Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would

Make war with mankind” (Act II, scene IV)

To try and provide an explanation to the unexplained events, it may be hypothesised that perhaps, the weird sisters cause all these in grief, “troubled with man’s act”, or as an attempt to dissuade him from fulfilling his destiny- his destiny to be deceitful murderer.

Another fascinating matter is the three apparitions, and even more fascinating is to imagine that they are, for the lack of a better word, “things” brought from the past or the future, or are at least their representations thereof. Folklore often confers upon witches and on other such beings the power to connect the present with the past or the future; and if it may be supposed that the “bloody child” is a so-called thing from the past, or more specifically, from the past of Macduff when he was “from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd”, then it is not unviable to stretch the line of thought to identify the “armed head” as one from the future- of Macbeth’s future when he was possibly decapitated during or after his final fight. This may shed light on the witch’s reason for saying that “He knows” Macbeth’s thoughts and why the cursed soul seems to be in a hurry to be dismissed; furthermore, the declaration that the second apparition is “More potent than the first” lends extra credit to this notion, as Macduff finally proved to be more powerful than the tyrant.

Role of Lady Macbeth

Quoting directly from the words of Macbeth, “nothing is but what is not”, and no exception to this statement is, nor should suitably be, Lady Macbeth: she is the third most important character of the play after her spouse and the three witches, with her actions being as much difficult to comprehend as her reasons.

Theatre actresses who play the role of the wife of the thane of Glamis don two distinct, but rather interrelated costumes: they act as both pathetic and neglected wives as well as ambitious conspirators-in-crime. An attempt to have a better understanding of this mystifying duality is indeed in order, and for this singular purpose, it may be proposed, going in line with the explanations above, that Lady Macbeth has what may be called, a suppressed persona: consciously, she is the devoted wife, but subconsciously, she is one of the witches, who tries, though not in a very different way as compared to the others, to put an end to the tyrant. This proposition can probably account for the sleepwalking scene as well: quite possibly, she becomes a hollow shell of her former self as her suppressed side slowly erases itself once its work is done, following Macbeth’s confession-

“I am in blood

Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er” (Act III, scene IV)

About the conscious level, or in other words, about her dominant frame of mind, little is to doubt that the tenacious woman is the epitome of devotion: starting with how she has the “perfectest report” about her husband’s heart- truths of which even he is unsure; and the extent to which she goes for his sake merits nothing short of respect, although her actions make that much challenging.

On the other side of the coin, many critics, including K.M. Jan, note Lady Macbeth to be the fourth witch, giving her soliloquy after the reading of Macbeth’s letter, as the primary basis for their argument. If that be so, at least on the subconscious strata, then it is scarcely unreasonable to believe that her subconscious part dominates her conscious mind, influencing it to suit its needs- its need to put upon the path of destruction the man who was supposed to, and actually does, become a mass-murderer. In a way thus, she shows, or at least intended to show him, the path of the least possible destruction- though this road led to no little amount of casualties, including them both as well.

Conclusion

A conclusion to this study should suffice with a very concise recapitulation of what has been said so far: of witch-panics, it was the fear of the unknown that lead to the large number of deaths, especially of old and poor women; of the three witches, it is the proposal that they are actually positive forces who try to put an end to the one who was destined to, and actually becomes, a symbol of homicide; and of Lady Macbeth, it is the supposition that though she is unintentionally one of the witches, but knowingly, she is a very devoted wife, whose subconscious side dominates the actions of her conscious part. Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”, thus, reiterates what John Milton’s “Paradise Lost” declares:

“Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself” is all that is required to make the mightiest fall the farthest.

References

1. As noted on Wikipedia's page on “Witch-hunt”, the most common estimates are between 40,000 and 60,000 deaths. Brian Levack (*The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*) multiplied the number of known European witch trials by the average rate of conviction and execution, to arrive at a figure of around 60,000 deaths. Anne Lewellyn Barstow (*Witchcraze*) adjusted Levack's estimate to account for lost records, estimating 100,000 deaths. Ronald Hutton (*Triumph of the Moon*) argues that Levack's estimate had already been adjusted for these, and revises the figure to approximately 40,000.
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