

*The Clash between the Utopian World of the Witches
and the Dystopian Society of Humankind in
“The Witch” and “Macbeth”*

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Abstract: Witchcraft has been present in cultural and intellectual history of various societies, and inescapably the representation of witchcraft and a witch figure have been one of the shared interests in numerous literary works. Particularly, witchcraft as a theme was very popular among the famous dramatists of the Renaissance period in England. For instance, both *The Witch* by Thomas Middleton and *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare have thick layer of witchcraft in their corpora. Accordingly, the present research is an attempt to highlight that, in contrast to the contemporary firm beliefs in and accusations against “witches,” these plays present the closed witch community as an almost a utopia through providing a stark contrast between the enigmatic yet egalitarian and free society of the witches and the hypocritical norms of the plays’ societies specifically related to sexuality and freedom of an individual.

Keywords: *The Witch*, Thomas Middleton, *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare, Renaissance drama, Witchcraft, female sexuality, female utopian world.

Witchcraft has always been present in cultural and intellectual history of various societies, and it has been a subject approached by so many scholars from varying disciplines ranging from anthropology to sociology. Because of its profound impacts on different historical socio-cultural, religious, and literary

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contexts, the witchcraft phenomenon has been and still is a fertile ground for different perspectives and discussions. Inescapably the representation of witchcraft and a witch figure have been one of the shared interests in numerous literary works. Particularly, witchcraft as a theme was very popular among the famous dramatists of the Renaissance period in England. For instance, both *The Witch* by Thomas Middleton and *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare have thick layer of witchcraft in their corpora. When we seek to understand and examine the nature of witch hunts during the early modern period in England, we see that there is a clear bitter clash between the prevailed beliefs in the existence of witches among the society and the way the English dramatists mentioned above represented witchcraft in their works. Accordingly, the present research is an attempt to highlight that, in contrast to the contemporary firm beliefs in and accusations against ‘witches,’ these plays present the closed witch community as an almost a utopia through providing a stark contrast between the enigmatic yet egalitarian and free society of the witches and the hypocritical norms of the plays’ societies specifically related to sexuality and freedom of the individuals.

To begin with, touching upon the history of witchcraft in England would provide the necessary background information about how and why these two well-known dramatists made use of witchcraft subject in the whole spectrum of their plays. First of all, it is important to note that due to the religious friction between the Catholic Church and Protestant Reformation, there is a radical difference between European and English witchcraft. For instance, whereas witchcraft was considered heresy in Catholicism, in Protestant demonology, it was not open apostasy of the sort depicted in the fantasies of witches’ Sabbaths.¹ However, as Carol Karlsen states, “between 1645 and 1647, several hundred people had been hanged in the wake of England’s most serious witchcraft outbreak” and “[m]ore than ninety per cent of these English witches were women.”² Especially when the socio-historical and religious background for witchcraft is analysed in depth, it appears that English witchcraft, as James

¹ Nathan Johnstone, “The Protestant Devil: The Experience of Temptation in Early Modern England,” *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 176, doi:10.1086/380949.

² Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 2.

Sharpe notes, was certainly “a variation on a European theme.”³ For both places, when the possible reasons for such an almost sex-specific crime are examined, the Judeo-Christian tradition of misogyny, which “equated women and their bodies with sin, carnality, and spiritual death”⁴ and its impact on the English Reformation with regard to gender discourse seems to have a crucial role for making women become the target of witch-hunts. In the light of these patriarchal religious values, wrong perceptions of sexual anatomy of female body were prevailed. According to ‘one-sex model,’ which was valid until the late eighteenth century, women’s anatomy was perceived as identical to men’s; but women’s genitals were inward and thus women seemed lesser beings than men.⁵ All these notions had a cumulative effect on the portrayal of women during the early modern period as being physically and spiritually much weaker than men. The perception of woman as the more sexually voracious of the sexes is represented in many archival writings of the Renaissance period as can be observed in Ludovic Mercatus’s writing on “womb hysteria” which refers to “an immoderate and unbridled desire to copulate, so strong and unquenchable that the woman appears mad and delirious as a result of this excessive and insatiable appetite” (qtd. in Aughterson).⁶ Furthermore, the legal status of the *femme couverte* (a married woman) suggested that all women’s property came under her husband’s control during the couple’s marriage and so that the majority of women were deprived of their economic independence and most of their rights under law. Thus, as Susie Steinbach points out, “we find women concentrated in occupations that were considered female, many associated with domestic labour.”⁷ Since public sphere was closed for women, women tended to pursue a few traditionally female employments such as domestic service, charring and laundering, making and mending clothes, nursing and midwifery, and tending animals. Some of these jobs begot a great

³ James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1997), 32.

⁴ Sigrid Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany*, ed. Robert H. Brown (Massachusetts: Massachusetts UP, 1995), 13.

⁵ Susie Steinbach, *Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History* (London: Phoenix, 2005), 112.

⁶ Kate Aughterson, *Renaissance Woman: Constructions of Femininity in England* (London: Routledge, 1995) 53.

⁷ Susie Steinbach, *Women in England*, 9-10.

affinity between witchcraft and femininity. Besides, the communal fear sourced by any kind of unexpected setback to domestic routine such as the sudden death of a baby or an animal in a village life was the main reason for scapegoating which was a very common attitude related to witch trials. After all, as Sharpe describes:

[t]he early modern English community, whether rural or urban, was a place where gossip thrived, where reputations were evaluated, where discussable news was a welcome entity. In such an environment there is little doubt that witchcraft suspicions were among the more avidly discussed of topics.⁸

For the early modern English society described in the quotation reputation was of crucial importance in defining the society's behaviour pattern towards individuals. In regard to this point, Edward Bever points out the interpersonal violence as a fact of village life:

Indeed nearly every human relationship which went wrong might lead to a charge of witchcraft. [...] Early modern village life certainly included warm friendships and peaceful coexistence, but any attempt to understand early modern witchcraft must start by recognizing that the "internal viciousness of village interactions [...] and the brutality of interpersonal conflict" drove some members to pursue personal quarrels with a degree of persistence and ruthlessness that might harass an enemy even unto death.⁹

As can be inferred, in such a community described in the quotation above, a heightened tension between society and the individual, a tension between the accuser and the accused one paved the way for an endemic and chronic fear which would be resulted in the scapegoat phenomenon in witch trials. The main reason for this situation seems to be the communal sense of anxiety caused by any kind of interruption of domestic routine, such as the so-called unnatural death of individuals or animals, and by an increasing demand for explanation of the illnesses or misfortunes.

⁸ James Sharpe, *Instruments*, 163.

⁹ Edward Bever, "Witchcraft, Female Agression, and Power in the Early Modern Community," *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 958. doi: www.jstor.org/stable/3790618.

In addition to these possible reasons, the literary works created by being based on the mentioned reasons were also quite effective in prevalence of the witchcraft phenomenon. For instance, *The Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinric Kramer and Jacob Sprenger (1486) is one of the most famous and discussed medieval treatises on female witches. Although proving the existence of witchcraft and supplying the European witch hunters with information on how to identify, interrogate and convict witches seem to have been the basic concerns of the work, the claims on and explanations for the defects of women are also outstanding. The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* belonged to the fifteenth century Dominican reform movement, which propagated celibacy, venerated the Virgin Mary, equated sexuality in women with sin and death, and in their work, they insisted on their essentialist approach to womanhood as a weaker sex being prone to temptation.

The English gentlemen Reginald Scot was the first to respond to the claims in the *Malleus Maleficarum* on witchcraft, and in his work, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), Scot rejected the existence of magic and witchcraft by applying to reason and religion. However, Scot's point was not related to the issue of femininity; he was merely against the idea of superstition which was caused by women and could have been a threat to divine power. In her book, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, Diane Purkiss refers to Scot's work as sceptical on witchcraft but misogynistic in response to the idea that women might act as agents of supernatural causation.¹⁰ On the other hand, the copies of Scot's empirical study were burned on the accession of James I, the author of *Daemonologie* and the sponsor of the translation of the Bible. In the introduction of his *Daemonologie*, the king states that his aim is to convince those who are sceptical about the existence of witchcraft, and Epistemon's words in *Daemonologie* reveal the common belief that ever since the serpent deceived Eve, he has tricked more women than men. As can be inferred, these historical works written either to prove or to reject the existence of witchcraft share a common aspect that is the constant representation of women as being inherently weaker than men. Nevertheless,

¹⁰ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 64.

the representations of witches in *The Witch* and *Macbeth* show strong inclination to question the existence and effectiveness of such figures in society. Moreover, in both plays, the witches seem to be the wicked ones; yet when the plays are examined in depth, it appears that the members of the plays' societies are the real corrupt persons and their world is almost dystopian society due to its members' vices, while the witch communities are in harmony in their own microcosm.

As for *The Witch* by Middleton, although the title of the play provides a reader or audience with a strong impression that this is a play about a witch, it explores and offers various possible roles available for women such as a wife, an unmarried mother or a prostitute. As it is stated in Isabella's song (II.i.127-34),¹¹ whose lyrics allude to the plights of Isabella, Amoretta, Francisca, Florida and the Duchess in the play, a widow, typical known marital status of witches, is "one state more to try" (II.i.131). Accordingly, while the play's other female characters suffer from being sexually possessed and oppressed at the hands of male authority, the witches, Hecate, Stadlin, Hoppo, Hellwayn and Prickle, are free from any kind of patriarchal norms. By applying to a witch figure that is depicted as not being confined by any patriarchal values, Middleton examines and criticizes social norms for female sexuality and the cult of female chastity in the chaotic, dystopian world of the play's society.

The Witch, as Samuel Schoenbaum observes, is Middleton's first exploration of tragicomedy in which he, for the first time, uses women characters as the essential figures to investigate the nature of virtue itself.¹² However, in his later attempts such as *Women Beware Women* (1657) and *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* (1657), Middleton, as a playwright who acknowledged the mutual implication of sex and power, had destroyed the Jacobean opposition of lust and power thanks to his suspicion of dogma, his subversive use of irony, and his trick of reversing perspectives and withholding judgement.¹³ Thus, his

¹¹ Thomas Middleton, *The Witch*, ed. Elizabeth Schafer (London: A&C Black Limited, 1994), 30. All further references to the text will be taken from this edition.

¹² Samuel Schoenbaum, "Middleton's Tragicomedies," *Modern Philology* 54, no. 1 (1956): 8. doi: www.jstor.org/stable/435153

¹³ Swapan Chakravorty, *Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3-6.

empirical and close observation of the feminine life and femininity is reflected in *The Witch*, too. Accordingly, what combines and dominates the three plot lines in the play is the question of female chastity, and the presence or absence of virginity. The witches are included in two of three plots; yet their existence or their poisons do not affect the events of the plots.

Firstly, Isabella is a key female figure whose name directly involves in the female virginity discourse of the play's Isabella-Sebastian-Antonio-Florida plot. The first act of the play begins with Sebastian's claim that "She is my wife by contract before heaven, and all the angels" (I.i.3), and only one line after, he informs that "she's gone; another has possession" (I.i.4). Towards the end of the first scene of the first act, we discover that this is, in fact, the day of the marriage of Isabella and Antonio. From now on, the effort put by Sebastian and Antonio into defining who will 'conquer' Isabella's hymen is portrayed. On one hand, Sebastian resorts to the witches to make Antonio impotent by a charm on his wedding night, so that he can preserve Isabella's virginity for his own purposes. However, although the spell which Hecate puts on Antonio is successful, later, his plan to lure Isabella into bed brings him on the verge of violating her virginity with rape. That he subsequently gets what he wants has nothing to do with the witch but rather with "a fearful, unexpected accident" (V.iii.25). Beside the ineffectiveness of witchery, this scene also highlights the hypocrisy of men in relation to female chastity: Sebastian, who speaks about a heavenly union with Isabella, comes close to raping her by claiming that it is his right to do so. In addition, Sebastian makes so many misogynistic comments during the whole play. For instance, he complains that "honesty's a rare wealth in a woman" (II.ii.209) while he is disguising himself as Celio, Isabella's servant, to reach his aim. He does not hesitate about labelling Florida as a whore, following her affair with Antonio; yet he considers Fernando, who is the owner of the brothel in which Florida has a room too, as his best friend. On the other hand, the play's ostensible tragic hero is Antonio, who dies in the end; but his excessive reaction against Isabella's so-called infidelity and his exaggerated speeches on his honour as a man who has had a mistress for nearly seven years prevent us from sympathizing with him. Instead, the realistic aspect of Middleton's play represents male hypocrisy regarding female chastity and the distorted morality with respect to gender in sexuality.

Secondly, in the Duchess-Amoretta-Almachildes plot, The Duchess is a woman whose father is killed by her husband who “came to” her “bedside at the full of midnight, and in his hand that fatal, fearful cup, waked” her and “forced” her “pledge him” and her “father’s scorn” (II.ii.58-62). Thus, the Duchess who is driven by revenge wants to get Almachildes who desires her servant, Amoretta, to help her killing the Duke. Thus, the Duchess tricks Almachildes by blindfolding. This scene of the play is important because as Elizabeth Schafer points out:

[t]here is so much hullabaloo over which woman precisely Almachildes has penetrated: first it seems that it may be Amoretta, then that it may be the duchess and finally it turns out that it was a common prostitute. A bitter comedy emerges, focused around the grotesque comic device of the bed trick, where one woman is substituted for another without the man concerned noticing difference [...] In a play where the focus on female chastity and sex is so strong, the bed trick points uncomfortably to the utter reification of women in the act of sex, as each woman becomes an anonymous body to be penetrated, not an individual with distinguishing marks.¹⁴

Almachildes is, like Antonio and Sebastian, a hypocrite who complains that the woman he thought he was deflowering did not have an intact hymen, so she deceived him (III.i.1-14). However, he visits Hecate’s cave and asks for a love charm to be used on Amoretta. Although the love charm at first appears so powerful, it works only as a dupe, misleading him about the woman he is having sex with. Therefore, again, the witchery charm does not work in the play’s action.

On the other side, the Duchess, who refers to Hecate as a “mother” (V.ii.33) and reveals once more the witches’ acceptance by society, is the last person visiting the witches. She asks for a potion to kill Almachildes who helped her kill the Duke. Nevertheless, the poisons she gets from Hecate to make Almachildes meet “a sudden and a subtle” death (V.ii.2) turn out in the next and last scene either not to have worked or even been remembered.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Schafer, Introduction to *The Witch*, by Thomas Middleton (London: A&C Black Limited, 1994), xxii.

Furthermore, the Duchess's acceptance to be executed as a murderer and her hard fight to clear her name of adultery shows, as it is observed in the case of Isabella and Francisca, that the obsession for chastity is not specific to the play's male characters; it has a vital importance also for the female characters.

Thirdly, in the plot of Francisca and Aberzanes, in which the witches are not included, Francisca is one of the "poor venturing gentlewomen" (II.i.43) who is under seventeen-years old, and in her soliloquy (II.i.35-62) she reveals the fact that Aberzanes secretly comes to her at night and now she is pregnant by him. She expresses her great fear of being killed by her brother, Antonio, if her secret sexual relationship with Aberzanes and her pregnancy are discovered. Aberzanes's solution to their predicament is getting Isabella out of the house so that she could give birth in secret. When Francisca has her baby, this time he pays an old woman to raise the child secretly. Obviously, he has no intention of accepting full responsibility for the baby. He makes his attitude clear when he speaks to Francisca and says: "Not I, pardon me;/ That let a husband do when he has married you;" (II.ii. 38). On the other hand, Francisca has the same attitude with Aberzanes; what makes her hate herself after giving birth is "how monstrous thin I look!" (II.ii.33), and before her childbearing, she does not seem to hesitate about spreading lies about Isabella to protect herself against exposure of her secret. Here, it is important to note that Isabella is the first person who discovers Francisca's secret and her first reaction is well worth examining:

Isabella: I'll call her stranger ever in my heart.
She's killed the name of sister through base lust, (III.ii.50-51)

However, when Francisca enters, Isabella continues calling her "sister" (III.ii.74). Her hypocritical attitude and her accusations against Francisca then Aberzanes as if, as a woman, she was the only responsible person for the situation reveal how collaboration is impossible among women in this atmosphere of hatred.

On the contrary, when Hecate says “Come, my sweet sisters;” she really means “sister”, because the witches are in collaboration with each other. For instance, Hecate asks Stadlin for advice on the quantity of ingredients she adds to the cauldron (I.ii. 10-11) or they prepare for a night-time flight together (III.3). They do not harshly judge each other on their individual sexual activities as females. In this respect, it is possible to say that a witch community in the play reflects Middleton’s ideal society in which individual liberty is considered important, for, as David Holmes points out:

Middleton was a great lover of individual liberty, and this humanistic predilection no doubt played a large part in producing the balanced and objective outlook which his dramatic microcosms increasingly reveal [...] Middleton’s liberalism was considerably ‘advanced’ [...] Middleton was not an enemy of the aristocracy, or of any other class; nor was he opposed to the class system of social organization itself, for that matter. Yet [...] he was intolerant of the humbug in the social structure.¹⁵

Another important aspect of the play is that this is the only play of the period which represents almost all the sensationalist elements in Continental witchcraft, such as infanticide, sexual deviance or transvection, which were, as Julia Garrett puts forward, not common in English trials,¹⁶ yet occupied a place in the broader public imagination. However, the hyperbolic and rumbustious characterization of the witches and their ineffectiveness on the main action in the play reveal Middleton’s incredulity towards the existence of witches. Thus, the play is not a deep exploration of witchcraft. Instead, it examines social norms for female sexuality and the cult of female chastity by applying to a witch figure that is depicted as not being confined by any social norms or values especially regarding sexuality. For this reason, the witches in the play are not represented as being capable of or interested in committing any crime associated with witches such as shaping anyone’s destiny or causing harm to someone. Instead, they are much more interested in satisfying their

¹⁵ David Holmes, *The Art of Thomas Middleton: A Critical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 146.

¹⁶ Julia M. Garrett, “Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 46, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2013.0002>

own lusts by openly sleeping with visitors or succubi or their own offspring, while, on the contrary, the play's human characters try to use the witches to make their sexual dreams real and make great efforts to hide their practice of sexual pleasures. As Marion O'Connor explains:

Conspicuously ineffectual in their plot relations to the courtiers, the witch and her colleagues appear almost innocent alongside them. For all her talk of incest and infanticide, the coven is not shown to be performing anything more noxious than their aerial song and dance routine. Within the fiction of *The Witch*, it is in the court that vices are enacted, and it is by the courtiers that crimes are committed, with ultimate impunity.¹⁷

Thus, it is possible to conclude that all machinations and the nature of both male and female characters in relation to female virginity and sexuality in *The Witch* expose Middleton's criticism of his own society. In fact, when the play is analyzed in depth, it appears that this play is not related to witchcraft at all, and the existence of the witches merely supplies the dramatist with the necessary material to mirror the obsession of his own society with female chastity. Although ostensibly the witches are there to supply the play with an action by their charms and poisons, as we observe, Hecate and her cohorts are represented as being incapable of determining the outcome or affecting the actions of the human figures; but the existence of their community which is marked by harmony and collaboration is vital because it creates the direct opposition with the dystopian, cruel and corrupt world of the play.

As in the case of *The Witch*, *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare also displays a clear contrast between the harmonic world of the witches and the chaotic world of the play's society. First of all, it is important to note that the existence of the witch scenes in *Macbeth* constitutes one of the most debated topics in the field of Shakespeare studies. It is mostly because the interpretation of the play changes drastically in accordance with how the play's witch material is interpreted, and on this point, the play itself offers a plurality of references to the sisters, which leads us to considerable variation in interpretations. For

¹⁷ Marion O'Connor, "The Witch," in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 1126.

instance, they are called “witches”¹⁸ by Folio direction, yet only the sailor’s wife refers to one of them as a “witch” in the play (I.iii.6). Instead, they call each other as “sister” (I.iii.1-3), while Macbeth terms them as “imperfect speakers” (I.iii.70) and “the Weird Sisters” (III.iv.133), and Banquo mentions them as “the devil” (I.iii.107) and “the instruments of darkness” (I.iii.124). What is most striking is that they call each other as “sister” (I.iii.1-3), which is the visible mark of their sisterhood in their closed community.

Interestingly, the play offers strong implication about a combination or continuity between these indefinable creatures and Lady Macbeth, for her soliloquy when she invokes the “spirits” to “unsex” her, to “fill [her] with cruelty,” to “make thick [her] blood, and to “exchange [her] milk with gall” (I.v.39-47) portrays her as a witch-like woman. Accordingly, some scholars such as Peter S allybrass, who claims the triumph of feminine authority over patriarchy,¹⁹ and Marvin Rosenberg, who interprets the Sisters in Freudian terms as the “projections of inner images of the powerful female-mother-figure who suborns the male, driving or luring him to his own destruction,”²⁰ concludes that Lady Macbeth and the witches function as coercive power in the play. However, when the historical and social contexts of the play are considered, it appears that the world of the play is dominated by the hierarchical norms of the feudal society and in such an atmosphere it is difficult to claim that Lady Macbeth and the witches manipulate Macbeth with remarkable effectiveness. Instead, the play deals with the paradox of violent action in defence of civilised values by reflecting the realities of the dystopian patriarchal system in the play’s society. Thus, Lady Macbeth and the witches, in fact, do not have any direct effect on the deeds of Macbeth. He, as a Scottish general and the thane of Glamis and later Cawdor, is a powerful man and a brave soldier who fulfils the ambitions of the feudal system around him, and the only way he knows to solve the problems or get what he wants is violence

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990). All further references to the text will be taken from this edition.

¹⁹ Peter S allybrass, “Macbeth and Witchcraft,” in *Macbeth: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Macmillan Education, 1992), 34.

²⁰ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth* (Delaware: Delaware UP, 1993), 23. (First published in 1978.)

and murder. Outstandingly, he contemplates murdering the king before Lady Macbeth voices his wish and before his first encounter with the witches. This shows his remarkable capacity for evil, and he only seeks for “spur to prick the sides of my intent” (I.vii. 26-27). Thus, as Stephen Greenblatt points out, he deludes himself into believing in the words of the sisters and of his wife.²¹

The main reason for the ineffectiveness of the witches is that although they seem to have an inexplicable relation to Macbeth, they are not in close cooperation with him at all. As in the case of Macbeth’s contemplation of murdering the king before Lady Macbeth voices his wish, Macbeth’s first sentence in the play, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I.iii.38), echoes the witches and the play’s motto: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.i.12). This fact shows that Macbeth is not ‘bewitched’ by the witches; instead he already has a remarkable capacity for evil before his first encounter with the witches. Even if Lady Macbeth’s influence on him to kill the king is open to discussion, the fact that he is alone murdering the others and that he only visits Hecate at the end of his ‘fantastic’ career emphasizes his free will to decide upon events.

Another important aspect related to the existence of witch scenes in *Macbeth* is that the witches in *Macbeth* are treated as social outcasts by others in the play’s society. For instance, the first witch wants some chestnuts from a mortal female; but she is rejected and accused of being a witch, which is for the first and the only time in the play that “witch” is used to refer to the Sisters:

First Witch: A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap,
 And munched, and munched, and munched. ‘Give me’, quoth I;
 ‘Aroynt thee, witch’, the rump-fed ronyon cries.
 Her husband’s to Aleppo gone, master o’th Tiger;
 But in a sieve I’ll thither sail,
 And like a rat without tail,
 I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do. (I.iii.4-10)

²¹ Stephen Greenblatt, “Shakespeare Bewitched,” in *William Shakespeare’s Macbeth: A Sourcebook*, ed. Alexander Leggatt (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 83-84.

Now, she plans to take her revenge by destroying her husband's ship. On this issue, Terry Eagleton refers to the witches as the "unconscious" of the drama, "which must be exiled and repressed as dangerous but which is always likely to return with a vengeance."²² In fact, the act of the first witch physically exemplifies what Eagleton means in his description of the witches as the unconscious of the play. Moreover, what happens between the witch and the sailor's wife exposes the fact that the witches in *Macbeth* are marginalized by the play's society. We find the same attitude in Hecate's complaining about mortals:

Hecate: And which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you. (III.v.10-13)

Here, Hecate is angry with her cohorts, for they appeared to "a wayward son," Macbeth. Thus, it is possible to say that although the Sisters seem to be close to Macbeth, which might pave the way for the idea that they are incorporated into Macbeth's society, they are, in fact, totally excluded from the social environment, and they also do not attempt or seek to be a part of society. This situation blurs the lines between their existence and inexistence in the play. In this sense, one of the most striking and thought-provoking interpretations of the witch material in *Macbeth* belongs to Stephen Greenblatt who argues that the witches in the play account for nothing:

They are given many of the conventional attributes of both Continental and English witch lore [...] they are associated with tempests, and particularly with thunder and lightning; they are shown calling to their familiars and conjuring spirits; they recount killing livestock, raising winds, sailing in a sieve; their hideous broth links them to birth-strangled babes and blaspheming Jews; above all, they traffic in prognostication and prophecy. And yet though

²² Terry Eagleton, "'The witches are the heroines of the piece...'" in *Macbeth: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Alan Sinfield (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education, 1992), 47.

the witches are given a vital theatrical *energeia*, though their malevolent energy is apparently put in act, it is in fact extremely difficult to specify what, if anything they do or even what, if anything, they are.²³

Greenblatt's perspective could be supported with Banquo's question, "What are these," (I.iii.37) when he and Macbeth first encounter them, and by showing how Macbeth echoes the same question, "Speak, if you can. What are you?" (I.iii.45) to which he receives in reply his own name: "All hail, Macbeth!" (I.iii.46). Thus, through these questions, it might be concluded that it is extremely difficult to specify what the witches are and what they do. Even their gender is blurred in Banquo's description of these creatures as "women" with "beards" (I.iii.43-44).

In the same vein, it is difficult to term what the witches tell Macbeth as prognostication or prophecy. For instance, Macbeth's ignorance of the latest news that he is made thane of Cawdor does not make the witches' words prophecy. Similarly, again Macbeth's ignorance of the fact that Macduff was born by caesarean section (V.vii.46-47) is not enough to interpret the witches' words as prophecy. Above all, throughout the whole framework, we never see them urge Macbeth to any specifically immoral act. Instead, they "are a projection of his own desires and superstitions [...] and are therefore neither instigators nor determinants of his behaviour."²⁴ In relation to this point, the use of amphibology in the witches' riddles which constituted a substantial part in the life and literature of Renaissance England does not make them powerful demonic creatures that are very much effective on the tragic hero's action. In fact, in contrast with Macbeth's description of the weird sisters as "imperfect speakers" (I.iii.70), their unreliable and unstable riddling language running through the play shows how they are outstandingly successful at equivocation. As Alexander Leggatt expresses, "[r]eversing the meanings of the words, they [the witches] reverse the poles of the moral universe," and in *Macbeth's* society, the witches do not have to put in a great deal of effort to

²³ Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched," 83-4.

²⁴ A. R. Braunmuller, Introduction to *Macbeth*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 71.

do so, since “words slide easily into their opposites.”²⁵ For instance, at the very beginning of the play, the second witch’s line, “When the battle’s lost, and won” (I.i.4), summarizes the dual and relativist construction of the play. However, even though the witches are experts of applying to it, it is the ‘real’ power of the language, not of the ‘magical’ power of the witches.

In conclusion, Macbeth, as a Scottish general and the thane of Glamis and later Cawdor, is a powerful man and a brave soldier who fulfils the ambitions of the feudal system around him. The only way he knows to solve the problems or get what he wants is violence and murder. Although he has some problems with the psychological results of his atrocities, in contrast with his wife’s psychological and physical discontinuity in this system, he fights until the last moment and is killed as a king. In this social background, Lady Macbeth is forced to disappear with a reported suicide, and the witches are obliged to fly away, for through the end of the play Macbeth leaves to allude to them.

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²⁵ Alexander Leggatt, *William Shakespeare’s Macbeth: A Sourcebook* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 127.

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