“Double, Double, toil and trouble?” The Multiplicitous Nature of the Weird Sisters and its Effects on Culpability in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

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Introduction

Humans often use the terms “supernatural” or “magic” to categorize phenomena and behavior that they cannot explain by other means. These terms were used even more frequently in certain historical periods, particularly around moments of political or economic insecurity (Holmes 18; Purkiss 127). In the late Medieval and Early Modern periods, Europeans often placed women who did not fit societal norms into the category of “witches” (Russell 3-7; Holmes 14). However, European Medieval and Early Modern conceptions about witchcraft likely stemmed from pre-Christian belief systems or traditions that were not incorporated into Christian society (Holmes 14). Throughout the Middle Ages, the Christian perspective of witchcraft evolved from considering witchcraft and magic as part of a separate belief system to condemning them as a heretical set of dangerous practices that were closely associated with the work of demons and the Devil within the Christian world view (Holmes 14; Russell 4-5, 16-21). In the Early Modern period, people began to accuse others of using witchcraft as a tool for political sabotage, or even to cause harm to their rivals, which led to its secular criminalization in England in 1563 (Wills 41-42; Holmes 68, 72-73, 76-78, 107-110). This criminalization made being accused of witchcraft an increasingly dangerous, and even deadly, charge (Holmes 15, 73-74, 76-77,110; Russell 13, 16-19). The Early Modern period also saw a scholarly debate among King James VI of Scotland and I of England, scholar Reginald Scot, and others about the nature of witches as servants of the Devil or mere tricksters who were accused by fearmongers (Scot 25; Greenblatt, “Shakespeare Bewitched” 24-27; James VI/I 35).

Within this context of increasingly fraught perceptions of witchcraft in Europe, King James commissioned the King’s Men to perform a play at Hampton Court for the visit of King Christian IV of Denmark, James’ brother-in-law (Kernan 72; Paul 1). William Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* for this commission, and the King’s Men first performed it on August 7, 1606

(Kernan 72). Shakespeare based much of *Macbeth*, his "Scottish play," written for the Scottish king of England, on historian Raphael Holinshed's account of the historical Scottish King Makbeth in his *Chronicles of Englande, Scotlande, and Irelande* (The British Library, "Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 1577"). Shakespeare chose to include and highlight characters such as Banquo, from whom James believed himself to be descended, in order to cater to James' interests (Kernan 80; Holinshed 239, 246-248). Possibly to cater to James' fascination with witches and witchcraft, Shakespeare also included a group of supernatural characters, called the "Weird Sisters," who presented some of the hallmarks of witches, as well as the characteristics of other supernatural characters, including the Fates from Classical mythology (Holmes 107-109; Leimberg 69-75). However, Shakespeare's characters differed from Holinshed's supernatural characters of the same name. Holinshed's Weird Sisters were three among several different supernatural figures, and Holinshed was careful to emphasize the uncertainty surrounding the Sisters' nature, specifically whether they are "Goddesses of destinie," "Nimphes," or "Feiries" (Holinshed 243-244, 249). Shakespeare complicated the uncertain nature of the Weird Sisters by combining their characters with all of the other supernatural figures in Holinshed's narrative (Holinshed 249).

Shakespeare's amalgamation of Holinshed's supernatural characters into the Sisters prevents the audience from being able to characterize them with certainty. The Weird Sisters appear several times throughout the play, and each of their appearances reveals different perspectives on their nature. The ambiguity surrounding the Sisters' nature has sparked modern scholarly debates, including one centering around the question of their witch-like nature between Stephen Greenblatt and Inge Leimberg.[1]

[1] There are other scholarly debates and readings concerning the role and characterization of the Weird Sisters. These vary from the interpretations presented by Greenblatt and Leimberg to T.S. Elliot's reading of the Sisters as ghosts

Greenblatt argues that the Sisters are witches, and as a result, they are implicitly responsible for the action in the play due to the influence they exert over Macbeth (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 32-34). In a response to Greenblatt's article, Leimberg relies more heavily on Holinshed's narrative, and argues that the Sisters are not witches, but rather that they are representations of the Fates or Furies from Classical mythology (Leimberg 62-67, 69-75). While Leimberg does not explicitly address questions surrounding culpability in the play, her presentation of the Sisters as Fates contrasts with Greenblatt's reading of the Sisters as witches. The ambiguity of the Sisters' nature calls into question the degree to which the Sisters are responsible for the actions of the play.

While it may be tempting to scapegoat the Sisters as either witches or Fates, the inability to place them into one category of supernatural creature relieves them of some responsibility for the action of the play. In fact, the Sisters do not take any direct action in the play, but merely speak with Macbeth and Banquo, and conjure apparitions that speak to Macbeth at his command. Instead, Macbeth interprets the Sisters' words and makes his own decisions to act, exercising what he believes to be his own free will, with tragic results.

History of English Witchcraft and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle*

The Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* are popularly referred to as "witches." However, the perceptions of witches in 1606 England were far cries from the spooky, hat-wearing, broom-riding characters that one sees on a modern Halloween night. Witchcraft became a crime in England in 1563, which renewed a debate surrounding its nature. Reginald Scot, an English scholar, contended that witchcraft was nothing more than accusations levied against innocent people by fearmongers (Scot 25; Holmes 74-77, 98). In contrast to Scot, King James VI/I of

(Elliot 17). However, this paper will focus on the options presented by Greenblatt and Leimberg because their arguments best highlight the moral issues raised by the play.

Scotland and England argued that witchcraft was intrinsically linked to the Devil and that witches' actions could be politically motivated (James VI/I 35). This debate stems from the evolution of European perspectives on witchcraft and magic during the 16th and early 17th centuries.

As early as the Middle Ages (5th century, C.E. – c.13th century, C.E.), Christians viewed witches and magic unfavorably (Russell 3-7; Encyclopedia Britannica "Middle Ages: Definitions and Facts"). Witchcraft and magic likely represented remnants of far older belief systems and traditions that were not incorporated into Christianity (Holmes 14). In the Middle Ages, witchcraft was considered part of a "lower" order of magic, magic that was "practical and aimed at obtaining immediate effects…," with *maleficium* ("evil-doing") at its core (Russell 4, 6-7). Despite falling into this lower order of magic, historian Jeffery Burton Russell claims that witchcraft could be used for either good or evil purposes (Russell 13). However, if any form of magic was used to hurt someone, the person who had used magic would be charged for their crime as they would be under any other circumstances (Russell 13).

Although witchcraft was not a crime in itself before 1563, Russell explains that witchcraft and other forms of low magic were seen by Christians as rooted in evil (Russell 6, 13). In this view, witches' attempts to manipulate the "powers of the Universe" flouted the will of God, thereby indicating that they were working with the Devil and other demons (Russell 6, 13). The European Church in particular came to understand witchcraft as heresy over the course of the 13th-16th centuries (Russell 16-19). In addition, Russell writes that the histories of the time reflected the evolving understandings of the supernatural phenomenon associated with magic and witchcraft as being understood as proof of the Devil's existence and power (Russell 20-21). This contributed to the European understanding of witchcraft as what Russell describes as "a religious

cult of the Devil built on the foundations of low magic and folk traditions but formed and defined by the Christian society within which it operated" (Russell 17). By defining witchcraft in opposition to Christianity, this definition links the ideas of witchcraft and demonolatry in ways that carry through into the Early Modern period. *The Malleus Maleficarum*, a 15th century text on witchcraft, magic, and evil spirits, reinforces this connection between witchcraft and evil through its definition of witches. The text defines witches as female "workers of harmful magic," meaning someone who contracts with an evil spirit to perform magic against another person to harm or deceive them (Maxwell-Stuart 41-47, 67-72). This general definition continues the Middle Ages' understanding of a witch or magician as someone who is working with an evil spirit (and thus in opposition to God and his will) to accomplish their goals, a thread which carries throughout the 15th century into the 16th and the Early Modern period.

While this understanding of witchcraft in opposition to Christianity continued from the Medieval period into the Early Modern period, historian Ronald Holmes argues that like their Medieval predecessors, many Early Modern English people did not actively fear witches, thinking of them as more figures of innocuous superstition than as an active part of their reality (Holmes 110; Russell 13, 16, 20). However, Holmes acknowledges a shift in belief with the influx of Continental Protestants' ideas as a critical point in the evolution of perceptions of witchcraft in the Early Modern period (Holmes 76-77). These ideas centered around a blind belief in the existence of witchcraft, which he describes as a "faith which had no connection with reality" (Holmes 76-77). The popularization of this perspective increased cultural anxiety about witches, which in turn helped to shape cultural understandings of the nature of witches (Holmes 110-112).

The tumultuous religious changes in England following the death of King Henry VIII contributed to the blending of these associations of witchcraft with the Devil with the political tensions surrounding religious beliefs and practices (Holmes 68, 72-73, 76-78). This amalgamation became known as political witchcraft. (Wills 42). Political witchcraft was exactly what it sounds like: witchcraft that was thought to be used to benefit a particular political cause at the expense of another (Wills 41-42). Suspected acts of political witchcraft ranged from a group of witches accused of causing the storm that delayed King James VI of Scotland's (the future King James I of England) return after his wedding to Princess Anne of Denmark to threats of assassination from Catholics against Queen Elizabeth I (Holmes 15, 77-78, 107-109).[2] These religious undertones underpinning accusations of political witchcraft were solidified when Elizabeth's advisors and Parliament acted on concerns about political witchcraft instigated by the Catholic Stuarts or other Catholic sympathizers as Elizabeth forced England back to Protestantism after Queen Mary's Catholic reign (Holmes 15, 68, 72-73, 76-78, 110-111). Largely due to these concerns for Elizabeth's safety, the Witchcraft Act was passed in 1563, outlawing witchcraft in England explicitly (Holmes 15, 73 -74). Elizabeth's policies not only reflected the rising possibility of supernatural threats from her rivals and enemies, but also a shift in the cultural understanding about witchcraft from the Medieval one centered in religion to the politicization of religion and all of its trappings, including the supernatural (Holmes 74-78).

This transition to a more political and legal perspective on witchcraft created a space for the debate around the nature of witches between Scot and James, among others. Reginald Scot, wrote *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584 in an attempt to quell some of the resulting anxiety

[2] This event is considered by several scholars to be the incident that incited King James VI/I's interest in witchcraft (Holmes 107-109).

surrounding witchcraft, by calling out falsehoods partially resulting from its politicization (Holmes 93; Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 23-24). In his book, Scot defines witches as:

> certain old women here on earth, called Witches, must needs be the contrivers of all mens calamities; and as though they themselves were innocents, and had deserved no so much punishments. Insomuch as they stick not to ride and go to such, as either are injuriously termed Witches, or else are willing to so be accounted, seeking at their hands comfort and remedy in time of their tribulation, contrary to Gods Will and Commandment in that behalf, who bids us to rest to him in all our necessities.
>
> (Scot 25)

Scot's definition outlines his understanding of the cultural expectation for witches, as women seem to be thought to be the cause of all of men's woes (Holmes 18). He also illustrates the hypocrisy of Christians who blame their problems on witches rather than seeking help from God. Scholar Stephen Greenblatt argues that, in other sections, Scot attempts to understand the trick behind supposedly supernatural actions, suggesting that while he does not want people to be accused of witchcraft, he also wants to figure out how people fool their communities (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 24-27). In his attempt to expose the hypocrisy of witch accusers and the tricks of accused witches, Scot seeks to return to a perspective of witchcraft more akin to that of pre-political witchcraft one than to an anxiety-provoking and dangerous phenomenon that had swept across England by the time of Scot's book in the form of witch trials (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 24-27; Holmes 74-77, 98).

Before he assumed the throne of England, King James VI of Scotland wrote a treatise on magic and witchcraft, *Daemonologie*, which was first published in 1597 (Holmes 106, 109). James centers his perspective on witchcraft in religious and historical contexts in order to support

his political policy against accused witches (Holmes 109, 110; Paul 76). In contrast to Scot, James, in Daemonologie, defines a witch as a servant of the Devil, who is "intised ether for the desire of reuenge, or of worldly riches, their whole practices are either to hurte men and their gudes, or what they possesse, for satisfying of their cruel minds in the former, or else by the wrack in whatsoeuer sorte, of anie whom God will permitte them to haue power off, to satisfie their greedie desire in the last poynt" (James VI/I 35). James' understanding of witches and witchcraft feeds the exact anxieties that Scot was trying to appease in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* ten years previously (Holmes 110-111). This fundamental disagreement in their perspectives about witchcraft and witches – the falsely accused and the demonic servant – may have contributed to James' banning *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* upon taking the English throne in 1603 (Holmes 110; Paul 6).

James' understanding of witchcraft is directly reflected in his English policy as well. One of his statues issued in 1603 made witchcraft a capital crime (Holmes 109-110). James' policy and aggressive position towards the issue of witchcraft fanned anxieties produced by the Elizabethan Witchcraft Act of 1563 into a panic that culminated in a torrent of deadly witch trials later in the 17th century (Holmes 112). Despite his early intensity surrounding witchcraft, later in his reign, James became more skeptical about the authenticity of accused witches, even going so far as to question accused witches (Holmes 112-114, 117; Paul 76, 78-79). Despite his later skepticism, James' earlier understanding of witchcraft and his banning of alternative points of view had already done their damage by infecting popular conceptions of witchcraft and the supernatural with fear of danger behind every door, the sense that people could take matters into their own hands, and the blind belief that anyone accused of witchcraft must be guilty of serving the Devil himself (Holmes 112-114).

These evolving views on witches and witchcraft, as well as knowledge of James' personal interest in the subject, would have provided critical inspiration to Shakespeare as he wrote *Macbeth*. Shakespeare almost-certainly also derived key inspiration from the historical account of King Makbeth of Scotland that appears in *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* written by Raphael Holinshed. Holinshed was a historian who published his *Chronicle* in 1577, detailing the history of England, Scotland, and Ireland until 1571 (The British Library, "Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 1577"). This work became source material for many of Shakespeare's History and historically based plays (The British Library, "Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 1577"). Holinshed relates the story of the rise and fall of Makbeth, a Scottish thane who lived in the 11th century (Holinshed 251-252). Makbeth rose to the throne by murdering King Duncane, reigned as a bloody tyrant, and lost his throne and life in a civil war against Duncane's son, Malcome Cammore, and Makduffe, Thane of Fife (Holinshed 239-252).

Holinshed also includes supernatural figures in his history. Three female supernatural characters first appear in an interaction with Makbeth and Banquho as they return home after chasing the Danes out of Scotland:

> [three] women in straunge [and] ferly apparel, resembling creatures of an elder worlde, whom when they attentiuely beheld, wondering much at the sight. The first of them spake [and] sayde: All hayle Makbeth Thane of Glammis (for he had lately entred into that dignitie and office by the death of his father Synel). The [second] of them said: Hayle Makbeth Thane of Cawder: but the third sayde: All Hayle Makbeth that hereafter shall be king of Scotland
>
> (Holinshed 243).

In this scene, the women greet Makbeth with both his current and future titles. They do not tell how this will happen, even when they continue to tell Banquho that "he [Makbeth] shall reygne in deede, but with an vnluckie [unlucky] end…" and that Banquho's descendants shall rule Scotland thereafter (Holinshed 243). The women do not say how any of this will come to pass, only that it will and that it will not end well for Makbeth. However, Makbeth and Banquho seem to ignore that latter warning, and instead fill their heads with visions of advancement, as the two men began to joke about their future titles after the women depart (Holinshed 243-244).

It is interesting that Holinshed does not name these figures in their first interaction with Makbeth, instead choosing to describe them as "[three] women in straunge [and] ferly apparel, resembling creatures of an elder worlde" (Holinshed 243). It is unclear what Holinshed means by "an elder worlde," but one possibility could be that he is referring to the time that Holmes mentions in which witchcraft and magic were part of practiced belief systems (Holmes 14). Holinshed names the women immediately following their disappearance from this encounter with Banquho and Makbeth, writing "[b]ut afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were eyther the weird sisters, that is as ye would say ye Goddesses of destinie, or els some Nimphes or Feiries, endewed with knowledge of phrophesie by their Nicromanticall science, bicause euery thing came to passe as they had spoken" (Holinshed 244). Holinshed presents these three kinds of supernatural figures as seemingly equal options for the women's nature; however, they are very different from one another. Goddesses of destiny are akin to the Classical Fates, which will be discussed later. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines nymphs as "semi-divine spirits" that are frequently associated with nature (*OED* "nymph, n.1" 1). Fairies are very broadly defined in the *OED* as humanoid supernatural beings "to whom are traditionally attributed magical powers and who are thought to interfere in human affairs," which

could in theory also apply to the other two without the added connotation of divinity (*OED* "fairy, n. and adj." A3a). These three kinds of supernatural creatures all bear their own significance and power. However, Holinshed emphasizes their common ability to prophesize. Beyond this commonality, Holinshed's deferral to the "common opinion" suggests that he does not quite know what they are.

The phrase, "the weird sisters," also supports the complex nature of their characterization. The word "weird" is derived from the old English word *wyrd,* which means fate (*OED* "weird, n." Forms, Etymology). The *OED* defines "weird" as "[h]aving the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings, etc.; later, claiming the supernatural power of dealing with fate or destiny" (*OED* "weird, adj." 1). Holinshed refers to the supernatural women later in the Makbeth story as "the weird sisters," when Makbeth is spurred on by their words into his plotting against Duncane when he names Malcome his heir instead of Makbeth, but the Sisters themselves do not appear for the rest of the narrative (Holinshed 244). This use of the term "weird sisters," combined with this understanding of "weird" suggests that the Weird Sisters of *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* were intended by Holinshed to be associated with fate, destiny, and prophecy rather than magic. This interpretation of the phrase that Holinshed uses to refer to them aligns with their actions in the *Chronicles,* as the women only speak to Makbeth and Banquho about their futures.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding what exactly these women are, the "common opinion" is clearer on the question of the nature and source of their power: "[n]icromanticall science" (Holinshed 244). The word "nicromanticall" is defined in the *OED* as "necromantic," which in turn relates in both of its adjectival definitions to the concepts of magic and witchcraft

(*OED* "necromantic, n. and adj." B1, B2a, B2b; *OED* "necromantical, adj." 1a).[3] The women's necromantical power is evidenced by the phrasing of Holinshed's quote stating that, regardless of if they are "Goddesses of destinie," or "some Nimphes or Feiries," the women have been "endewed with knowledge of phrophesie by their Nicromanticall science" (Holinshed 244). This connection between the Sisters and necromancy through Holinshed's description creates a link between the Sisters and magic. In addition, necromancy is a form of magic that is imbued with a darker tone due to its dealings with the dead (*OED* "necromancy, n." 1a). In *Daemonologie*, King James acknowledges necromancy and witchcraft to be two different forms of the same supernatural concept with different amounts of power (James VI/I 9). With this link to magic, it is tempting to understand the Sisters as witches, adding another item to Holinshed's list of possibilities (Holinshed 244). However, Holinshed does not call the Sisters witches; he instead saves that title for other supernatural figures who appear later in the narrative. This suggests that the common opinion upon which the description of the Sisters is based believed that either the Sisters' powers are different from those who fall under the category of "witch," or that they are understood to be some sort of non-human supernatural being, and therefore would not fall under the category of human witches.

The Weird Sisters themselves do not appear again in Holinshed's narrative, but later in the chronicle he mentions that Makbeth meets with other supernatural figures. Holinshed writes that Makbeth's distrust of Makduffe might stem from information "that he had learned of certain wysardes in whose wordes he put great confidence (for that the propheicie had happened so right, which the three Fayries or weird sisters had declared vnto him) how that he ought to take

[3] The definitions for the word "necromantic" in the OED are all listed with examples dated after the publication of Holinshed's *Chronicles.* However, because it was the given definition for "necromantical," I chose to still include references to the definition of "necromantic" in this paper ("necromantic, n. and adj." B1, B2a, B2b; "necromantical, adj." 1a).

heede of Makduffe…" and that Makbeth refrained from executing Makduffe because of the words of "a certain witch whom he had in great trust" (Holinshed 249). This witch told him the prophecy that he would "neuer be slain with man borne of any woman, nor vanquished till the wood of Bernane, came to the Castell of Dunsinnane" (Holinshed 249). While it is unclear who these other figures are in Holinshed's narrative, other than witches or wizards, the distinction between them and the Weird Sisters suggests that they exist in distinct categories of supernatural figures.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare follows Holinshed's story of Makbeth, including all of the supernatural encounters. While the initial meeting between the Weird Sisters and Macbeth is lifted almost verbatim from Holinshed's narrative, Shakespeare presents the other supernatural interactions as conversations between the Weird Sisters and Macbeth. By blending Holinshed's ambiguous magical figures of the Weird Sisters with these wizards and witches, Shakespeare creates characters that are an amalgamation of supernatural traditions that he can then use to examine the nature of the relationship between the supernatural and reality within the microcosm of his "Scottish play."

The Weird Sisters as Witches

Shakespeare's Weird Sisters appear four times throughout *Macbeth,* and interact with Macbeth twice. Their first appearance in Act 1, Scene 1 (I.i) largely sets the tone of the play. Next, in I.iii, they appear conversing with each other about their off-stage adventures before meeting Macbeth and Banquo and providing them with information about their futures. The Sisters appear for the third time in III.v with Hecate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft, who reprimands them for their interactions with Macbeth and Banquo.[4] The Sisters' final scene (IV.i)

[4] There is a lot of scholarly controversy surrounding the authorship of III.v. Some scholars argue that Thomas Middleton, rather than Shakespeare, wrote the scene. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason discuss this debate in their

is also their second meeting with Macbeth, in which he demands more information from them about his future, and they comply by summoning apparitions from their cauldron. Due to the fact that they fill the roles of multiple supernatural characters from Holinshed's account, Shakespeare's Weird Sisters, in their appearances, exhibit a mixture of witch-like and fate-like characteristics. In addition, perceptions of witchcraft in the Early Modern period varied widely, and Shakespeare utilizes the range of those perspectives to emphasize the Sisters' witch-like characteristics. However, the Sisters ultimately do not drive the action of the play through action of their own, which is counter to much of the behavior of witches (Purkiss 119).

In their conversation that opens the show, the Sisters reference in passing their connection to an element of witchcraft: familiars (Purkiss 130-131, 146-147, 168; Clary 65). Familiars are demons, commonly in the form of animals, who assist witches (Purkiss 130-131, 146-147, 168; Clary 65). In I.i, the Sisters coordinate their next meeting, which will be their first encounter with Macbeth and Banquo:

> 1 Witch:[5] Where the place?
>
> 2 Witch: Upon the heath.
>
> 3 Witch: There to meet with Macbeth.
>
> 1 Witch: I come, Gray-Malkin.
>
> 2 Witch: Paddock calls.
>
> 3 Witch: Anon.
>
> (I.i.6-8)

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edition of *Macbeth* (cited in this paper; 228n3.5.0.1). Debates about authorship fall outside the scope of this paper. Accordingly, Hecate and the rest of III.v. will be considered as if they were written by Shakespeare.

[5] The term "Witch" is used by the 3rd Arden Shakespeare edition, edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason, which is the edition quoted in this paper. Therefore "Witch" is included in this and subsequent quotes as the character name for each of the Weird Sisters in order to maintain the quotes' accuracy to the edition's text.

Scholars Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason write that "Grey-Malkin is a name for a cat and Paddock means a toad. Both animals are common witches' familiars" (129n1.1.8). Familiars are animal companions of witches that also provide forms into which the witch can transform (Purkiss 127, 130, 168). By referencing two common kinds of familiars, cats and toads, Shakespeare sets up the audience to view the Sisters in terms of witchcraft from the outset.

As previously mentioned, Holinshed writes that common opinion attributes the source of the Sisters' power to "nicromanticall science" (Holinshed 244). The nature of this necromantical power, along with Shakespeare's choice to blend the Sisters with the witches and wizards in Holinshed's narrative establish the framework for interpreting Shakespeare's Weird Sisters as witches. Holinshed's presentation of the source of the Sisters' power as derived from necromancy primes the Sisters to fall under the classification of a witch established by James and others. James links necromancy and witchcraft as two levels of the same kind of power in *Daemonologie* (James VI/I 9). This link provides a logical progression from Holinshed's supernatural figures who use "nicromanticall science" to witches, particularly as the blending of Holinshed's supernatural figures into Shakespeare's Weird Sisters' might alter their power, making it more akin to that of witches than the necromancers (Holinshed 244; James VI/I 9). In addition to his views on the relationship between necromancy and witchcraft, James' conception of witchcraft is also tied to its connection to the Devil (James VI/I 35). Shakespeare does not include any evidence in interactions either amongst the Sisters themselves or between the Sisters and Macbeth that would suggest the involvement of the Devil.

Without commenting on the Devil's participation, Shakespeare continues to lead the audience to think of the Sisters as witches in their second appearance. I.iii contains another conversation amongst themselves during which the Sisters recount their witch-like behaviors to

one another as they prepare for their meeting with Macbeth and Banquo. The Sisters question each other about their purported exploits:

1 Witch: Where hast thou been, sister?

2 Witch: Killing swine.

3 Witch: Sister, where thou?

1 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 a tail,

I'll do, I'll do, I'll do.

2 Witch: I'll give thee a wind.

1 Witch: Th'art kind.

3 Witch: And I another.

1 Witch: I myself have all the other,

And the very ports they blow,

All the quarters that they know,

I'the' shipman's card.

I'll drain him dry as hay:

Sleep shall neither night nor day

Hang upon his penthouse lid:

He shall live a man forbid.

Weary sev'nights nine times nine

Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine:

Though his bark cannot be lost,

Yet it shall be tempest-tossed

(I.iii.1-25).

The first and second Sisters both claim to have engaged in behavior that is associated with witchcraft, either indirectly in the case of the second Sister – killing swine was associated with witchcraft according to Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason – or explicitly in the case of the first witch who the sailor's wife calling the first Sister a witch, rather than a thief, after the first Sister tries to steal her chestnuts (136n1.3.2). These behaviors are in contrast to those exhibited by the Sisters in I.i and by Holinshed's Weird Sisters, both of whom align more closely with James' conception of witches as figures who partner with the Devil for malicious ends (James VI/I 35). The behaviors that the Sisters exhibit in this appearance seem to be more fitting of Reginald Scot's conception of witches as tricksters (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 24-27). These mixed signals help to reinforce the ambiguous nature of Shakespeare's Sisters, even within the category of witches.

The mixed signals continue when the three Sisters agree to partner together to create a tempest, which is a far more directly malicious form of witchcraft. Despite their combined efforts, the first Sister acknowledges that they will not be able to sink the ship, "[t]hough his bark cannot be lost/[y]et it shall be tempest-tossed" (I.iii.24-25). This statement recognizes a limitation on the Sisters' power. Shakespeare's decision to acknowledge limits on the Sisters' power is curious, particularly since all of these actions are only discussed between the Sisters,

not shown on stage (thus we cannot be sure that they occurred at all). In addition, this limitation – to be able to conjure the storm, but not sink the ship – distinguishes the Sisters and the larger category of witches from other groups of supernatural creatures who have the ability to use their powers to kill.

Shakespeare also uses this episode to allude to King James' first supposed encounter with political witchcraft in which a storm delayed his and his new wife's return from Denmark to Scotland (Holmes 107-109). Just as the Sisters do not plan to harm the sailor, James' witches' storm did not cause any direct harm to him or his wife (Holmes 107-109). Even if they cannot use their power to harm others, the Sisters' ability to conjure storms moves beyond Scot's conception of witches as mere tricksters, and more toward James' idea of demonic witches.

It is also important to note that in order to accomplish this task of raising the tempest, the Sisters have to combine all of their power, just as James accused his witches of doing with respect to the storm that impacted his travels home (Holmes 107-109). The Sisters again combine their powers to prepare a charm before Macbeth and Banquo's arrival. The Sisters say in unison:

> The weïrd sisters, hand in hand,
> Posters of the sea and land,
> Thus do go, about, about
> Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
> And thrice again, to make up nine.
> Peace, the charm's wound up.
> (I.iii.32-37)

The rhythm created by the rhyming and repetitive nature of this speech gives it the sense of an incantation or chant. The last line, "[p]eace, the charm's wound up," confirms their speech to be a chant, specifically one that prepares a charm, through the inclusion of the command to stop their actions as they reach their conclusion, and Macbeth and Banquo approach (I.iii.37). Chants and charms were commonly associated with spells that witches would cast (Purkiss 146-147; Holmes 108).[6] The Sisters' incantation reveals how they travel when they claim to be "[p]osters of the sea and land" (I.iii.33). A "poster" is one who travels quickly, and by asserting the ability to employ this power on both the sea and the land, the Sisters inform the audience that they both travel quickly and widely, which perhaps can help explain how they are able to vanish so quickly later in the play (*OED* "poster, n.1").

This chant is also the first instance in the play where the Sisters characterize themselves. They call themselves "the weïrd sisters," not witches, which is somewhat surprising given their previous recounting of their various witch-like behaviors. The Sisters choice to name themselves using the word "weird" is interesting because "weird," as previously discussed, aligns the Sisters more closely with the realm of figures associated with fate, destiny, and prophecy rather than magic (*OED* "weird, adj." 1). This, coupled with Shakespeare's decision not to explicitly call them witches, raises questions about their nature that provides the audience with a puzzle regarding if the Sisters are witches, and under which form of witchcraft, if any, they fall.

While the Sisters recount their witch-like activities that align with both James' and Scot's perceptions of witchcraft to each other, the audience does not receive proof that they actually occurred. They do, however, get to see both of the interactions between the Sisters and Macbeth. In each of these scenes, the Sisters remain at a distance from Macbeth by speaking in riddles or

[6] These references illustrate the commonality of charms and chants in the practice of witchcraft, rather than outline the theory behind these tools.

without explanation rather than taking or demanding any direct action upon or from him. During their first meeting, the Sisters only offer terse predictions to both Macbeth and Banquo:

> 1 Witch: All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.
>
> 2 Witch: All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.
>
> 3 Witch: All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter.
>
> […]
>
> 1 Witch [*to Banquo*]: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
>
> 2 Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.
>
> 3 Witch: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
>
> So all hail Macbeth, and Banquo.
>
> 1 Witch: Banquo, and Macbeth, all hail.
>
> (I.iii.48-50, 65-69)

The Sisters greet Macbeth and Banquo, and state what will become of them and their lineage, in this first interaction. The Sisters' greeting to Macbeth matches Holinshed's account verbatim, and the greeting to Banquo also remains very close to Holinshed's original. Similarly, in both narratives Macbeth and Banquo are puzzled by what kind of creatures the Sisters are. Banquo describes them as bearded women – beards were a distinctive feature associated with some accused female witches (I.iii.45-46; Purkiss 127). However, once they have addressed Macbeth, Banquo does not know what to make of them, asking them "[a]re ye fantastical…" (I.iii.53).

After the Sisters have finished telling Macbeth and Banquo what they wish to impart, they seem to vanish instantly into the fog. While vanishing into thin air is not frequently associated with witches, Diane Purkiss writes that witches' bodies were understood to be "formless," which enabled them to shapeshift into their familiars (Purkiss 125). This "formless"

nature possibly could enable the Sisters' to vanish, or perhaps to transform into their familiars without Macbeth and Banquo noticing. Once they vanish, Banquo and Macbeth compare them to bubbles, signaling their lack of confidence about what the Sisters are, and if they even have a corporeal existence (I.iii.79-80). The Sisters disappearance into the mist (which they might have created) raises questions for Banquo, Macbeth, and the audience as to their nature (I.iii.79-86; Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 32). Banquo even goes as far as to think of them as demons when he and Macbeth learn that the Thane of Cawdor is dead and Macbeth has been given the title by King Duncan, saying "[w]hat, can the devil speak true?" (I.iii.108). This line could also be referring to the Thane of Ross, who calls Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor before his companion, Angus, explains that the former Thane of Cawdor is to be executed for treason (I.iii.105-107, 110-117). If Banquo question is posed about the Sisters, it helps to pull them under the umbrella of Jacobean witches whose powers are perceived as directly associated with the Devil himself. Despite this possible connection with the Devil, Banquo and Macbeth's questions about the Sisters' place in reality illustrate that their passive, predictive role does not meet Early Modern expectations of how witches behave. This calls into question the degree to which the Sisters are witches at all, despite their own accounts of their more active, witch-like behavior earlier in the scene. Witches curse people and plot tempests to trouble their sea voyages. However, as will be discussed in further detail in the next section, witches do not give statements about a person's future with no explanation that can then lead to the person interpreting their words to fit their own ambitions.

In their remaining appearances, The Sisters are joined by Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft from Classical mythology, and their supernatural supervisor (Lemming "Hecate"). Hecate's featured role in the Sisters' third appearance (III.v) will be explored below. However,

she also is present in the Sisters' fourth and final appearance in the play and second interaction with Macbeth (IV.i). This scene comes when Macbeth seeks the Sisters out for more information about his future; specifically, his ability to maintain his throne now that he has made their initial words true through violence and murder. Again, this scene begins with the Sisters on their own, actively participating in behavior associated with witchcraft: putting strange ingredients into a boiling cauldron and chanting over it (Durrant and Bailey 57). This cauldron and the charm within it require not only the skill of the Sisters, but also that Hecate (Lemming "Hecate"; Henrichs). The presence and power of several witches, all of whom are present according to the stage directions in the First Folio, also is needed in order to produce the apparitions (IV.i.39-43, 63-68; "Macbeth (Folio 1, 1623)" p. 144). The presence of Hecate and additional witches is a production choice that reinforces the idea laid out in the Sisters' teamwork to conjure the tempest – that witches can come together and pool their power to execute larger spells (Holmes 108-110). This idea also comes through in the reports of the events surrounding the tempest that affected King James because a large group of women were accused of all working together to execute the spell, and as a result all of them were accused of treason (and implicitly, witchcraft) (Holmes 108-110).

When Macbeth encounters the Sisters with their cauldron, he presents a clearer sense of what they are and how he thinks he can get them to help him:

Macbeth: How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags?

What is't you do?

All: A deed without a name.

Macbeth: I conjure you, by that which you profess,

Howe'er you come to know it, answer me;

> Though you untie the windows and let them fight
> Against the churches, though the yeasty waves
> Confound and swallow navigation up
> Though bladed corn be lodged and trees bloom down
> Though castles topple on their warders' heads,
> Though palaces and pyramids to do slope
> Their heads to their foundations, though the treasures
> Of Nature's germen jumble altogether
> Even till destruction sicken, answer me
> To what I ask of you.
> (IV.i.46-57)

In this interaction, Macbeth takes charge of the situation, commanding the Sisters to do as he asks. His use of the word "hag" as well as referencing the Sisters' ability to "untie the winds" suggests that he believes them to be witches (*OED* "hag, n.1" 2). The *OED* definition of "hag" that means witch also includes "[a] woman supposed to have dealings with Satan and the infernal world" (*OED* "hag, n.1" 2). Shakespeare's use of "hag" establishes that Macbeth does not just think that the Sisters are witches, but that they are demonic witches, following the Jacobean conception of witchcraft (James VI/I 35). His claim that they are able to direct the winds to "fight/[a]gainst the churches" helps Macbeth makes sense of the Sisters by linking them and their potential use of their power to attack holy spaces (IV.i.51-2). The Sisters contribute to this perception of themselves with their cauldron, a stereotypical accessory for witches, and by adding several different kinds of animal blood into the cauldron in order to execute their charm (Durrant and Bailey 57; Purkiss 130-131). The use of blood in spells was considered a critical

piece in dealings with the Devil, the link between witches and familiars, and other elements of witchcraft (IV.i.37-38, 63-64; Durrant and Bailey 57; Purkiss 130-131).

In addition, when Macbeth asks the Sisters what they are doing, they could have explained themselves. However, they choose to lean into his description of them and respond "[a] deed without a name," raising questions for the audience about why their action has no name (IV.i.48). Is the deed so horrible that one cannot say its name, or is it rather something so unique that its name wouldn't help Macbeth, or the audience, understand what is about to happen? By embracing Macbeth's initial description of them as "secret, black, and midnight hags" through the tone of their response, the Sisters are utilizing part of a strategy for accused witches outlined by scholar Diane Purkiss: embrace the accusation and use witchcraft to shape their own identity, or deny it and be defined by the accusation despite its false nature (IV.i.1; Purkiss 2, 72, 145). In this scene, the Sisters choose to embrace Macbeth's conception of them as witches, and to obey his commands for answers in a way that still keeps some of their prior distance through the vagueness of the apparitions they conjure and the apparitions' riddle-like warnings that Macbeth must interpret – and act upon – for himself.

In their two interactions with Macbeth, the Weird Sisters' present very different witch-like qualities. I.iii shows them as distant, terse, and predictive, and presents them in a manner that makes Banquo run the supernatural gamut of thinking that they are witches to thinking they are not real or that they are air bubbles of some sort. IV.i, however, allows the audience to see the Sisters performing what looks like witchcraft, and while they answer Macbeth's demands, they still do not give him a full explanation about his future, but rather allow him to interpret the apparitions at his own peril. In Holinshed's narrative, the scene that became IV.i was two meetings between Makbeth, a wizard, and a witch, characters who appeared just for these

moments (Holinshed 249). By deciding to keep the Weird Sisters as the primary supernatural figures throughout the play, Shakespeare merged the Sisters with the witch and wizard that Holinshed used to warn Makbeth. This merging of the supernatural characters does not make the Sisters entirely witches, but rather allows them to present some of the qualities of witches. This blend permits Early Modern audience members to perceive some of their qualities as witch-like, and thus be motivated to watch their actions carefully, but also prevents the audience from reading the Sisters as stereotypes of witches. If original audiences accepted the Sisters as witches without question, they would follow the contemporary attitude of blaming them for the negative consequences of the action of the play (Scot 25). However, if the audience experienced this ambiguity, they might not hold the Sisters entirely responsible for the actions of the play. In addition, by not presenting the Sisters' solely as witches, Shakespeare invites the audience to draw on centers of cultural context other than their Early Modern prejudices about witches and witchcraft

The Weird Sisters as Fates

While the contemporary political situation surrounding witchcraft would have been a large part of the cultural context, Classical influences also permeated Early Modern English cultural consciousness through theater and education (Leimberg 68-70; Greenblatt, *Will in the World* 24-28). Early Modern grammar schools, like the one that Shakespeare attended as a child, focused entirely on Latin, the language of diplomacy and a signal of social status (Greenblatt, *Will in the World* 24). Grammar schools often used Classical plays as one way to develop their skills (Greenblatt, *Will in the World* 27). Shakespeare and other contemporary playwrights frequently used Classical texts as source material or inspiration, largely due to their educational backgrounds (Leimberg 67-70; Greenblatt, *Will in the World* 27-28). Shakespeare also frequently

draws inspiration from Classical antiquity for many of his plays including *Anthony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, Pericles, Timon of Athens,* and *Troilus and Cressida,* among others. Scholar Inge Leimberg uses the larger concept of Classical influence on Early Modern drama to bolster her interpretation of the Weird Sisters as representations of the Fates from Greco-Roman mythology (Leimberg 67-71).

The Fates are three sisters from Classical mythology who work together to control the threads that measure the span of each mortal's life (Lemming "Fates"; Encyclopedia Britannica "Fate: Greek and Roman Mythology"). Their critical role in human life leads them to be referred to in Greek mythology as "Goddesses of human destiny" (Phillip's "Fates"). The Weird Sisters resemble the Fates in some ways: there are three of them, they refer to each other as "sister," and they provide Macbeth and Banquo with information about their futures and the futures of their families in both Holinshed's and Shakespeare's versions of the story. Holinshed indicates that "common opinion" would have regarded them as "Goddesses of destinie," which intimately links them to the Fates and their control over people's lives (Holinshed 244; Phillip's "Fates").

While prophecy seems to be the primary purpose of Holinshed's Weird Sisters, it is merely one role that they play in Shakespeare's narrative. As briefly mentioned previously, in their first interaction with Macbeth and Banquo (I.iii), the Sisters serve to predict the futures of the two men (and Banquo's heirs). However, their manner of delivering these predictions emphasizes their parallels with the Fates. Throughout their encounter with Macbeth and Banquo, they speak in threes, or as if they are three parts of the same whole, just as the Fates work together as three parts of the larger role of measuring lives. For example, when the witches address Banquo, they speak in the following manner:

1 Witch: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

2 Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.

3 Witch: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:

So all hail Macbeth, and Banquo.

(I.iii.65-69)

These statements to Banquo could have been said by one Sister only. However, Shakespeare's choice to split the delivery of Banquo's future among all three sisters emphasizes their collective characteristics.

In addition to being closely linked to the concepts of fate and destiny, prophecy was traditionally associated with witchcraft in Europe (Wills 141). This tradition of prophesizing supports Stephen Greenblatt's claim that the Sisters are indirectly responsible for the action of the play due to the influence that their words had over Macbeth (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 33-34). However, Shakespeare's melding of Holinshed's supernatural characters into the Weird Sisters allows for a complication of Leimberg's reading of the Sisters as Fates without completely invalidating her argument.

While prophecy is the realm of the Fates, the Weird Sisters face some pushback for their interaction with Macbeth and Banquo from a character who does not appear in Holinshed's narrative. Hecate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, strongly reprimands the Sisters during her conversation with them in III.v for their involvement with Macbeth (Lemming "Hecate"; Henrichs). Hecate chastises the Sisters, saying:

Hecate: Have I not reason, beldams as you are,

Saucy and over-bold? How did you dare

To trade and traffic with Macbeth

In riddles and affairs of death;

> And I, the mistress of your charms,
> The close contriver of all harms
> Was never called to bear my part
> Or show the glory of our art?
> 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.
> But make amends now…
> (III.v.1-14)

Hecate's scolding focuses on the Sisters' choice to interact with Macbeth and the fact that they did not include her. However, this interaction was simply talking about what will come to pass: the Sisters did not give Macbeth instructions as to how to realize this future or act themselves (I.iii.38-78). This remains true throughout their interactions with Macbeth.

Hecate asserts her power over the Sisters, reminding them that she is "the mistress of your charms" (III.v.6). This is striking because Hecate is the Greek goddess of witchcraft, sorcery, doorways, and crossroads (Henrichs). Her position within the Greek pantheon allows Hecate to bridge the gap between the Classical Fates and more local and contemporary witches. In her assertion of her power over the Sisters, Hecate shifts the focus of the Sisters' own powers from the distant, prophesizing nature of the Fates back towards the more active and interpersonal nature of witches (Purkiss 119). This shift also incorporates her desire for her "art" to be included in the Sisters' actions, which leads to the cauldron scene and apparitions in IV.i, the Sisters' final appearance in the play (III.v.9). Hecate's speech reaffirms that the Sisters cannot

entirely be representative of the Fates, as Leimberg argues, but instead they occupy the crossroad between Classical mythology and Early-Modern witchcraft in their interactions with Macbeth.

The Weird Sisters as Amalgamations

The Weird Sisters possess attributes that resemble both witches and representations of the Classical Fates. Their actions in their four appearances in the play illustrate the bifurcated nature of their characters. I.i is without context, and in it the Sisters establish the details of the meeting to come with Macbeth and the supernatural tone of the play. The scene also plants the view of the Sisters as witches through their mentions of common familiar names. I.iii allows the audience to first observe the Sisters interact with each other in a more casual setting, recounting their exploits that involve behaviors associated with witchcraft, and then their encounter with Macbeth and Banquo in which they act in a manner befitting the Classical Fates, or "Goddesses of destinie" (Holinshed 244). III.v. features the sole appearance of Hecate, in which she reprimands the Sisters for their behavior with Macbeth and their decision to exclude her and her "art" (witchcraft) from the encounter (III.v.2-14). Finally, IV.i. shows the Sisters' reaction to Hecate's criticisms, and includes the appearance of a cauldron, a hallmark accessory of witches, and the appearance of the apparitions (Durrant and Bailey 57). However, the Sisters conjure the apparitions from their cauldron in order to satisfy Macbeth's demands for more information about his future. This action in itself is a blend of the two worlds that the Sisters straddle.

The Sisters' collective name, the Weird Sisters, as previously discussed, also contributes to the complex nature of their characterization. The previously discussed understanding of "weird" suggests that the Weird Sisters of *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* and *Macbeth* were intended by Holinshed to be associated with fate, destiny, and prophecy rather than magic (*OED* "weird, adj." 1). This interpretation of their name aligns with their actions in

Holinshed's *Chronicles*, as the Weird Sisters in that narrative only speak to Makbeth and Banquho about their futures. Shakespeare chooses to keep the character name, electing to have the Sisters name themselves in their chant-like speech in I.iii. However, Shakespeare's Sisters do not fit as cleanly into the role expected of them by their name because they are more than copies of Holinshed's "women in straunge and ferly apparel" (Holinshed 243).

Shakespeare's Weird Sisters are a complex amalgamation of the witches, wizards, and the supernatural women characters that Holinshed describes in his recounting of Makbeth's story. This blending explains Banquo's confusion as to what kind of supernatural figure the Sisters are, provided they are real, after the Sisters vanish (I.iii.79-86). By adding Hecate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft (among other things), Shakespeare forces this Siters to occupy the liminal space between controlling and predicting destinies and active witchcraft in a way that the blending of Holinshed's characters alone cannot. This blending between the Classically inspired role of the purveyors of destiny, an inherently distant role due to its informative and grandiose nature, and the more active and intimate role of witches allows for multiple understandings of the nature of these characters (Purkiss 119). This complicates their image, and prevents the explicit categorization of their actions for the purpose of placing responsibility for the subsequent events of the play.

Each side of the space in which the Weird Sisters occupy the intersection is traditionally used as a scapegoat for actions taken by humans. Fate is frequently blamed as a cause for misfortune in Classical Antiquity (Robertson and Dietrich). Witches, as Reginald Scot discusses, are people who, according to their communities, "must needs be the contrivers of all mens - calamities…" (Scot 25). While Scot is making an argument about the nature of witchcraft in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, he does so based on existing conceptions (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare

Bewitched" 23-25). Contemporary audiences would have likely shared these conceptions of Fates and witches as responsible to some degree for any woes that befall humans. However, this broad brush of blame distracts from other possible explanations for the causes of the action of the play.

The Weird Sisters, Macbeth, and Responsibility

The Sisters do not explain how their statements or riddles will come to pass in any of their encounters with Macbeth. The Sisters' only on-stage action during the play is speaking and conjuring the apparitions who speak to Macbeth. They do not directly act on any other character. The lack of detail in the Sisters' statements presents Macbeth with an opportunity to interpret or ignore their words as he will.

Macbeth ultimately chooses to use them to propel his own ambitions. Upon hearing that he is to be named Thane of Cawdor following his first encounter with the Sisters, Macbeth already seems to be imagining the next step in his mind, as evidenced in his asides:

> Macbeth [*aside*]: …This supernatural soliciting
>
> Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
>
> Why hath it given me earnest of success,
>
> Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
>
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
>
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
>
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
>
> Against the use of nature? Present fears
>
> Are less than horrible imaginings.
>
> My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,

> Shakes so my single state of man
>
> That function is smothered in surmise,
>
> And nothing is, but what is not.
>
> [...]
>
> If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me,
>
> Without my stir.
>
> (I.iii.132-144, 146-147)

In the first aside, Macbeth's imagination runs rampant as he comes to terms with the fact that the first of the Sisters' predictions has come to pass. Clark and Mason argue that the physical distress that Macbeth experiences is due to his mind's imaginings of Duncan's murder (147n1.3.141-4). The power that his thoughts have to "[shake] so my single state of man" foreshadows the greed-and-remorse-driven insanity that will follow him upon taking the throne (I.iii.142). While the text supports that Macbeth's physical reaction is a product of his ambitious thoughts, he acknowledges in his second aside that he could let Fate decide if he is indeed meant to be king as the Sisters predicted, and that he therefore does not need to act in order to achieve his ambitions (I.iii.146-147). If he had listened to himself at that moment, *Macbeth* would likely have a different ending because Macbeth, in all probability, would not have murdered Duncan, and set off the chain of events that govern the rest of the play. Instead of listening to his reason and letting things come to pass according to chance, Macbeth acts on his hubristic desires for power and the ambition-fueled urgings of his wife, Lady Macbeth, choosing to take his destiny into his own hands and achieve his goals through any means necessary.

Lady Macbeth does not interact with the Sisters directly. She receives Macbeth's account of his encounter with the Sisters in a letter in the scene following Macbeth's elevation to the

Thane of Cawdor. In her initial reaction to the letter, she says “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be/What thou art promised” (I.v.15-16). Lady Macbeth does not seem content to leave the matter of Macbeth’s rise to power to chance. Rather she embraces the Sisters’ words and uses them – and the fact that they have been correct once – as an excuse to propel forward the couple’s ambitions for more power. Her use of the phrase “shalt be” opens possibilities of her position on how Macbeth will succeed (I.v.15). On the one hand, “shalt be” could be insinuate that Lady Macbeth is simply leaving the matter up to chance, and that she can take a passive role in the situation. On the other hand, “shalt be” could indicative of her determination to act in order to make sure that Macbeth reaches his highest potential. Lady Macbeth’s later pressuring of Macbeth to act indicates that she believes the couple should follow the active course to reach their foretold destiny.

Like her husband, Lady Macbeth quickly thinks of the idea of murdering Duncan as an expedient way to achieve their goals, saying right before calling on the spirits to “unsex” her to give her the power to do what she otherwise would not be able to do (conspire to kill Duncan), she says “[t]he raven himself is hoarse/that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan/under my battlements” (I.v.39-41). Lady Macbeth sees what she believes to be omens and other supernatural signs that validate her decision at every turn. This suggests that, in contrast to Macbeth’s acceptance of relying on chance as an option, she is actively seeking to realize the Sisters’ prophecy of Macbeth’s ascension to the throne. In this sense, Lady Macbeth is greatly influenced and swayed by the words of the Sisters, which suggests that they may be indirectly responsible for her actions in the matter of Duncan’s murder, as Stephen Greenblatt argues in a much more general way in “Shakespeare Bewitched” (Greenblatt, “Shakespeare Bewitched” 33-34). However, Lady Macbeth does not stab Duncan – Macbeth does, and to do so is a choice that

he makes (albeit with heavy persuasion from her), not one that the Sisters ordered. In both cases of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, they believe that they are acting of their own free will, and thus suffer the full brunt of the consequences of their choices.

Macbeth's initial choice to follow his ambition over his own conscience sets off a violent chain of events including the murders of Duncan and Banquo, the attack on Banquo's son, Fleance, the sack of Fife castle and the murder of Macduff's household and family, and the escalation to the brink of civil war. Macbeth's violent actions also come with more personal costs: the all-consuming guilt that threatens to drive Macbeth mad and has driven Lady Macbeth mad as she tries to wash the imagined blood from her hands for her part in inciting this bloody reign. Despite their guilt, neither of the Macbeths ever explicitly blame the Sisters for what has befallen them.

Macbeth seeks out the Sisters after the appearance of Banquo's ghost at the feast scares him and Macduff does not answer his summons, not for physical help, but for reassuring prophecies about his success in the coming civil war. This is another critical decision that exhibits his active role in his own fate. This encounter in IV.i features a different power dynamic than their first encounter, with Macbeth seizing control of the situation and the Sisters complying in their own way. In his first request for information from the Sisters, Macbeth commands them to "answer me/to what I ask you," establishing his dominance and control over the situation (IV.i.59-60). The Sisters reply with their own series of commands for Macbeth to speak, and at his request, they conjure three apparitions, who speak warnings of Macduff and in double entendres about the conditions for Macbeth's success in battle.[7] Macbeth interprets each as proof

[7] The apparitions' words to Macbeth are as follows (and continue onto the next page):

> 1 Apparition: Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth. Beware Macduff,
> Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough.
> […]

that he will be victorious, that he is even unbeatable because, due to his pride and ambition, he cannot understand the other possible meanings of the apparitions' words. However, after the third apparition vanishes, Macbeth once again asks for more from the Sisters, initiating the following exchange:

> Macbeth: […] tell me, if your art
>
> Can tell so much, shall Banquo's issue ever
>
> Reign in this kingdom?
>
> All: Seek to know no more.
>
> Macbeth: I will be satisfied. Deny me this,
>
> And an eternal curse fall on you. Let me know.
>
> (IV.i.100-104)

Macbeth seeks definitive answers from the Sisters, something that they have not given him up to this point. Their command back to him suggests that they have no intention of doing so; however, Macbeth persists, firing back with the threat of a curse. Threatening to curse the Sisters is bold tactic given that he does not really know what they are capable of other than predicting the future and conjuring apparitions. The sisters take no action against him, but again act as predictors of the future by granting his request with a chant that suggests that he should have listened to them and not asked to know more: "[s]how his eyes, and grieve his heart;/[c]ome like

---

2 Apparition: Be bloody, bold and resolute: laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.
[…]
3 Apparition: Be lion-mettled, proud, and take care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are.
Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill
Shall come against him.
(IV.i.70-71, 78-80, 89-93)

shadows, so depart" (IV.i.109-110). The procession of Scotland's past kings, the final series of apparitions that the Sisters conjure, saddens Macbeth at the sight of the ghost of Banquo, however he has seen enough to learn that the Sisters spoke true to Banquo as well, but that does not dim his hubristic feelings of invincibility in the battle to come (IV.i.111-123; 243-244n4.1.110.1-2). Macbeth's decision to seek out more information from the Sisters on both of these topics leads to his overconfident behavior in the battle against Malcom's forces, and ultimately, his death.

Macbeth's actions following his initial meeting with the Sisters and Banquo lead to his downfall. He recognizes at several points before killing Duncan that if chance has made him Thane of Cawdor, it will make him king, or that at least that he should not kill Duncan while Duncan is his guest in order to gain the throne. However, Macbeth chooses to act for the sake of his ambition and his pride, which has violent consequences. These decisions were of Macbeth's own making, and therefore he should be held responsible for their consequences, not any other characters. Lady Macbeth, for her part in pushing Macbeth into action, takes her portion of the responsibility in her own suffering and madness as a result of her guilt. Despite the fact that they are not directly involved in any of the violent actions, popular associations of the Sisters with witches (and all that comes with being a witch) likely contributes to the perception of them as at least partially culpable for the events of the play (Scot 25; Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" 33-34). There is no evidence in the Sisters' dialogue or Hecate's scolding that suggest that the Sisters manipulate Macbeth, either to achieve a larger goal of their own or to enjoy watching the ensuing chaos.

Even though Macbeth seems to make the choice to fulfill the Sisters' words of his accord, there is another possibility for why he chooses violence: he is predestined to do so. Despite

possessing similar characteristics to the Classical Fates, the Sisters are not the Fates themselves. The events of the play may have been destined to happen, and the Sisters, as possible representatives of Fate, reveal the chain of events that were going to happen in order to push Macbeth into action. Holinshed writes that Makbeth may have also been pushed in this manner by the Sisters, "[t]he words of the three weird sisters also, (of whom before ye haue heard) greatly encouraged him herevnto…" (Holinshed 244). Holinshed or his publisher also includes a note in the margin, "[p]rophesies moue men to vnlawfull attemptes," which suggests that the Sisters' could be working as agents of Fate through their prophetic nature (Holinshed 244). However, despite the potentially more intentional nature of their actions under this understanding of the events of the play, the Sisters are still not proactive figures, but rather are working as necessary agents and representatives of Fate to ensure that Macbeth's Fate will happen as it should due to his knowledge of his rise in power.

It is unclear what motivates the Sisters appear to Macbeth and Banquo in I.iii, but neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth is prepared to accept their predictions passively. Rather, they interpret the Sisters' words in ways that provides them as an excuse to satisfy their own ambitions. The audience could understand the resulting tragic chain of events as either predestined, or the result of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth exercising their free will. The fact that they believe that they are acting of their own free will is evidenced by their resulting guilt and madness they experience as a result of their actions. As a part of this belief, Macbeth understands that the Sisters only ever only gave him prophecies about his fate rather than directly driving his actions. This places the Sisters' role in an ambiguous space between agents of Fate and prophesying witches. While it is unclear upon which path Macbeth's decisions fall, the path of

free will feeds into Shakespeare's larger discussion of the role of the supernatural in the play. It also provides the play with its sense of tragedy as Macbeth's choices bring catastrophe.

Conclusion

Within the play, there is a lack of explicit evidence pointing to the idea that the Sisters should be held responsible for Macbeth's decisions, unless their predictions simply force a predestined course of action. By providing scant evidence, Shakespeare uses the Sisters to make a larger claim about human responsibility and the role of the supernatural. Macbeth's responsibility for his own actions and their consequences complicates the notion of blaming supernatural figures for the cause of all one's problems, as Scot outlines in his definition of witchcraft (Scot 25). While it may be logical in some cases, and convenient in almost all of them, placing blame for one's woes on supernatural figures is almost always unfair. If someone in a village blames the outcast elderly women for their problems, that woman then is both even more isolated and it will likely damage her reputation amongst the rest of the community permanently (Paul 93).

Shakespeare uses the blended nature of the Weird Sisters to extend this claim to the concept of Fate as well as witchcraft. Macbeth actively pushes back against his understanding of his Fate as a passive thing that will happen to him regardless to something he actively seeks and tries to achieve. His temporary success in achieving his goals suggests what humans likely already know: that they and their fellow humans influence the arc of their own life stories. Shakespeare uses the Weird Sisters' passive role in the action of *Macbeth* to challenge the idea that supernatural figures should be the immediate scapegoat for all other culpable parties (Scot 25). He does this by utilizing their passivity to expose the natures of the active characters (Scot 25). Through this, he also challenges the fabric of political witchcraft itself because it implies

action by the accused supernatural figure, despite the possibly false nature of the accusations made by other active characters (Holmes 18; Purkiss 76). Through his creation of the Weird Sisters as complex supernatural amalgamations, Shakespeare presents a discussion of the human nature of free will and how it was understood in Jacobean England.

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