

3. Role of Witches in Macbeth

Macbeth was written to be performed before James I, who believed himself to be a descendant of Banquo. More than his descent, he believed in the power of witchcraft. In fact, so rooted was his belief in the existence of the dark power of witches, that he wrote a book on it, named *Daemonologie* (modern spelling would be *Demonology*).

Shakespeare, being a professional playwright, might have naturally felt the need to include the theme of witchcraft in his drama, for the royal satisfaction. Therefore, it can be safely stated that the first role the witches play is to make the play successful before the eyes of the king.

Some critics believe that the witches are purely a creation of Macbeth's mind - they are his hallucinations. While it cannot be denied that the witches do influence his mind and play a great role psychologically, it would undermine the dramatic performance to say that the witches do not exist at all. They speak to Banquo and there are scenes where the witches speak without the presence of Macbeth. So, critics should not chase wild goose by stating that the witches do not exist. In fact, one can truly appreciate the play when one accepts the existence of the witches (but not their power) and then analyse whether their powers are real or psychological.

The witches have not been clearly described in the drama. That gives more density to the cover of darkness that hangs in the ambience of the play. They look like women, but they have beards:

“...you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.”

It might seem that they are the plot makers of the drama. After all, they decide when to meet Macbeth - they know when he will come - they are aware of the future. However, they are not the ultimate. They are ruled by Hecate. Nevertheless, we can definitely call them as agents of dark powers.

Shakespeare's witches are a compound of native folklore and classical mythology. The name "weird sisters", as used by Holinshed, does bring the allusion to the three sisters of fate - who used to spin, weave and cut off the future. Their power of prophesy also adds up. However, they are much lesser than the Greek deities. They are also called "midnight hags". The sailor's wife and the stage directions refer to them as "witches". They serve demons, and conjure up apparitions. At the same time, their use of cauldrons for divination is borrowed from the practice of classical furies. But they are also given the native pagan colour by their choice of "familiars" - a cat, a toad and an owl. The ingredients of the broth definitely add to their pagan attributes.

The fusion of the classical deities with the folklore of the witches results into an indecision to say anything definite about their origin. The confusion seems to loom large even with Holinshed, who writes,

Three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of (an) elder world...either the weird sisters...or else some nymphs or feiries.²²

The witches do seem to influence Macbeth. Apparently, it would seem that they have prophesied the ascension of Macbeth to the throne of Scotland. A deeper look will reveal that they have not made any disinterested prophesy that has come true in the course of time, but a rather instigating statement, which roused Macbeth to

²²Refer to Appendix II for fuller description.

take action himself instead of waiting and letting time to place the throne on him. Here, some might argue that perhaps that was the way things were meant to happen. Perhaps. We do not know for sure. But there is enough evidence to suggest that Macbeth thought of murdering king Duncan only after the witches' prophesies. Oddly enough, there is also evidence to suggest that Macbeth had secretly thought of his becoming the king – the witches had only revealed it openly before Banquo (hence, Macbeth's surprise at their knowledge of his secret thoughts). Nevertheless, we can say that even if he had been secretly ambitious, he would not have thought of enacting out the deed of murder had the witches not prophesied to him. After the fulfilment of the prophesy about his Thaneship of Cawdor, he naturally hoped for "the imperial theme". In fact, he would naturally rise to execute it after seeing Duncan's intention of (naturally) making his eldest son his successor. Therefore, to Macbeth, assassinating Duncan would have seemed the natural way of becoming the king.

But did the witches really prophesy to Macbeth about being the Thane of Cawdor? Textual analysis will reveal that Duncan gives that title to Macbeth in I.2:

“...Go pronounce his present death
And with his former title greet Macbeth”.

The weird sisters tell Macbeth this news after Duncan has already made his decision to make Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor, and has also dispatched Ross to tell it to him. The words of the first two witches are the same in syntax:

“All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis”
and
“All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.”

They speak of both the titles as his present status,
unlike the third pronouncement
“...that shalt be king hereafter”

which is clearly in the future tense. Therefore, what the second witch said was something that was already decided. If one takes this view, one is still bound to admit the supernatural power of the witches - they must have witnessed Duncan's decision by being invisible, and of their ability to fly ahead of the messengers to tell to Macbeth beforehand, so that it would appear like prophesy to him. It is quite probable, for the witches do have one power for sure - to appear and disappear, and “hover through...the filthy air”.

Can it therefore be told that the third witch possesses the power to see the future? There is evidence to suggest that, for she is the one to tell that the battle will be over “'ere the set of sun” (when the bloody captain cannot say so himself, and states, “doubtful it stood”), and she is the one to tell the future to Macbeth. While one may be reluctantly forced to admit some mysterious knowledge of the future in the third witch with regard to the outcome of the battle, one need not acknowledge the same for her prophecies to Macbeth. It can be argued that the third witch did not really predict the future for Macbeth, but told something to instigate him towards it (or told something that he had secretly thought of becoming). Indeed, Macbeth regards it to be a prophesy, and states,

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme

At this time, he still believes that “chance” will crown him without his “stir”, but things change when Duncan names Malcolm as his heir. He states

...that is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies.

He decides to take action himself.

Other than the power to appear and disappear, the witches also seem to have some sway over the elements, as revealed in the incident with the sailor's wife. Their role is to be the harbinger of chaos. This is quite apparent when they chant around the cauldron

Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

The cauldron is not only the literal cauldron, but also a symbolic one. It symbolizes Macbeth's mind filled with confusion. The cauldron also represents Scotland in a state of turmoil due to wars.

The witches work against peace, and seem to uproot balance in nature (although *Maqbool*, the Bollywood adaptation of Macbeth, presents the witches - an astrologer - to work for maintaining balance). Their heretic side is revealed in their plot against the king (to plot against the king was to plot against God). As the witches cannot directly go to arms against the Omnipotent, they get pleasure in ruining that which stands on earth as a symbol of the Omnipotent. Macbeth seems to understand this when he tells

...you unite the winds and let them fight
Against the churches

Let us now examine the power of the witches by examining their apparitions. The apparitions are not prophetic. A close examination will reveal that they present Macbeth's thoughts, and also give dramatic insights, which serve as clues. The first apparition, "an armed head" reflects Macbeth's thoughts to prepare for war; the second apparition, "a bloody child" might

reflect the child which is lost to him and his wife, and also serves as a clue to the audience (and to him) that the person who will kill him will not be *naturally* born out of the womb of a woman, but will be “untimely ripped”, hence the “bloody child”. Polanski’s production even shows the baby being taken out of the mother’s womb, to make it clear that it will be a Caesarian baby. The third apparition, “a child crowned, with a tree in hand” gives away the solution of the riddle - the woods will come to Dunsinane as the soldiers will bear the branches of tress in their hands to hide “their numbers”. Macbeth, seeing the apparition, does not realise what it tries to convey, and shows how much the witches have been able to make him trust them literally. The crowned child may, therefore, represent, Malcolm, whom Macbeth, in scorn, calls “boy” and “young”. The third apparition might also suggest Macbeth’s fears - that Banquo’s issue will be king next, and indeed, he asks that question after the third apparition vanishes, whereupon the witches indulge to “show his mind/And grieve his heart”.

The apparitions are not, as we have discussed, prophetic, but, as Hecate states

...artificial sprites
As by the strength of their illusion
Shall draw him on to his confusion.

The witches, it can be analysed, play the role of conspirers against the crown, and of course part of the dark power. However, their powers are limited to causing ruin, but they lack the power of prophesy, which, as we have analysed, are more psychological than futuristic.