

# **Which Witch?**

**A study of William Shakespeare's portrayal of  
the witch figure in *Macbeth* and *Richard III***

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I love you all, this is for you.

## **Introduction: Which Witch?**

*When we say 'witch', we can hardly help thinking of Macbeth's witches, however we judge them politically or aesthetically. It is hard for a literary critic to hear any new story without at once trying to fold it back into the old. However much we crave novelty and surprise, we want to be surprised not by the unfamiliar, but in relation to what we already know; new readings of old texts, not new texts for old.*<sup>1</sup>

Diane Purkiss (1996)

*There met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world [...] The common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, because everie thing came to passe as they had spoken.*<sup>2</sup>

Raphael Holinshed (1587)

The popular notion of the witch is one that, as Diane Purkiss suggests above, is traditionally perceived to be inspired by the 'weird sisters' of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.<sup>3</sup> The vision of an old hag, with her warts, crooked nose and broomstick, cannot help but enter our thoughts when we discuss the historical or literary figure of the witch. The contemporary world, with both the commercial spectacle that is Halloween and the mass saturation of the stereotypical 'wicked witch' figure across film, television and theatre, only assists in promoting this portrayal.<sup>4</sup> However, though we may attribute this concept of the witch to *Macbeth*, there is arguably little evidence to support such a contention. In fact, I would suggest that both Shakespeare's characterisation of the witches within his 'Scottish play' and the source material from which he draws inspiration for them, are both a great deal more

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> Raphael Holinshed, "The Historie of Scotland", in *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London: Henry Denham, 1587), pp. 29-464, <[http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?TextID=holinshed\\_chronicle&PagePosition=889](http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?TextID=holinshed_chronicle&PagePosition=889)> [accessed 20 November 2010], p. 170-1.

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> I refer to the American-influenced commercialised version of Halloween, as opposed to the historical meaning, as the word *Halloween* can be attested to originate in the sixteenth century as a Scottish variant of the fuller *All-Hallows-Eve*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* states is itself not evident until 1556.

complex than Purkiss' quotation would imply. Accordingly, I refer to my second excerpt, taken from Shakespeare's source material for *Macbeth*, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. Holinshed's description of the three women, upon which Shakespeare's three sisters are based, illustrates diverse representations, none of which portrays them as stereotypical witches. In fact, we can see that Holinshed deliberately refrains from any singular representation, implying that their foundations lie in mythology, fairy-lore, or necromancy. Consequently, this would suggest that Shakespeare had no specific prior representation of our clichéd witch figure from which to work. Thus, the stereotypical image of the witch, that Purkiss assumes we derive from *Macbeth*, is perceived as she is because, through subsequent depictions and retrospective social commentary, history has shaped her in this way. The subject of witches and witchcraft has captivated the imagination of audiences and humanity for thousands of years, and certainly predates Shakespeare's triad of women. Doubtlessly, there was much variation in the figure of the witch before Shakespeare. Thus, as advocated above, whilst the image of the 'midnight hag' (*Macbeth*, IV.i.47) may forever be ascribed to Shakespeare, the purpose of this piece is to explore the many faces of Shakespeare's witch, and the historical incarnations they are predicated upon. With close reference to *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, and in correspondence with Purkiss' assertion, the figures of Holinshed's depiction will be addressed as alternative interpretations of the witch figure in order to ascertain Shakespeare's own concept of this theatrical being.

Throughout this study I will be utilising two distinct strands of critical enquiry, looking at both literary witches and the development of witchcraft throughout history. Although witchcraft initially came into the political domain during the medieval period, it was not until Shakespeare's era, with the passing of the 1563 and 1604 Witchcraft Statutes,

that the English witnessed the reality of witchcraft.<sup>5</sup> The most influential Statute was passed in 1563 during the reign of Elizabeth I, entitled *An Act Against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts*.<sup>6</sup> The Scottish parliament also issued an equivalent act in 1563, with an addition that it was not only practitioners, but also those perceived to be consulting with witches, who were subject to execution if found guilty. In 1604, James I, now King of England as well as Scotland, expanded Elizabeth's previous act to include the ethereal, as shown in the title: *An Act against Conjuratiō, Witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked Spirits*.<sup>7</sup> This prohibition remained until both English and Scottish Statutes were repealed in 1736, after the decline of witchcraft prosecutions.<sup>8</sup> Mapping the change in Statutes, surviving records imply that Witchcraft prosecutions peaked around Elizabeth's reign, and, although there was a slight decline under James' rule, convictions did not decline sharply until the ascension of Charles I. This pattern becomes essential in understanding the contradictory relationship between stage and reality. The constant separation of fantasy and reality, which I shall discuss in greater detail in relation to *Macbeth* and *Richard III* in chapters two and three respectively, is a key issue that permeates this investigation. Shakespeare's fantastical depictions of witches are not necessarily political commentaries upon the state of witchcraft within the early modern period, rather the two – the reality of witchcraft and Shakespeare's fantastical interpretation of it – are linked only thematically. That is to say, the literary figures should not be read as analogical depictions of the real figure of the witch. Although my opening paragraph stated that we cannot help but conjure up the image of *Macbeth's* 'midnight hags' when we think of witches, Purkiss also conveys that witches offer

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<sup>5</sup> Although there were other Statutes passed during this period, namely under Henry VIII in 1542, the 1563 and 1604 Statutes are the most appropriate with regards to the dates of the studied texts and angle of this study.

<sup>6</sup> Queen Elizabeth I, *An Act against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts*, (1563, 5 Eliz. I c. 16), noted in Marion Gibson, "Witchcraft in the Courts", in *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550–1750* (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 1-9, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> King James I, *An Act against Conjuratiō, Witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked Spirits*, (1604, 1 Jas. I c. 12), noted in Marion Gibson, "Witchcraft in the Courts", in *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550–1750* (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 1-9, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> A more detailed investigation of the changes between Acts and their social affects can be found in Ronald Holmes, *Witchcraft in British History* (London: Muller, 1974) and Keith Thomas, "Witchcraft: The Crime and its History", in *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), pp. 435-468.

an opportunity for elaborate fantasy, as well as real identification (Purkiss, p. 10). I would suggest that in some respects the witch can only be seen as fantasy because the literary/stage witch was, in the Renaissance, just a spectacle of entertainment. However, the prosecutions and penalties for the accused women of Shakespeare's England were extremely real. Although this separation between fantasy and reality may be apparent through stage and social representations, arguably this could be reversed, or at least generate what Michael Foucault has referred to as 'heterotopias'.<sup>9</sup> In order to comprehend the essential duality of fantasy and reality in relation to the witch figure, I need to explore Foucault's fusion of these two poles, alongside Luce Irigaray's linguistic concepts and Judith Butler's philosophy of 'gender performativity',<sup>10</sup> as a means of interpreting the fantastical and the real.

Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" addresses the notion that in contrast to utopias, which are essentially unreal spaces that cannot exist – and thus are purely fantastical – the mythic and real can exist simultaneously in real spaces of heterotopias. According to Foucault 'there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. That is a constant of every human group' (Foucault, p. 24). They therefore become a place where the lines between fantasy and reality are blurred and an appropriate analogue for the duality of the stage and texts that address a fantasy figure. By placing the witch figure on the stage, an invented space, she remains a fantasy. However, by placing her within the midst of social history and relating social and political events to the character, she arguably becomes a reality. Contrarily, although prosecutions under the Witchcraft Acts were very real, they may also be considered nothing more than a fantasy, as the patriarchal social ideology in which they are accused is an artificial construction. That is, the social institutions upon which the witch-trials were based – the ecclesiastical and secular infra-structures of society – are merely prejudiced fantasies. Luce Irigaray reaffirms this fantastical facet of witchcraft, but suggests

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" was originally a lecture in 1967, later translated by Jay Miskowiec and published in *Diacritics*, 16.1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 22-27, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/464648>> [accessed 20 November 2010].

<sup>10</sup> Gender Performativity is a term coined by Judith Butler in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

that this fantasy is primarily constructed through language. She posits the ‘possibility of a different language’<sup>11</sup> – a feminine language – so that women can free themselves from the influence of the phallogentric language that has dominated, and still dominates, human discourse. Her notion is predicated on the conception that language creates reality, but that this necessarily means that reality is both artificial and fantastical. Therefore, the power of patriarchy must necessarily be an artificial language construct also – a fantasy. As the power of both the real and fantastical witch resides in spells and chants, perhaps the language of witchcraft is an instance of Irigaray’s ‘possible language’. Furthermore, let us consider the essence of witchcraft, magic. The word *magic* originates from the Greek and Latin, *mageia/magikos* and *magia/magicus* respectively, meaning the art of the magician or magus. The origin of the word can actually be traced back even further than this, as the Greek and Latin terms in turn derive from the ancient Persian *magos*, who was a priest or religious practitioner.<sup>12</sup> Nevill Drury details how the *magoi*, the secret Persian group responsible for royal sacrifices, funeral rites and the interpretation of dreams had, by the time of Plato, ‘acquired a negative connotation’ (Drury, p. 32). Moreover, the origins of the magos in royalist circles, suggests that the notion of magic has always been elitist, and by its nature steeped in patriarchy. With magic residing in such an institutionalised role, we have to question whether the notion of magic, and its subsequent attributes, should be, or can be, appropriated by the female witch figure, and consequently feminine discourse at all.

Fundamentally, for Irigaray this means that Foucault’s heterotopias are, like both the reality and fantasy that he implies they amalgamate, a linguistic construct. Within his essay, Foucault goes on to specify the classification of heterotopias further. He describes crisis heterotopias for those who are, in relation to society, in a ‘state of crisis’: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, and so on. All of these examples focus

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<sup>11</sup> Luce Irigaray, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine”, in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 68-85, p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> Nevill Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft: From Shamanism to the Technopagans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 32.

on the sexuality of a woman at the different stages in her life. Indeed, Foucault uses the example of the 'honeymoon trip', in other words the loss of a girl's virginity, as a heterotopia, as she is both spiritually and mentally nowhere but physically somewhere. Often the young women accused of witchcraft could be described as being in crisis. Many accounts of witchcraft were related to female sexuality, and whilst contemporary society deems this natural, at the time it was described as creating fear in men. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English argue that this sexual exploration started the witch-craze, which was fundamentally an attempt by the male medical professionals of the day to 'take over and control the regulation of women's bodies'.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the theatre amplified this control through the prohibition of women performers on the stage. These stage conventions dictated a certain performativity in terms of cross-dressing and, as early modern writers developed the link between magic and theatricality, the theatre invoked its own 'idiosyncratic figuration of the witch, rather than referring to the authoritative discourses then in circulation' (Purkiss, p. 182). Contemporary theorist Judith Butler terms this gender performativity, which insists that both gender and sex are socially constructed terms, whereas for Irigaray, they are linguistic constructions. Butler's theory proposes that all gender identity is like a performance: 'In other words, the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts'.<sup>14</sup> The difference between the performance of a gender and the ascribed sex of a person, if any, is power. To embed this further within a theatrical context, by placing the male on the stage in a female role, the female is displaced not only from an arena of real influence, but also from one of fantastical extrapolation. In this way, the female is deprived of the power, both linguistic and performative, to define her own reality.

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1973), noted in Purkiss, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", in *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (Dec. 1988), pp. 519-531, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>> [accessed 19 November 2010], p. 521.

In addition, Foucault also speaks of heterotopias of deviation: ‘those [spaces] in which individuals whose behavior [sic] is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed’ (Foucault, p. 25). He cites care homes, psychiatric hospitals and prisons as examples of such places, or in other words institutions. By extracting the key element of this principle – those individuals whose behaviour is deviant – we can refer to both the fantasy and the real representations of the witch. Both the jail in which the real accused women were placed (as not all were executed) and the space that the sisters of *Macbeth* inhabit within the play, that is, the outskirts of society, can be placed within this description. Simultaneously, they also correspond to the definition of the principle of crisis heterotopias, since the many biological states of a woman are considered to be a crisis. The basis of this fluidity between fantasy and reality is essential in understanding the flexibility of the witch that Shakespeare presents to his audience, as this allows us to comprehend the multiple variations that Shakespeare strives to create between the two poles of supernatural fantasy and human reality.

Though there is a substantial amount of work on the subject of Shakespearean magic, most of these studies may be described as commentaries upon *how* Shakespeare uses magic within his work, and *how* he presents certain magical beings, rather than *why* he does so. Such studies diminish the role of magic within Shakespeare’s work, and it is often dismissed as low-brow or as a theatrical prop, rather than being an intentional element.<sup>15</sup> This study’s purpose is to illustrate how Shakespeare’s use of magic was a deliberate attempt to stimulate social or philosophical debate. It transcended its ability to entertain to become a vehicle for social, political and religious criticism. This revolves around the idea that Shakespeare’s utilisation of each specific portrayal of the witch figure is a politically loaded choice. The effect of this is that the meaning of his critique would alter if presented in an alternative

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<sup>15</sup> H. M. Doak refers to the use of the supernatural in Shakespeare as a purely dramatic method, in “‘Supernatural Soliciting’ in Shakespeare”, in *The Sewanee Review*, 15.3 (Jul. 1907), pp. 321-331. Kenneth Muir’s “Folklore and Shakespeare”, in *Folklore*, 92.2 (1981), pp. 231-240, also details how Shakespeare has developed magic and the supernatural from folklore, but does not specify why he makes such decisions. These studies are of course acceptable in their own right however, as their purpose is different from this study.

way. For example, the implicit message behind the three sisters of *Macbeth* would vary if we were to approach them as Holinshed's variant of goddesses rather than 'midnight hags'. This study therefore partly continues a critical tradition that has sought to define the variety of magic Shakespeare uses within his works. However, it will move beyond this mode of thought by attempting to ascertain *why* he presents each particular portrayal of the witch in its individual way. It will look at how the witch sits historically and what reason, be it social, political, or both, does he have for choosing each representation.

As many of the figures I want to uncover are embedded within literary history, it seems appropriate for this work to begin with a historical contextualisation of the witch. The opening chapter of this piece foreshadows Shakespeare's alternative witch figures with a study of the literature of the Greek and Roman Classics through to the literature of the Renaissance. It explores the diverse incarnations of the figure before Shakespeare, even without modern theory and interpretation. Drawing from Holinshed's description, this chapter employs his interpretations to demonstrate how goddesses, fairies and prophetesses were the witches of history. From the medieval period onwards, a discussion of cultural and social context relating to the change in religion and the ensuing witch-trials is included. This is to aid my comparison by giving a background in which to situate the witch figure. Although the textual studies of *Macbeth* and *Richard III* will include relevant historical contextualisation, a Renaissance history of the witch and her position in society and literature concludes chapter one, in order to provide a comprehensive grounding for the subsequent portrayals.

As the foundation for my literary investigation, *Macbeth* begins my textual study in chapter two. This chapter investigates why the play's triad of women are understood to be 'secret, black, and midnight hags' (*Macbeth*, IV.i.47) and what relevance this now stereotypical portrayal has to the text and its cultural reception. With no prior representation of the hag figure within his source material, we must conclude that it was a deliberate selection and this chapter focuses on why Shakespeare made this choice. With the ascension

of James I around the time *Macbeth* was written (1605-6),<sup>16</sup> much critique draws on the relationship between James' interest in witchcraft and the presentation of a complimentary witch figure. As many treatises were also exploring witchcraft – Johann Weyer's *On the Illusions of the Demons and on Spells and Poisons* (1563), Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and Holinshed's *Chronicles* – a recognisable social figure was constructed. Therefore to read the sisters of *Macbeth* as witches became a populist reading. To accentuate this mode of thought, Holinshed's account of his 'weird sisters' is considered to present alternative readings of the witches as the goddesses of destiny – as fates. Much focus of these readings centres on the use of the name *weird* sisters, as opposed to calling them witches. As the sisters are never actually called 'witch' by any other character, this alternative reading has become as received as the traditional hag figure. This chapter assesses how this not only alters the text itself, but also the social commentary interwoven within the text of the play.

After investigating the fantasy elements of witches, chapter three progresses to the reality of witchcraft. This chapter looks at the image of the human witch, in contrast to the supernatural witch, by drawing on one of Shakespeare's histories, *Richard III* (1593). In contrast to the witches of *Macbeth*, the women within *Richard III*, one of whom is called a '[f]oul wrinkled witch' (*Richard III*, I.iii.162), are not defined as supernatural beings, but human. However, the human witch, or cunning-folk, who used their magic for good, for beneficium, were thought to derive their power from the devil as much as evil, malefic witches.<sup>17</sup> Therefore many supernatural features of the hag were thought to be used in human witchcraft. The power of prophesy is attributed to the women of *Richard III*. This chapter

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<sup>16</sup> With regards to any play composed in this era, there is much debate regarding how to date it and whether to use the (possible) publication date or the date of the first performance. For the purpose of this study, I will be taking all subsequent theatrical dates from H. W. Herrington's, "Witchcraft and Magic in the Elizabethan Drama", in *The Journal of American Folklore*, 32.126 (Oct. - Dec. 1919), pp. 447-485, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/535187>> [accessed 20 November 2010], as this study gives an overview of magical plays of the period and includes all that are noted within this study.

<sup>17</sup> James Sharpe, "The Debate on Witchcraft", in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 653-661, p. 656.

attempts to understand why Shakespeare exercised fantastical features in a historical play, and in doing so how he breaks convention in presenting non-supernatural witches. The investigation employs both historical and contemporary politics, to demonstrate how the women of *Richard III* allude to Elizabeth I, and the succession crisis that surrounded the end of her reign. It has been suggested above, that the human witch emerged out of the lack of understanding patriarchal society had towards the female body. Therefore, this chapter explores the parallel between the female triad from *Richard III* and the female trinity of the maiden-mother-crone seen in Elizabeth I. This is to show how female sexuality and witchlore became intertwined, and the overarching political comment Shakespeare made through this.

It is understandable that the witch has become a central feminist figure within historical debate, as she was one of the few women to have been ‘given any space whatever in pre-feminist history’ (Purkiss, p. 9). For this reason, as chapter one will show, the witch becomes a perfect vehicle to approach the fantastical and real through a linguistic and constructed history.

## Chapter One: The History of the Witch

*witch, n.1* - A man who practises witchcraft or magic; a magician, sorcerer, wizard.<sup>18</sup>

*witch, n.2 - 1.a.* A female magician, sorceress; in later use *esp.* a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and to be able by their co-operation to perform supernatural acts.<sup>19</sup>

In the introduction to this piece, I suggested that our contemporary image of the figure of the witch, as received from *Macbeth*, is that of a fantastical ‘midnight hag’, or, historically, a sexualised woman. However, these images are problematic. Upon close evaluation, neither image is definitive nor historically accurate in its representation of this figure. This problem of clear conceptual explication exists not only in relation to our historical conception of the witch, but is also carried across into the etymological and semantic comprehension of the figure. Let us consider the above definitions, taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Immediately, we can see a separation between the male and female witch. However, the complexity and variation that the word *witch* encompasses is not limited to this simple gender stigmatisation. The above descriptions are actually only two elements within a much more extensive definition. In total, the *Oxford English Dictionary* states at least ten distinct meanings for the word *witch*, many of which make reference to evil, malevolence or the devil. To complicate matters further, the *OED* has a separate listing for *white witch*: ‘someone of a good disposition; one who uses witchcraft for beneficent purposes; one who practices “white magic”’.<sup>20</sup> The separation of the notion of white magic from the *witch* effectively demonises the word, and in doing so, implicitly aligns the term with evil and ‘black magic’. Moreover, we cannot solely accept the *OED*’s definition as a definitive

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<sup>18</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*  
<<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50286229/>> [accessed 15 November 2010]

<sup>19</sup> *OEDO*  
<<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50286230/>> [accessed 15 November 2010]

<sup>20</sup> *OEDO*  
<<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50284881/>> [accessed 14 November 2010]

version. John Widdowson complicates such a reading when he suggests that historically the witch has been conceptualised in two ways: ‘as extraordinary human beings, and as beings which are basically supernatural or invented rather than human’.<sup>21</sup> The second concept, as has already been discussed, and will be further examined in chapter two of this piece, is straightforward and true of the witches in *Macbeth*. They are supernatural beings who are not of this realm. However, his initial description of the witch as ‘an extraordinary human being’, that is to say as a mortal, requires further clarification. This concept of the witch, as shall be described in this section and further clarified in chapter three, must be separated into those who practice sorcery by choice, and those with a natural magic. By this I mean the healer-witch or, as Ronald Holmes refers to them ‘*folk-witches*’,<sup>22</sup> who use herbs and potions to cure and prevent illnesses. Therefore, we can see that Holmes’ divergent witch categories imply that the semantic and etymological complexity that exists in relation to our use of the word *witch*, is paralleled by a historical problem of definitively defining the figure. This chapter will therefore discuss the various historical incarnations of the witch figure, in order to explain the current linguistic concept of the witch.

Later in the same piece referred to above, Ronald Holmes notes that although contemporary society may find the role of the witch a complex one, our ancestors had a clear idea of what they saw a witch to be (Holmes, p. 17). However, in reality, history is saturated by an abundant diversity of witch figures that we have historically failed to acknowledge. Perhaps it is because of the immensity of the character, or that the witch-trials were so popularised, that we see the medieval period as the beginning of the figure. However the belief in magic, the essence of witchcraft, goes back to antiquity. Most historical accounts of witchcraft, much like this study, tend to concentrate on the period from the later Middle Ages onwards, due to the emphasis on the beginnings of the witch-trials. However, comprehensive

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<sup>21</sup> John Widdowson, “The Witch as a Frightening and Threatening Figure”, in *The Witch Figure: Folklore essays by a group of scholars in England honouring the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of Katharine M. Briggs*, ed. Venetia Newall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 200-220, p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Holmes, *Witchcraft in British History* (London: Muller, 1974), p. 15.

studies show that female witchcraft predates this historical timeline and, as Katherine Morris recognises, extends as far back as the Greco-Roman culture.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, I cannot agree with Holmes when he implies that, historically, there was a clear cut image of the figure. However, Holmes is certainly correct when he says that contemporary conceptions of the witch are complex. We often write of witchcraft as being a thing of the past, yet it is still celebrated today. The Pagan Federation estimates between fifty thousand and two-hundred thousand practitioners in the UK alone, with up to three-hundred and thirty thousand followers in the US.<sup>24</sup> Like Christianity, there are many terms and derivatives of Paganism, including Wicca, Neo-Druidism, Dianic and the Goddess Movement to name a few. In contrast to Christianity, most worship a Mother Goddess alongside her male consort, with modern witchcraft attempting to make the Goddess its principle deity. This makes the religion an obvious attraction for feminists.<sup>25</sup> Like many of the sects, the Goddess Movement is firmly rooted in the female body, with an ethos intended to revise power, authority, sexuality and social relations.<sup>26</sup> This return to sexuality is a key notion in the purpose of feminist witchcraft, and indeed feminism as a whole. Perhaps it is because the concept of the supernatural has become neutralised in theory, and metaphorical rather than literal, but modern presentations rarely accept the figure of the fantastical ‘midnight hag’, because it is unrealistic, especially in performance. As modern audiences do not have the same beliefs in demonology as a Renaissance audience, it is seen as unbelievable and even comic for the hag to have true power. Today, power openly steps through female sexuality and seductiveness,

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<sup>23</sup> Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch?: The image of gender in medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), p. 3. This study is an excellent alternative view on historical witchcraft, looking at the Icelandic and Norse mythology as a parallel to the Greco-Roman influence, and how the Icelandic conversion to Christianity 600 years later than mainland Europe affected its witchcraft history.

<sup>24</sup> *The Pagan Federation*

<<http://www.paganfed.org/>> [accessed 22 July 2010] and Purkiss, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Diane Purkiss suggests an ‘extraordinary flexibility of the term ‘witch’ as a signifier within all feminist discourse’. She is ‘constantly cast and recast as the late twentieth century’s idea of a protofeminist, a sister from the past, the witch has undergone transformations as dramatic as those in any pantomime’, (Purkiss, p. 9).

<sup>26</sup> Wendy Griffin, ‘The Embodied Goddess: Feminist Witchcraft and Female Divinity’, in *Sociology of Religion*, 56.1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 35-48, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3712037>> [accessed 22 July 2010], p. 36.

creating the possibility of the depiction of witches as goddesses and temptresses.<sup>27</sup>

This association with the goddesses of the Classics has to be addressed as a grounding for my investigation into the potential of the witches of *Macbeth* as goddesses in my textual study.

### Classical

**witch, n.2 - 5.d.** *attrib.* passing into *adj.* Magic, magical. (*OEDO*)

Due to the immensity of the subject of magic and witchcraft in history, the following is naturally only a selection of relevant portrayals. Nonetheless, many of the qualities that we see in present depictions of the witch, both good and evil, are established in classical literature and mythology. Arguably the first witch of literature, in the western tradition at least, is Circe, the sorceress of Homer's *Odyssey*. In the Ancient Greek tradition, Circe is a minor goddess of magic and is also, at times, described as either a nymph or an enchantress. In this way we can see that the figure of Circe conflates three distinct types of magical being. Such a conceptual amalgamation is in no way unique to the Circe character. In fact, this merging of supernatural forms within one *magical* figure reoccurs throughout history. As the above element of the *OED*'s *witch* definition demonstrates, a witch could simply be a magical being. Described as an inhabitant of the Island of Aeaea, Circe is most famous for turning men into swine and beasts. Though her actions are deemed malicious, the manner in which she transforms her enemies foreshadows the craft of the natural witch and the healer/folk-witches of the Middle Ages. Circe's magical actions are developed through magical potions and an extended knowledge of herbs and drugs. Effectively, this pre-empts the importance of herbalist art in curing illness and wounds as an early form of medicine. Before the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, such knowledge of the medicinal properties of natural elements was limited, and consequently, seen as a practised art, much

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<sup>27</sup> This was the case for the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2003 London production of *Macbeth*, with Sean Bean and Samantha Bond. The witches were presented as Greek sirens, enticing and seducing Macbeth through singing and enchanting spells.

like witchcraft. Hence, like many of the witch figures this study encounters, Circe is widely misunderstood, or at least judged in a restricted manner. Though her actions may fall within our principle motif for defining a witch, when she is compared to her corresponding females in Odysseus' other episodes, she 'can be seen to fall somewhere near the centre of this continuum' due to her 'switchback good-and-evil nature'.<sup>28</sup> This possible conversion is supported by Odysseus' bed challenge, when he makes Circe swear 'a great oath by the blessed gods that she will not contrive any more evil against him, lest she should render him "cowardly and unmanly" once he has taken his clothes off' (Ogden, p. 8). When they awaken, Circe restores Odysseus' fellow travellers from swine back to human form, and she herself begins a transformation into a respectable and humane woman. Although she is considered the proto-witch of Greek mythology, it seems she gains an acceptable non-malefic status through her eventual actions and in comparison to her contemporaries, Calypso and the Sirens.

Perhaps the most infamous witch of the classical tradition is considered to be Medea. The niece, or possible sister, of Circe, her literary sources are not as clear as her predecessor's. Her origin is most commonly attributed to the Greek play *Medea* by Euripides. Later, she also appears in a play of the same name by the Roman Seneca, and within several episodes of the epic *Argonautica* with Jason and the Argonauts. She is best known as an enchantress and, like Circe, her craft is most notably facilitated through the use of drugs and ointments. The main difference between these two figures is that Medea's use of magic is instigated by a need to aid her lover Jason in overcoming his various tasks and challenges. Unlike Circe, she displays no real malevolence in her intent. Conversely, Medea is historically seen, if we are to believe Euripides, as a betrayed woman who poisons traitors and murders her children. This would imply she has no craft to her name, just an all-consuming need for vengeance. In this way we can see that Medea's classification as a witch

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Ogden, *Night's Black Agents: Witches, Wizards and the Dead in the Ancient World* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2008), p. 11.

is perhaps more contentious than Circe's, but this is probably because her story is so fragmented and because she does not have a single historical narrative. Nevertheless, the essence of this section is to illustrate that there is not one single definition of a witch. A witch does not have to be the malevolent hag contemporary society perceives her to be. Thus, her application of drugs and potions, a tradition of witchcraft, is enough to align Medea with the natural witches of medieval England and to validate her place in the history of witchcraft.

Nevertheless, Medea has also been depicted as a priestess of Hecate, the Greek goddess of magic and crossroads, and the pagan goddess of fertility. Many of the classical Greek goddesses were adopted by pagans as their deities and in turn many pagan goddesses have become archetypes for the witch figure.<sup>29</sup> Today, Hecate is also celebrated as the goddess of witches. The Roman moon goddess Diana has also been embraced by the pagan religion (there is a strand of the practice named Dianic Wicca in her honour), and across this study we will find many integrations of these pagan goddesses into literary witch depictions. This creation of a 'goddess-witch' is comparative to the conflation of the disparate magical beings of Circe's representation. The goddess-witch illustrates features that are not perpetuated in a post-Christian world, explicitly, an open attitude towards female sexuality. This was considered a negative and dangerous trait in the patriarchal Christian world. Female sexuality is abundant across classical literature, and Diana and Hecate are adapted to present the celebration of the cycle of life and fertility. By the medieval and Renaissance periods however, Diana and Hecate had become associated with witchcraft and the darker side of magic. As the pagan tradition would later be suppressed by Christianity, it is understandable that all core pagan beliefs – magic, sexuality, and herbalist practices - would be opposed and demonised by the Church. As Katherine Morris concludes '[b]efore the advent of Christianity, the witch was not necessarily a negative part of society; she could

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), noted in Morris, p. 19.

have the characteristics of a fertility goddess, a prophetess, a priestess, a healer, or a person who was skilled in beneficent magic' (Morris, p. 5).

### Biblical

**witch, n.2 - 1.c. a witch of Endor** (in allusion to 1 Sam. xxviii. 7): a fanciful term for (a) a bewitching person; (b) a medium. (*OEDO*)

Alas, not all the ancient views of witchcraft are as enchanting as the goddess role. A significant reason that the classical representation is superseded by the traditional witch as a symbol of evil is because religious history has shaped her in that way. The witch has become 'just as powerful to the mind in a negative way as the symbol of the Cross was in a positive way' (Holmes, p. 17). As demonstrated above, a biblical depiction of the witch remains in our contemporary perception of the figure, as the witch of Endor - a woman who summoned the deceased prophet Samuel in his first book 28.7 - is one definition of a witch as stated by the *OED*. Many studies agree that social and political upheaval within the period had an impact on the inevitable witch-trials (more so in England than on the continent), although the Church is commonly considered to be at the base of this knock-on effect. The infamous passage from Exodus 22.18 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'<sup>30</sup> was used centuries later as justification for the examination and prosecution of accused parties. The Old Testament contains many references to the evils of witchcraft, sorcery and enchantment.<sup>31</sup> Although there is no physical description of a witch within it, the biblical tradition insinuates a malevolent figure that must, in its opposition to the Hebrew dogma, be a force of evil and a representation of the Devil. Christian scriptures of the New Testament, Galatians 5.19-20 for example, further conclude that witchcraft is an act of sinful nature or 'work[s] of the flesh'. Revelations 21.8 adds that 'sorcerers [...] shall have their part in the

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<sup>30</sup> King James Bible

<<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> [accessed 15 November 2010]

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Holmes' chapter "The Earliest Magic", in *Witchcraft in British History* expands on other references. See also Meir Bar-Ilan, "Witches in the Bible and in the Talmud", in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, eds. Herbert W. Basser and Simcha Fishbane (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 7-32.

lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death'. Given that for centuries the bible has been a key instrument of social and moral didacticism, it is no wonder that the witch has been shaped into such negative boundaries. There was, however, scepticism about witchcraft around the time of the early Middle Ages, which was encouraged by the Church and the *Canon Episcopi*, the key doctrine on witchcraft until the thirteenth century. It was not until the later Middle Ages, and the early modern period that is the focus of this piece, that a belief in witchcraft was recognised by the Church, through the authority of the Inquisition, and the predominant witch-hunts began.

Arguably, literature has few recognisable witches after the classical period until the eras dominated by Arthurian literature, which returns to the classical mode. Although written tales are scarce, it is probable that the form of oral and traditional folk-tales were exchanged between these periods. In a broad sense, these could have been such tales as *Aesop's Fables* that were re-told over the centuries, and the *Breton Lais* which evolved around the twelfth century. Essentially, these could be the inspiration behind some of our best known and recognised fairy tales. Many modern versions of fairy tales often portray the malevolent witch, and usually a hag or crone-like figure, with an evil intention of harming others. As part of this study aims to rediscover the connection between society and literature, I find it strange that there is little popular literature reflecting the changing representation of the witch from mythology to the Arthurian Romances. Both the classical and biblical representations present an evil being, or at least in classical literature a figure with a somewhat evil intent. However, Greek mythology still presents an elite, god figure, whereas Christianity portrays a hag of lowly status. It seems therefore that fairy tales, or the fundamental forms upon which they were based, were responding to the biblical suggestion that witches were evil and bridge this apparent gap of the witch in literature.

## Arthurian

**witch, n.2 - 3.b.** (a) A young woman or girl of bewitching aspect or manners. (*OEDO*)

The legends of King Arthur, and the associated romances of the early Middle Ages, are the next important use of witchcraft for this study. Arthurian legends are more associated with magically orientated tales rather than witchcraft specifically. This is because the Arthurian consideration of a witch was different to our traditional understanding. Arthurian tales utilise a classical persona and, like Greek mythology, combine aspects of different magical figures to depict their witch figure. Classical literature has the ‘goddess-witch’, Arthurian literature the ‘fairy-witch’, or the fay as these women are termed. The Romance of *Lancelot du Lac* reveals ‘in those days all maidens that knew enchantments and charms were called fays’.<sup>32</sup> As mortal damsels were also referred to as enchanting since beauty itself was considered dangerous, fays were often beautiful maidens with considerable natural gifts. As the further *OED* *witch* definition acknowledges above, any mortal beauty could be given magical status. The typical embodiment of this being is Morgan le Fay. As the etymology of Morgan’s name suggests, she must be of close descent from mythology and the classical tradition. The English *fay*, or *fée* in old French, derives from the Latin *fatum* literally meaning ‘fate’ (Edwards, p. 4). The plural of *fatum*, *fata*, were the Fates of classical Roman mythology, also known as the Parcae. Their Greek counterparts were the Moirae, who held the magical powers of prophesy and destiny. Morgan herself has a divinity surrounding her that is likely to have been derived from her links with the Celtic war goddess Morrigan. Gillian Edwards’ study into the origins and overlaps of many magical beings, explains that fays were beautiful, seductive *femme fatales*, with natural and supernatural gifts. They should in fact, however, be referred to as sorceresses, as their power lies not just in their beauty, but through

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<sup>32</sup> Noted in Gillian Edwards, *Hobgoblin and Sweet Puck: Fairy Names and Natures* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1974), p. 5.

‘knowledge and skill in the practice of magical arts’ (Edwards, p. 5). Here we begin to recognise the features of our traditional witch.

To define a witch in Arthurian terms would arguably be as a mortal who practiced sorcery, and not one who was necessarily born in the realm of magic, or was naturally magical. Morgan’s many stories only aid the confusion regarding this magical form. Legend changes her from an enchantress of fairyland in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*, to a being of human birth and Arthur’s sister in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. One account tells of a supernatural maiden, who is described as healing Arthur’s wound at his final battle at Camlan.<sup>33</sup> Another speaks of the jealous ‘slighted mistress who seeks revenge upon a mortal favourite for spurned love’.<sup>34</sup> Yet another account shows her as a mortal, who bears Arthur’s child (Modred), with the purpose of destroying the Round Table (Edwards, p. 6). Like Medea, she has a multifaceted element to her character that makes it complicated to definitively characterise her. However, Arthurian tradition produces some recognisable fairies, in both the Lady of the Lake and Nimue. Like Morgan, both are referred to as powerful fays, but they are more stable than Morgan le Fay as they exist only in strict Arthurian tales and with the same consistent persona. All these tales present such an evident crossover of the terms fay, enchantress, fairy, witch, mortal, supernatural, that the only way to distinguish the witch from any other female character of the canon is her intent. Charles Loomis’ premise that magic is neither good nor bad - *beneficium* nor *maleficium* - but lies upon the will of the agent,<sup>35</sup> allows us to conclude that Morgan le Fay is a witch, even if her name and former characteristics suggest otherwise. As Gillian Edwards writes ‘Morgan le Fay, like the weird sisters, is both goddess and human, malign and benevolent, healing and destroying, good and bad; not one at a time, but all at once’ (Edwards, p. 6). Though she may

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<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini* (1148), vv.908-940, noted in Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, 2nd edn. subtitled “enlarged by a survey of scholarship on the fairy mythology since 1903 and a bibliography”, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Hartmann von Aue, *Iwein* (1200), vv.3422-3424, noted in Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Grant Loomis, *White Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1948), p. 3.

look like a fairy, her hatred, jealousy and malicious intent defines her as the primary witch of Arthurian Legend.

### Medieval

**white witch** - A witch (or wizard) of a good disposition; one who uses witchcraft for beneficent purposes; one who practises 'white magic'. (*OEDO*)

The witch so far, that is to say up until the fourteenth century, had 'a special position vis-a-vis the gods or deities'.<sup>36</sup> She had not necessarily been classified as good or bad, as this was dependant on the objective of her magic. As the previously referenced definition above illustrates, a witch's magical intent was separated into maleficium and beneficium. Likewise, though the Church was aware of the gravity of the witch, the focus was on her craft, rather than on her eventual association with heresy. Although popular witch literature seems subdued in the medieval period, we begin to both gain knowledge of, and encounter, real accounts of human witchcraft. Bound in a tradition of working miracles, the Christian Church specialised in healing and curing illness. As Keith Thomas details intricately in his renowned *Religion and the Decline of Magic*:

The medieval Church thus found itself saddled with the tradition that the working of miracles was the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of the truth. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the *Lives* of the Saints had assumed a stereotyped pattern. They related the miraculous achievements of holy men, and stressed how they could prophesy the future, control the weather, provide protection against fire and flood, magically transport heavy objects, and bring relief to the sick.<sup>37</sup>

Concurrently, an opposing set of individuals had developed a reputation for the same craft. Coupled with the use of charms and foresight, heathens had fashioned the use of magical

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<sup>36</sup> Nachman Ben-Yehude, "The European Witch Craze of the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective", in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 86.1 (Jul. 1980), pp. 1-31, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2778849>> [accessed 8 July 2010], p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 26.

healing. This is probably the first account of the wise-woman, or white witch, who uses magic for 'beneficent purposes'. This form in itself is open to much discussion and specific categorisation, as there are the healer women and folk women mentioned previously, although these are technically only slight variations of the wise-woman. There are also the roles of the nurse and the midwife which, before the insight into scientific properties, were viewed as magical professions. However, for the purpose of this work it seems acceptable to place these variations together under one overarching term: natural witches. The important distinction to make here is that the natural witch is distinguishable from the other human witches who were taught and sought out sorcery, and the traditional supernatural presentation.

With natural witches performing cures, the Church had yet another reason to oppose the doctrine of witchcraft, as its natural practitioners were overshadowing the miracles of Christ.<sup>38</sup> Witchcraft was no longer regarded as an illusion, as was the Church's official policy until the thirteenth century. The early Middle Ages had given rise to a general scepticism regarding witchcraft that was 'further strengthened by the conviction that the Devil was powerless to harm the true Christian'.<sup>39</sup> However, with the founding of the Inquisition, a scholarly and legal body who 'decided that witchcraft involved a pact with the Devil and was, consequently, heresy' (Davies, p. 3), witchcraft became a heretical occupation and was fully recognised by the Church. To be clear, from this point the events that I refer to took place primarily upon the European continent. Whilst these issues eventually affected England, the European witch-craze is considered very separate from the English, as the European accounts notably began considerably earlier.<sup>40</sup> Once the Church had pronounced it was demonising witchcraft, Pope John XXII began accusations, and encouraged persecution

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<sup>38</sup> For a fully detailed account of the use of healing magic in early Christianity and the human witch, see Keith Thomas', "The Magic of the Medieval Church", pp. 25-50, and "Magical Healing", pp. 177-211 respectively, in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

<sup>39</sup> R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch-Beliefs* (London: Methuen & Co., 1947), p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> There were also different factors aiding the English witch-trials and these will be assessed in the following *Renaissance* sub-section.

of all sorcerers, magicians and other heretics. His Bulls of 1318 and 1320 were issued to officially declare witchcraft a heresy, and consequently when Pope Innocent VIII issued his Bull *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* in 1484, the momentum of terror and fear had built to an unprecedented level. Finally, it was the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarium* (*The Hammer of Witches*) by Inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger in 1487 that eventually thrust the matter of the witch into the public sphere.<sup>41</sup>

This infamous treatise was a complete guide to both the theoretical and practical elements involved in hunting witches; from the beginnings of the discovery, to their trials and assessments, and finally to the eventual torture and execution of those found guilty. One of its claims, which has shaped the history of witchcraft, was Sprenger's assertion that the sex of a witch was female. Implying that women are 'more credulous...more impressionable [...] liar[s] by nature' (Holmes, p. 49), Sprenger declares women have been defective from the beginning of time because they are the embodiment of original sin. This fixation upon the female as prey continued throughout the craze, as over one hundred years later in 1597, the then James VI of Scotland's treatise *Daemonologie* echoed 'for as that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devil'.<sup>42</sup> With all women at risk of being demonised, even the natural witches of medieval England were to come under attack from Sprenger, who concluded 'no one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives' (Holmes, p. 49). Sociologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda estimates that from the early fourteenth century up until the mid-seventeenth century, there were between two-hundred thousand and five-hundred thousand witches executed (many burnt at the stake) in Europe (Ben-Yehuda, p. 1). The figure of three-hundred thousand is a repeated estimate, and with eight-five percent or more of these being women (Ben-Yehuda, p. 1). In comparison, he goes on to note that English records show fewer than one thousand hangings during its witch-hunt

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<sup>41</sup> Ronald Holmes' chapter "Witchcraft in the Middle Ages", in *Witchcraft in British History* fully details the other attributing factors that shaped the European witch-hunts. See also Davies "The Growth of Witch-Mania", in *Four Centuries of Witch-Beliefs*.

<sup>42</sup> James VI and I, *Daemonologie, in forme of a Dialogue* (Edinburgh: Robert Walde-graue, 1597), <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/25929/25929-h/25929-h.html>> [accessed 18 November 2010], p. 30.

period (a single years worth for Europe), which started over one hundred years later in the mid-sixteenth century. Ben-Yehuda concludes that ‘the witch-craze answered the need for a redefinition of moral boundaries as a result of the profound changes in the medieval social order’ (Ben-Yehuda, p. 1). This is a fitting judgement when attached to the fact that witch-mania did not begin in England until one hundred years later, under a period of endless religious and social upheaval.

### Renaissance

**witch, n.2 - 3.b. (b) old witch:** a contemptuous appellation for a malevolent or repulsive-looking old woman. (*OEDO*)

It has been observed that the witch-hunts were conducted in their most intense form in those regions where the Catholic Church was weakest (Ben-Yehuda, p. 6). With Henry VIII’s break from Rome and the Catholic Church in the 1530s, it seems almost inevitable that the witch frenzy would eventually make its way to England. The religious struggle that Henry’s decision to leave the Catholic Church initiated shaped the period’s view on witchcraft. This included its representations in literature. Whilst there were conflicting treatises available within the period – Reginald Scot’s sympathetic *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* and the severe *Daemonologie* written by James I for example – most literature could agree on one thing, the physical abnormalities of a witch. John Gaule refers to ‘the old woman with a wrinkled face, a furr’d brow, a hairy lip, a gobbler tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue’.<sup>43</sup> As the above *OED* extract shows, this view has remained in contemporary society, and has shaped our received image of the witch figure – that of a hag. I should again clarify that here, England’s view and approach to witchcraft must be considered a separate entity that should be distinguished not only from Europe, but also from

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<sup>43</sup> John Gaule, *Select Cases of Conscience touching Witches and Witchcrafts* (1646), noted in Thomas, p. 567.

Scotland, in regards to the progression of the trials.<sup>44</sup> Due to a strong anti-witch sympathy demonstrated by King James VI, the soon to be James I of the united countries, the Scottish witch-craze closely followed the continental pattern. Conversely, witchcraft in England during the medieval European craze had been of little consequence, although belief in magic on the whole was still relevant; the works of Chaucer and Gower attest to this. Such texts tended to favour faerie lore and fantastical magical features, retaining some of those literary elements of Arthurian literature, but mixed with a strong didactic and moral Catholic message. Most of this literature would present Christian ideals alongside magical moments, as demonstrated in Chaucer's pilgrimages or the morality plays of the height of the period. As Catholicism was gaining strength in England there was no need for the evils of magic to be used as a tool of propaganda. It was Henry's break from the Catholic Church that initiated a reaction against witchcraft, when in 1542 Henry passed an Act against conjurations, witchcrafts, sorcery and enchantments. However, it is likely this had as much to do with restricting Catholics, and those who were against the newly reformed religion, as it did witchcraft. The Act 'clearly treated the [...] positive acts of hostility to the community, rather than in relations with the Devil as such' (Thomas, p. 442). Considering the Act was later annulled by Henry's son Edward VI in 1547 without much opposition, it has been questioned if this Act was actually ever put into practice against witches at all. Although the Act may never have been about witches, the constant social and religious changes within this period made for a weak and insecure state. This helped fuel a belief in witchcraft and opened the door for the trials that would soon begin. In order to establish its right as the dominant religion, Protestantism had to oppose the Catholic Church and therefore began to imply that Catholicism was aligned with witchcraft. Catholicism could not deny magic, as it had absorbed many pagan customs throughout its evolution, and held healing and miracles as fundamental elements of its beliefs. As Keith Thomas details, '[n]early every primitive

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<sup>44</sup> Julian Goodare's "Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland", in *Social History*, 23.3 (Oct. 1998), pp. 288-308, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4286516>> [accessed 8 July 2010] outlines the diverse events and findings from the English witch-hunt.

religion is regarded by its adherents as a medium for obtaining supernatural power [...] early Christianity offers no exception to this rule' (Thomas, p. 25). Therefore, in opposition to the medieval Catholic Church, which aligned itself with this magical principle, Protestant doctrine had no use for magic or superstitions. It was firm on the matter that all magic was evil, and, therefore constituted heresy. Though the two denominations went back and forth, the sixteenth century concluded with the stable Protestant Elizabeth I on the throne. It was not until her accession that the witch-mania of England truly began.

As acknowledged in the introduction, Elizabeth reissued the Witchcraft Act in 1563, which remains the most prominent Witchcraft Statute to date. This fuelled the sudden rise of witch-mania in England, but the reason why it took so long to blossom in England remains an open question. It is often recognised that the exiled Protestants who fled the country during the reign of Catholic Mary I, probably influenced the start of the trials after witnessing continental trials and burnings. One of Elizabeth's advisors, John Jewel, was one such man who had fled the country. Later made the Bishop of Salisbury, Jewel had been surrounded by Calvinist witch-hunts whilst in Zurich and, on returning to England, encouraged the witchcraft statutes, spreading witch-fear in England. The looming threat of the Catholic Spanish may have also played its part. The growing association between witchcraft and Catholicism was frequent, and Reginald Scott's *Discoverie* remarked '[o]ne such sort as are said to be witches, are women which be commonly old...poor, sullen, superstitious, and Papists'.<sup>45</sup> As it was commonplace within the period to believe that one's religious and political enemies were in league with the Devil, this merged the threat of the Catholics with the threat of witches, who were acting on behalf of Satan. Consequently, it was implied that a witch must be acting on behalf of England's enemy Spain. Similarly, Catholic propagandists in Spain were keen to present Elizabeth as being in league with the Devil, in order to blame her for their disasters. Witches were often blamed for the bad weather and plagues of mice

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<sup>45</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584), noted in Davies, p. 21.

and locusts that swept the continent, and essentially became the scapegoat for all the misfortunes of the day.

This may be why it took so long for the witch-craze to infuse England, as there was already a scapegoat for such disasters, in the shape of fairies. Today's perception of these diminutive supernatural creatures and their magical powers is far from the early modern view. Early and medieval stories describe them as large menacing creatures that brought disaster to mankind, prevented rain, caused the failure of crops and spread famine and disease (Edwards, p. 15). It is actually Shakespeare who seems to have started the fashion for portraying fairies as tiny, fragile creatures in his *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6). Also, it is only once the witch had taken over as England's supernatural scapegoat, that the image of the fairy was reformulated. Some modern scholars argue that the terms *witch* and *fairy* were indeed identical in the Elizabethan era and that 'the people who until the late Middle Ages were called fairies, by one name or another, were often those who, until the seventeenth century or so, were called witches'.<sup>46</sup> Katherine Briggs confirms that 'the strands of belief are almost inextricably entangled'.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, as this study has shown, the witch and fairy figures of Arthurian literature were indeed thoroughly entwined. Unlike the delay in dramatising witches, as the forthcoming chapters will show, fairies were sensationalised on the Elizabethan stage at the height of their popularity, accompanied by a re-visitation of classical literature. Fairy folk-lore and mythology were approached in works such as John Lyly's *Gallathea* (1584) and *Endymion, the Man in the Moon* (1585), both of which included allusions to classical and popular beliefs. Fairy literature was a big market within the period with extensive 'magazines', or chapbooks, dedicated to describing every minute detail concerning them. In comparison, the witch literature of the period had a much harsher tone. Many treatises had a strong anti-witch theme, Henry Holland's *A Treatise*

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<sup>46</sup> Pennethorne Hughes, *Witchcraft* (Longmans Green, 1952), noted in Anthony Harris, *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth Century English Drama*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> K. M. Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 222.

*against Witchcraft* (1590) for example. However some writers, like Reginald Scot for instance, wrote against the persecution of witches, whom he considered to be often harmless old women. Although these treatises were based on real fears and previous literature, accounts of real accused women and their subsequent trials were also publicised in witchcraft pamphlets. Marion Gibson notes that these pamphlets were ‘produced for a variety of reasons, from the financial to the propagandist’.<sup>48</sup> However, most presented accounts of straightforward prosecutions, possibly to deter women from witchcraft and the subsequent trials they would inevitably encounter. *Newes from Scotland* (1591) was a pamphlet written by James when he was still James VI of Scotland and described the infamous North Berwick witch-trials. This was a case he was very close to, as these witches were said to be responsible for the storms his fleet had suffered on his return from Denmark. Some of these pamphlets became almost as comprehensive as the treatises, with some consisting of over one hundred pages. *A true and just Recorde* (1582) was the longest witchcraft pamphlet of its time. It detailed one of the fullest accounts of the pre-trial legal processes against witches, including accounts given by witnesses and victims of the accused. By the time of the Jacobean period, these pamphlets were often dramatised. One of the most recognised is Henry Goodcole’s *The Wonderful Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch* (1621), which was serialised by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and John Ford in *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621).

As for the Elizabethan stage, and Shakespeare’s entrance to the public sphere, the familiar witch was seldom to be found. The witches found on the Elizabeth stage were often conventional characters borrowed, with little change, from other drama and literature of the past (Herrington, p. 471). Shakespeare followed this trend within his first play, *Henry VI, part I* (1590), by presenting the historical witch, Joan of Arc. From his arrival on the dramatic scene, Shakespeare openly embraced the contemporaneous dramatic traditions.

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<sup>48</sup> Marion Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

As we see nearly every Shakespeare play has some form of magic; *Romeo and Juliet's* Queen Mab, the ghost of *Hamlet* and the fairies within *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to name a few. With this obvious, decisive theme of magic within his works, there must be a purpose for Shakespeare's use of it, and his portrayal of witch figures. As this chapter has shown, the concept of the witch, both historically and linguistically, is complex and impossible to define with certainty. Shakespeare's portrayal of witches may be considered the stereotypical image, yet, as the following chapters will show, his concept was as intricate as the semantics and history of the figure.

## Chapter Two: *Macbeth*

### The Fantasy of the Witch

BANQUO

*What are these,  
So withered and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth,  
And yet are on't? – Live you? or are you aught  
That man may question? You seem to understand me,  
By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips; you should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.*<sup>49</sup>

In the introduction to this piece, I stated that I would be adopting a two-fold approach to my investigation of the witch figure. I claimed that this approach would acknowledge both the real and fantastical origins of the witch. In the previous chapter, I discussed the linguistic (fantasy) and the historical (real) origins of the witch figure and how, at times, the two forms of representation seem inextricably linked. Language in some instances affects reality and history is, at times, fantastical. One instance of such synergy appears within the introductory quotation to this chapter. These words, spoken by *Macbeth's* Banquo, could arguably be seen as the foundation for centuries' worth of social and scholarly examination surrounding the witch figure, and yet they are undoubtedly of fantastical origin. The origins of the traditional perception of the witch as the malefic crone of fairy tale interpretation and contemporary commercialisation, is often ascribed to Shakespeare's Scottish play, and Banquo's words are largely responsible for this. As discussed in chapter one, the word *witch* produces many linguistic and ontological uncertainties that variously and incompatibly depict the witch as either a malevolent figure, a wise woman, or simply as a magical being. Banquo's quote produces the same linguistic variation. These emaciated, feral individuals that he happens across, with their 'choppy fingers' laying upon 'skinny lips', may in fact only be withered old women, rather than supernatural witches. Banquo does not refer to them as

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<sup>49</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Act I.iii.37-45. All subsequent references are taken from this edition with reference to the Act, Scene and line numbers.

witches, nor are they named as such throughout the play. Shakespeare deliberately avoids this label, and yet the fear that these ‘inhabitants o’th’earth’ (*Macbeth*, I.iii.39) seem to provoke in the character of Macbeth, suggests a malevolence upon their part that ultimately demonises the sisters. As Purkiss suggested at the beginning of this piece, it is from Shakespeare’s description of ‘secret, black, and midnight hags’ (*Macbeth*, IV.i.47), spoken by the eponymous hero of the play, that contemporary society’s image of the witch is born. Arguably, there is little evidence within the text to substantiate this interpretation. It seems more likely that Shakespeare wished to create more politically dynamic figures than previous literary studies of the play have supposed. We only have to look at Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Shakespeare’s source material for the play, to see that he had no prior presentation of the hag figure from which to draw his inspiration: ‘either weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie or else nymph or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie’ (Holinshed, p. 171). It is only subsequent portrayal and social commentary that suggests this hag interpretation. Indeed, the thoughts on witchcraft of James I, presented in his book *Daemonologie*, leant more towards the presentation of evil beings with hideous appearances, ‘being intised ether for the desire of reuenge, or of worldly riches, their whole practises are either to hurte men and their gudes, or what they possesse’ (James VI and I, p. 35). The degree of mass cultural saturation that James’ work received cannot be understated. The repercussions that this has had for our subsequent understanding of Shakespeare’s weird sisters is concisely implied when Katherine Briggs suggests that ‘[p]erhaps if it had not been for the King’s *Daemonologie* [the sisters] would never have been witches at all’ (Briggs, *Pale Hecate’s Team*, pp. 77-8). This chapter explores the idea that whilst we consider this fantastical ‘midnight hag’ the archetypal witch figure, Shakespeare actually attempts to portray a more varied and complex figure than the rhetoric pertaining to witchcraft at the time would normally allow. Shakespeare encapsulates Holinshed’s depiction of the goddesses, as well as the stereotype, and subsequently, the variety of his

representations present a variation of social and political criticism through both the allegorical and literal connotations produced.

To begin this section we must first discuss the linguistic insinuations of the word *witch*, partially addressed in the previous chapter, in relation to the three sisters of *Macbeth*. More specifically, we need to understand the etymology and semantics of the terms Shakespeare employs. Although it cannot be denied that the modern reader recognises the sisters to be witches, for many, this interpretation can easily be invalidated by acknowledging the fact that they are actually never once called witches within the play. Although the stage directions and character list of many editions refer to them as witches,<sup>50</sup> this trend is not continued within the dialogue of the play itself. There is only one reference in the text to a witch, and that is made by one of the sisters herself: “‘Aroint thee, witch”, the rump-fed runnion cries’ (*Macbeth*, I.iii.5). Throughout the play the characters themselves refer to each other as sister, and are referred to as hags, familiars and weird sisters, by the rest of the cast. It is Shakespeare’s deliberate avoidance of this label that has allowed for the various modern day interpretations of the play. Although many contemporary theatrical adaptations of the play would not have been accepted, or been possible, on the Renaissance stage, this does not mean that Shakespeare’s intention was not the same as our contemporary outcome. The lack of simple clarification as to what they are, shown in the variety of descriptive names illustrated above, suggests that Shakespeare’s ‘hags’ were not necessarily his intended representation for the figures, or at least not the only facet that he consciously wished to produce through his characters. In this way, the use of language becomes more critically informative than the visual representation of the sisters. For example, throughout the play we can recognise the emphasis that is placed on the term *weird*. It was not until the nineteenth

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<sup>50</sup> This is not true of many twentieth century editions which focus on the sisterly relationship. *The RSC Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) refers to the witches as ‘*weyard* sisters’, as they were listed in the first folio. The Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth*, ed. Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990) notes the term ‘*weird* sisters’ adjacent to first/second/third witch. Interestingly, the earlier edition in the Cambridge series ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947) lists the witches as ‘The Weird Sisters’, where as the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, which I quote from, refers to them as ‘witches’.

century that our current understanding of the word *weird*, that is to say ‘out of the ordinary course, strange, unusual; hence, odd, fantastic’,<sup>51</sup> came about. From this, we can deduce that any use of the term in relation to the sisters would be inextricably tied up with a Jacobean meaning of the word, in which it is synonymous with ‘fate, lot or destiny’ (Harris, p. 33). The word *weird* derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*, meaning ‘the principle, power, or agency by which events are determined’ (Edwards, p. 2), that is to say, fate. *Wyrd* is also one of the Norns, the three weird sisters of Norse mythology, who are comparable to the Fates of the classical Roman pantheon, the Parcae, and the analogous Moirae of ancient Greek tradition. These mythological figures, like the sisters of *Macbeth*, each see either the past, the present or foretell the future. As it is likely Shakespeare took the term *weird* from Holinshed’s description, this endorses a collaborative portrayal of prophesy, fate and mythology to form ‘the goddesses of destinie’, and represents a stark alternative to the supernatural hag normally associated with the sisters.<sup>52</sup> In his book *Night’s Black Agents*, Anthony Harris asserts that any case built around the word *weird* is extremely suspect (Harris, p. 35), but as the purpose of this study is to demonstrate how each literary decision Shakespeare makes, that is to say how he presents his magical beings, is a deliberate choice, I cannot agree.

The emphasis on how language has affected the perception of the witch figure can be extended into the text itself. The words and expressions the witches use within *Macbeth* unquestionably shape their presentation. For example, let us consider the infamous cauldron scene of Act IV:

Round about the cauldron go;  
In the poisoned entrails throw [...]  
Fillet of a fenny snake,  
In the cauldron boil and bake:

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<sup>51</sup> *OEDO*

<<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50282494>> [accessed 17 November 2010]

<sup>52</sup>The reading of the witches as goddesses was first suggested by Frederick Gard Fleay in the nineteenth century, but became an acceptable opposing debate by George Lyman Kittredge in his 1939 edition of *Macbeth*.

Eye of newt, and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing [...]  
Cool it with a baboon's blood,  
Then the charm is firm and good.

(*Macbeth*, IV.i.4-38)

Many of these horrific components are still considered typical witchcraft ingredients today, as we can see from the recipes of simple children's literature like *Meg and Mog*,<sup>53</sup> to the global phenomenon that is the *Harry Potter* series.<sup>54</sup> The circling of the cauldron and the use of a finger of a 'birth-strangled babe' (*Macbeth*, IV.i.30) also implies that the witches are engaging in the traditional sabbat, as documented in the medieval *Malleus Maleficarum* explored in chapter one. Accordingly, the collaboration of each of these elements in this scene should firmly align the sisters with the traditional hag image already established. However, in response to the witches' sabbat, Macbeth enters after Hecate – the witches' superior and the classical goddess of witchcraft – exits, with a view to conjuring his own desires: 'I conjure you by that which you profess, / Howe'er you come to know it, answer me' (*Macbeth*, IV.i.49-50). As Garry Wills in *Witches and Jesuits* has observed, this model for Macbeth's speech is reminiscent of the classical *Medea* plays of Ovid and Seneca.<sup>55</sup> Drawing on the 'classical witch-catalogue' (Wills, p. 64) of nature, Macbeth engages in a manner of speech that is usually ascribed to a witch of non-stereotypical depiction. The use of the classical *adynata*, the ability to invert natural causation, is evocative of Macbeth's speech:

Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
Against the churches, though the yeasty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up,  
Though bladed corn be lodge and trees blown down,

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<sup>53</sup> The stories of *Meg and Mog* by Jan Pieńkowski follow a witch called Meg, and her friendly cat Mog, through many disasters usually created by incorrect spells. Note also the stereotypical cat as her familiar.

<sup>54</sup> J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels list ingredients such as billywig parts, which are dried stings and a Re'em's (giant Ox) blood as potion elements, reminiscent of components used by the sisters.

<sup>55</sup> Garry Wills, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 63.

Though castles topple on their warders' heads,  
Though palaces and pyramids do slope  
Their heads to their foundations, though the treasure  
Of nature's germen tumble altogether  
Even till destruction sicken:

(*Macbeth*, IV.i.51-59)

Shakespeare's imitation of classical sources is substantiated by Hecate's appearance and exit in this scene. Macbeth enters as Hecate exits, which suggests that Macbeth takes over Hecate's role as superior to the sisters, and begins to command their actions. With the classical element ascribed to the speech, and the insertion of the classical Hecate to interrupt a recognised traditional witch scene, the goddess depiction as a resistance to the hag figure becomes an understandable alternative. Furthermore, although there are very few original accounts of these texts in performance, a report by Elizabethan astrologist and occultist Dr Simon Forman on the performance of *Macbeth* at the Globe Theatre circa 1610-11 survives. This version of *Macbeth* had many variations from the current text in performance, the naming of the sisters as weyard/weyward being one.<sup>56</sup> More importantly however, there was no account of the cauldron scene, suggesting it may not have been performed.<sup>57</sup> Coupled with Forman's description of the sisters as 'three women feiries or Nymphes', this is suggestive of a performance that also encouraged a mythological presentation of the sisters, rather than as stereotypical hags.

In alignment with the particular words used by the witches, the manner in which they use them, that is the metre of their language, is also indicative of a particular portrayal. Firstly, their language is instantly recognisable as different from that of the other characters of the play. The most recognised witches' dialogue is undoubtedly the above mentioned '[d]ouble, double toil and trouble' (*Macbeth*, IV.i.1-38) speech within Act IV, in which the

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<sup>56</sup> In the first folio weird appears as weyard except for three occasions when weyward is used (*Macbeth*, I.iii.32, I.v.8, II.i.20), noted in Harris, p. 33.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Forman, *Booke of Plaies* (Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 208, folios 207r-v), noted in A. R. Braunmuller, "Introduction", in *Macbeth*, p. 57-8.

sisters speak in trochaic tetrameter to create a singsong rhythm.<sup>58</sup> Modern understanding is that this has become a simplistic convention to separate evil characters from good, as Purkiss suggests, this clarifies that ‘the witches are witches and not simply rather odd old women’ (Purkiss, p. 210). Moreover, the distinctiveness of the composition of their speech patterns, allows the audience to realise that when Macbeth says ‘[s]o foul and fair a day I have not seen’ (*Macbeth*, I.iii.36), he is, to some degree, echoing both the style and words spoken by the sisters earlier in the play: ‘[f]air is foul, and foul is fair’ (*Macbeth*, I.i.12). In response to Purkiss’ judgement that it is the language of the sisters that implies that they are witches, I would suggest it is more in Macbeth’s duplication of their words that provokes this interpretation. Macbeth’s opening line begins by copying the witches’ manner of speech as seen in the opening scene. In essence, this parallelisation of language within the play is key to the witch/goddess debate because it raises the question of how much influence the sisters have over Macbeth. In this way, the question of whether or not Shakespeare intended the sisters to be representations of supernatural hags or mythological goddesses becomes central to the debate over whether or not Macbeth is culpable for the crimes he commits within the play, or if he is simply the unwilling instrument of fate. Macbeth’s imitation of the language of the sisters would seem to demonstrate the apparent influence they have over him. If we are to accept the conventional perception of the sisters as human hags rather than goddesses, this influence can only be seen as mundane temptation because the sisters never actually force him to do anything. Therefore, in this reading, Macbeth must be culpable for his own choices and his subsequent downfall. Alternatively, to read the witches as weird sisters, or goddesses of fate, would imply that Macbeth has no control over his actions, as he is only fulfilling his destiny. However, in accepting a goddess reading, where the sisters have no holding influence over Macbeth, it would seem to invalidate his reasons for echoing the speech of the sisters. However, we should remember that Macbeth’s paralleling of the

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<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare’s use of trochaic tetrameter places the stress on the first syllable: **Double, double, toil and trouble**, as opposed to his primary use of iambic pentameter where the first syllable is unstressed: How **now**, you **secret**, **black**, and **midnight hags**!

sisters' language begins on his initial appearance. This would seem to suggest that the witches do not exert any sort of magical influence over him throughout the course of the play, but rather that he is fated to imitate them and to carry out the actions that he does.

Much debate regarding the sisters' purpose within the play, Karin S. Coddon suggests, comes from 'the dubious boundaries between the supernatural and the irrational' that they signify.<sup>59</sup> They reside so deeply in both the real, yet irrational, world of fate, and the fantastical supernatural, that their control over Macbeth remains unclear. This debate concerning how the sisters are presented in *Macbeth* stems from the inclusion of both Jacobean and classical elements. Many critiques tend to use the classical, goddess reading as an alternative, before confirming its place in social history by reading the witches as supernatural hags.<sup>60</sup> However, I cannot entirely concur with this conception, as I believe that the former interpretation should not be dismissed as a substitute for the hag interpretation. Instead, it should be read as an equally valid contention because both representations fundamentally evoke the image of a supernatural being. If we combine the supernatural element with the underlying theatricality of the play we can see that the witch is undoubtedly a fantasy figure. Many studies of Shakespeare have determined that the magic within his works was for theatricality, that is to say, a fantastical exploitation of trends within popular culture. Within *Macbeth*, though the supernatural facet of the witch remains, the traditional and, arguably, the classical representations can be related to contemporaneous social and political events. In this way, Shakespeare's witches become the embodiment of Foucault's heterotopias – the existence of a fusion of fantasy and reality – as they reside within the fantasy space of the stage, but are attached to the reality of the society that surrounds and observes them. However, which witch figure Shakespeare portrays, as well as his purpose for the character, still remains uncertain. Let us establish why the sisters are so often

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<sup>59</sup> Karin S. Coddon, "'Unreal Mockery': Unreason and the Problem of Spectacle in *Macbeth*", in *ELH*, 56.3 (Oct. 1989), pp. 485-501, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873194>> [accessed 26 November 2010], p. 491.

<sup>60</sup> See Harris, pp. 33-45.

perceived to be supernatural hags and what the purpose was behind Shakespeare's use of this presentation, before considering the goddess alternative.

Shakespeare's intent was not, as one would assume, predicated on the witch-trials of the era. Studies have shown that the peak in witchcraft plays were only after the height of the trials:

While the [later] Jacobean stage was preoccupied with witches just as the nation was losing interest in them, the Elizabethan stage was almost silent about them while the nation, and especially the court, were working themselves up to fever pitch.

(Purkiss, p. 185)

Art, in this instance, does not seem to have imitated life, as the stage and reality do not entirely correlate. The stage was silent on the subject of witchcraft until the later years of James' reign, with a large boom of dramatic representations in 1611 and a series of revivals around 1633 due to the case of the Lancashire witches.<sup>61</sup> This lack of earlier representation was probably due to the anxieties over the unclear succession to the throne after Elizabeth's death, and, as witchcraft had become synonymous with Catholicism, there was 'fear on the part of the playwrights of being accused of being in league with catholic propagandists' (Purkiss, p. 185). However, many plays of the era offered other spectacles on a par with the theatricality that was explicit within dramatic depictions of witchcraft. As briefly discussed in chapter one, fairy-lore and classical mythology, as portrayed in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1) and Shakespeare's own *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6) for example, became the stimulus for Elizabethan drama through to the turn of the century. An interest in magicians and necromancy also existed in this period, as exemplified in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1588-9) and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589)

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<sup>61</sup> The Lancashire witches were a group of 13 women from Pendle, Lancashire, who were accused, tried and executed in 1612 for various accounts of murder through witchcraft. A further witch-scare happened in the village 1633-4. See Robert Poole's, *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) for a detailed account. The other significant witch-trials of the period were those of the North Berwick witches in 1590-1. The accused women were said to have interfered with James' return journey from Denmark with his new bride Anne. As chapter one stated, he then wrote a pamphlet about the experience, as well as being involved in the trials and prosecutions.

by Robert Greene. Later, with the publication of Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* in 1605, a collaborative figure of the magician, necromancer and scholar, termed "practising magician" by H. W. Herrington (p. 458), continued to appear in early Jacobean drama; Ben Johnson's *The Alchemist* (1610) and Thomas Dekker's *Whore of Babylon* (1604-7) are examples. With such an eclectic mix of figures permeating the dramatic landscape of the day, one could question why Shakespeare would deliberately present a figure such as the hag, who existed outside the socially acceptable dramatic spectrum. Many critics have seen Shakespeare's depiction of his three sisters as a political move to gain the favour of James I, who, as has been described in the previous chapter, sought to demonise witchcraft through a series of prohibitive legislations and publicised treatises.<sup>62</sup> Fundamentally, one could simply conclude that the witches would be portrayed as hags to compliment James' beliefs. James had been surrounded by the Scottish view on witch-trials which closely followed continental beliefs. They presented harsher punishments for those convicted, and had substantially more individuals convicted than within the English witch-craze. For this reason the additions that he made in 1604 to the 1563 Witchcraft Statute issued under Elizabeth I, included harsher penalties for many offences, such as the infliction of bodily harm by a witch being an offence punishable by death. Existing elements of the act were also expanded and elaborated upon. For instance, the owning of a familiar spirit became a felony in its own right rather than as an associated crime to establish guilt. Familiars were now defined as the traditional companion to witches and as 'non-human agents of their deeds' (*Macbeth*, I.i.9, n.). James' beliefs were further strengthened after being personally involved in a several instances of witchcraft. On his return from Denmark in 1590 with his new bride Ann, James' fleet encountered violent storms and veered off course. The common supposition that witches controlled the weather and sent 'raine, haile,

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<sup>62</sup> See J. W. Draper, "'Macbeth' as a compliment to James I", in *Englische Studien*, 72 (1937-8), pp. 207-220 and Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (1950).

tempests, thunders, lightening'<sup>63</sup> became a very real prospect for James. In response to this calamity, the infamous North Berwick witches were charged with controlling the wind and raising storms. Indeed Shakespeare's sisters do not shy away from this practice: 'I'll give thee wind' (*Macbeth*, I.iii.10). Their entrance is surrounded in supernatural darkness that is punctuated by '[*Thunder and lightning*]' (*Macbeth*, I.i). Moreover, James' legislative innovations would also condemn their talk of 'Graymalkin' and 'Paddock', who appear to be their familiars. Taking these factors into account, we can conclude that Shakespeare's introduction of the witches would be recognisable to a Jacobean audience as a dramatic manifestation of some of their traditional beliefs concerning witches, and, subsequently, as a nod to King James.

There are many other aspects of the sisters that correspond to the period's perception of witchcraft. The sisters hover through the air, disappear suddenly, and often refer to body parts of animals. All this equates with the hideous appearance also considered a traditional attribute of the hag. Macbeth and Banquo's initial encounter with the sisters, when they ask 'what are they', may raise this debate's overarching question of form and figure, but what it also presents is a traditional witch figure that in appearance appears to confirm the opinions of contemporary and influential writers such as Reginald Scot, in his treatise *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Although Shakespeare's description resembles Holinshed's account of 'three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of the elder world' (Holinshed, p. 170), the hag characteristics of choppy fingers, skinny lips and beards that he also describes are not present. As we can see from the wood carving below, Holinshed possibly

Fig 1. Woodcut from Holinshed Chronicles



saw the sisters to be stately noblewomen, with no resemblance to our common perception of a witch. Their hag-like, bestial appearance seems therefore, to have been the creation of

<sup>63</sup> Scott, Reginald, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, in Harris, p. 38.

Shakespeare. This is an understandable notion in the sense that he was conforming to contemporary beliefs regarding the appearance of the witch, but proves problematic if we are to argue that this was not actually Shakespeare's intended representation, as it is obviously a deliberate choice to add these aesthetic features.

One reason Shakespeare may have stressed the hag-like appearance of the sisters, aside from it being a well received figure, was due to the dramatic treatment of witches at the time. Although, as stated in the introduction, Shakespeare surpasses basic theatricality, it must be noted how the stage conventions of the time constrain alternative readings. One way to deal with the real fear that still lingered from the witchcraft trials was to ridicule and transform the real figure of the witch into a fantastical one. Some dramatists actually thought the witch had become 'too unpoetical' for the tragic stage (Herington, p. 477) and embraced theatricality by exaggerating the comical aspects of the figure, and subsequently turned her into a dramatic spectacle. Ben Jonson's antimasque in *The Masque of Queens* (1609) creates a 'picturesque' (Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team*, p. 84) subject to convey the spectacle of witchcraft. The purpose of the device of the antimasque was to produce a spectacle of strangeness that allowed the songs, dance and occasion that precede the masque, to have a false sense of meaning. As Diane Purkiss' study validates, the witches 'present the court with a spectacle of a popular culture the court has outgrown, an opportunity to look *down* on a set of beliefs no longer current' (Purkiss, p. 202), and in return, an opportunity for the audience to ridicule the figures on stage. Moreover, by allowing only men and not women access to the stage, this comical spectacle was accentuated by the theatrical stage convention of cross-dressing. In this way, the stage witch ran a true risk of being considered comical. Furthermore, with lines such as 'you should be women, /And yet your beards forbid me to interpret /That you are so' (*Macbeth*, I.iii.43-5), Shakespeare could be seen to be mocking the convention, suggesting that no amount of costume could disguise masculine features. As this investigation has shown each choice is deliberate, the mocking of his own characters could

suggest to an audience that the conceived hag portrayal that would be read into the characters, was not his meaning for the sisters. However, the convention of casting males in female roles limits the understanding of any other reading of the sisters, especially one which draws on feminine power. Renaissance stage convention contradicts the interpretation of the sisters as goddess figures, because men acting out the roles of sexual and powerful sibyls could not be as convincingly portrayed on the stage, as males acting out the roles of withered, ugly old hags. As A. R. Braunmuller noted, convention still dictated the witches were played by men up until at least 1833,<sup>64</sup> which gives a modern reader some understanding of why Shakespeare's probable intentions are suppressed in favour of popular culture.

Much of the social and political commentary surrounding the play described so far, suggests a loaded choice for the fantastical 'midnight hag' figure of the witch. Accordingly, before we reach any conclusions, we must also consider a brief exploration of the witches' leader, Hecate, as the alternative goddess reading. There is criticism surrounding *Macbeth* which questions whether Hecate can actually be attributed to Shakespeare.<sup>65</sup> Many suggest Shakespeare's contemporary, Thomas Middleton, may have collaborated on the entire text, or at least, be responsible for the Hecate of Act III, due to the difference in her tone and style from the other witches. Nevertheless, whoever is responsible, her presence serves to differentiate the sisters from the common witch, by connecting them to classical mythology. As explored in chapter one, Hecate presents herself as the goddess of witches and crossroads. In the pagan tradition, she is then transformed into the goddess of fertility. Directors of *Macbeth* have often doubled the role of Lady Macbeth with Hecate, to draw on the sexuality of both characters, and also to consider Lady Macbeth as the fourth

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<sup>64</sup> A. R. Braunmuller, "Introduction", *Macbeth*, p. 68, ft.nt.1. Director and actor Henry Irving's production of *Macbeth* in 1888 was at the time promoted as a 'modern' version, which suggests men could have been playing the witches up until 1888.

<sup>65</sup> See A. R. Braunmuller, "Introduction" in *Macbeth*, p. 32, for language reasons, and K. M. Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team*, p. 79. See also J. M. Nosworthy, "The Hecate Scenes in *Macbeth*: *Macbeth* III.v; IV.i", in *The Review of English Studies*, 24.94 (Apr. 1948), pp. 138-139, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/509937>> [accessed 26 November 2010] as an opposing view for Shakespeare as the writer of Hecate.

witch of the play (Wills, p. 79). As the pagan goddess of fertility, Hecate encompasses an inherent female sexuality that understandably, as investigated earlier, would not have been acceptable on the Renaissance stage. Lady Macbeth also portrays this sexuality in the play with feminine fainting and a focus on her childbearing abilities, whilst at the same time denouncing them through her ‘unsexing’ (*Macbeth*, I.v.38-52). It is important to note the sexuality Shakespeare employs within *Macbeth*, as corresponding plays of the time that include the character of Hecate, set out to demonise her. Thomas Middleton’s *The Witch* (1609-1617) aligns his Hecate with the three sisters of *Macbeth*, whereby she conducts elaborate incantations around a cauldron, in parallel to a witches’ sabbat. She plots for her own purposes declaring ‘[t]is for love of mischief I do this’.<sup>66</sup> J. M. Nosworthy notes ‘[t]he Hecate of Middleton’s *The Witch* is a very different creature from the *prima donna* and *prima ballerina* of *Macbeth* [...] She is coarse, brusque, and colloquial [whilst] the Hecate of *Macbeth* employs [a] distinctly Senecan flavour (Nosworthy, p. 138). Shakespeare’s choice to portray Hecate as a goddess rather than the common witch, as I have shown earlier, can work on a textual basis, but is often neglected in favour of the hags because they can be related to society. However, the goddess figure also allows social critique. James I believed in the Divine Right of Kings, which meant his right to rule came directly from the will of God. The notion suggests succession does not come necessarily through family heritage, but that the ruler is chosen by God, that is to say, that he or she is fated to rule. With the apparent etymology of weird/fates as discussed earlier, there is a potential social and political reasoning to read the witches as goddesses, as fates. By presenting that all life is fated and Macbeth has no control over his outcome, serves as a compliment to James, as it shows that Shakespeare agrees he was fated and chosen by God to rule.

Katherine Briggs’ study of ‘Giants, Hags and Monsters’ proposes that the line between the natural and supernatural witch is hard to draw, suggesting that the figures in her

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas Middleton, *The Witch*, ed. W. W. Greg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), Act I.ii.199.

examples of folklore tales are perhaps ‘supernatural hag[s] rather than a witch[es]’.<sup>67</sup> It is often read, as Purkiss initially indicated, that it is from the witches of *Macbeth* that contemporary society’s image of the witch as a ‘midnight hag’ is conceived. However, as Briggs concludes, there is a distinction. The linguistic diversity, as shown in chapter one, allows the witch to be perceived as any magical being. The multiplicity of Banquo’s words, as shown at the beginning of this chapter, produces the same variation, allowing the traditional malevolent connotations, alongside the opportunity for a divergence in alternative readings. Banquo’s avoidance, and indeed Shakespeare’s evasion in naming them witches, creates both a textual and social argument as to the presentation and purpose of Shakespeare’s weird sisters. Common perception would suggest that the witches’ presentation was predicated on the real witch-trials of the era, but with the substantiation that the *weird* sisters can be read as the fates their names suggests, this does not correlate. Both Shakespeare’s depiction of the ‘midnight hag’ and the goddess should be seen as a compliment to James. Whilst the hag figure corresponds with James’ belief in the traditional malevolence of the witch, the goddess serves as Shakespeare’s approval that James was fated to rule. For the overarching purpose of this study, both representations are equally viable as they both create heterotopias, a conflation of fantasy and reality. Neither suggests that the literary witch is a comment on the real witches of neighbourly and peasant disputes, but that the witch remains an embodiment of the craze rather than a comment upon it. By defining *Macbeth*’s sisters as both hag figures and goddesses creates what Holmes has termed the *political-witch* (Holmes, p. 15) which exists in opposition to the real *folk-witch*, or human witch, subsequently explored in *Richard III*.

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<sup>67</sup> K. M. Briggs, “Giants, Hags and Monsters”, in *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 62-70.

## Chapter Three: Richard III

### The Reality of the Witch

MARGARET            *What, dost thou scorn me for my gentle counsel,  
And soothe the devil that I warn thee from?  
Oh, but remember this another day,  
When he shall split thy very heart with sorrow,  
And say poor Margaret was a prophetess.  
Live each of you the subjects to his hate,  
And he to yours, and all of you to God's.*

BUCKINGHAM        *My hair doth stand on end to hear her curses.*  
RIVERS                *And so doth mine. I muse why she's at liberty.*<sup>68</sup>

Throughout the course of this study we have been able to discern that the figure of the witch is one in which a series of dualities reside. For example, as discussed in chapter one, both the linguistic and historical origins of the figure seem to continually blur the line that separates the fantasy and reality dichotomy. Furthermore, drawing on Foucault's theory of heterotopias, a space in which reality and fantasy exists simultaneously, chapter two uncovered another conceptual duality pertaining to our interpretation of the weird sisters of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as either hags or goddesses. In relation to both readings we were able to draw upon historical evidence to describe the realistic association of each fantasy figure. In this chapter, the symbiotic relationship that supposedly exists between history and reality will be questioned, and the idea that both, at times, can be seen as fantastical will be interrogated. As shown in the introductory quotation to this chapter, there is a power and venom in Queen Margaret's speech that corresponds with the malevolence of such fantastical witch figures that this study has already explored. The declaration of Margaret's stance as a prophetess, and Buckingham and Rivers' responses to 'her curses', instil a fear in the court from her initial appearance, similar to that seen in Banquo and Macbeth's initial meeting with the sisters. However, the eponymous villain of the play responds with 'a virtuous and

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<sup>68</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. Janis Lull (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Act I.iii.297-305. All subsequent references are taken from this edition with reference to the Act, Scene and line numbers.

Christian-like conclusion' (*Richard III*, I.iii.316) that indicates an honourable understanding on his part: 'I cannot blame her, by God's holy mother, she hath had too much wrong, and I repent my part thereof that I have done to her' (*Richard III*, I.iii.306-8). His feelings of sympathy suggest that 'poor Margaret' is a woman to whom they should lend their support and that her curses are a manifestation of unexpressed anger. However, if we return to Margaret's entrance, Richard indulges in a scathing bout of name calling towards her: '[f]oul wrinkled witch' (*Richard III*, I.iii.162), 'thou hateful, withered hag' (*Richard III*, I.iii.213). Thus, we gain a truer impression of the underlying belief he has in her curses. These allusions to the devil, curses and witch figures insinuate the habitual theatrical and fantastical elements one would expect within the Shakespeare canon, and yet, to complicate matters, they are found in *Richard III*, one of Shakespeare's histories. The realistic insinuations of a historical play such as *Richard III* represent a stark contrast to the explicit phantasmagoria of *Macbeth*. In regards to the witch figure, *Richard III* seems to represent a creative reversal on the part of Shakespeare. As discussed in the previous chapter, the supernatural sisters of *Macbeth* are never called witches within the play, and yet, as shown above, within *Richard III* this identification is immediately attached to the character of Margaret within seconds of her entrance. If we remind ourselves of John Widdowson's conceptualisation of witches in history, he proposes that witches can be seen as both a supernatural being or invention, and, as presented here, an extraordinary human being. Though stage depictions of supernatural beings were often well received by the audiences of Shakespeare's day (Herrington, p. 447), the supposed historical elements of *Richard III* would seem to imply that a deliberate decision was made by Shakespeare to attempt to align the witch figures of the play with Widdowson's second order of conceptualisation – the human witch. This chapter explores this idea of the human witch and the political and social measures that would establish a conscious representation in Shakespeare's portrayal.

Due to the witch-craze of the period, it may seem a reasonable conclusion to expect the Elizabethan stage to portray real accounts of witchcraft, but, as previously stated, there was little correlation between the stage and the reality of witchcraft throughout this period. Only by the middling Jacobean years, in which witch persecutions declined, were playwrights secure enough in the leniency of the state, to approach plays concerning witches. Consequently, any portrayal of the cunning or wise woman within this period is rare. However, Elizabethan drama still retained a magical influence. As briefly discussed in chapter one, early conjurers and witches in the literature of the period were borrowed, with little change, from conventional characters from other works (Herrington, p. 471). A strong classical influence is observed throughout the period, through the appropriation of playwrights such as Seneca to many texts. In terms of an acceptable magical figure, the character of the magician was most commonly utilised as a response to the rising Calvinist beliefs in pre-determination and eternal damnation, as epitomised in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1588-9). As a response to the classical and the populist beliefs, fairy lore also featured heavily in Elizabethan drama. It was not until later Jacobean writings, such as Rowley, Dekker and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) and Thomas Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1633-4) that non-supernatural witches emerged in realist plays. In this context, we can see that by presenting one of the earliest human witches on the stage, decades before the dramatic custom was established, Shakespeare breaks the conventions of the day with *Richard III*.

Martha A. Kurtz has noted that 'the history play as a genre is fundamentally antagonistic to women and the "feminine"'.<sup>69</sup> Kurtz's contention is based upon the idea that due to their emphasis upon politics, power and conquest – all attributes associated with patriarchy – the histories are, by their very nature, incapable of fairly depicting female characters that successfully exist outside of the patriarchal infrastructure. Therefore, the

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<sup>69</sup> Martha A. Kurtz, "Gender and Genre in the History Play", in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 36.2, Tudor and Stuart Drama (Spring, 1996), pp. 267-287, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/450949>> [accessed 7 November 2010], p. 267.

history plays marginalise women. If we consider Purkiss' notion that the witch is the only female figure to receive any space in history (Purkiss, p. 9), it is understandable how a modern (feminised) audience reads the witch figure as marginalised femininity. However, because a Renaissance audience would be situated within a strong patriarchal society where the suppression of women was a normal attribute, they would not automatically apply the word *witch* to the female, but to the Other, that is to say those individuals who resided outside of patriarchal dualities. Therefore, the witch becomes a 'personification of all forms of deviance and revolt'.<sup>70</sup> Many of those who were accused of witchcraft were victimised because they either failed to conform to feminine social stereotypes of the day or lacked some form of patriarchal protection. In a society that conceived of women only in relation to a set of prejudiced hierarchical binary oppositions such as wife to husband, mother to child and Queen to King,<sup>71</sup> the accused were often those who had no clear position within this linguistic patriarchal infrastructure. The use of the word *witch* therefore became equally as appropriate for human otherness, and the extraordinary being of Widdowson's concept, as it did for the supernatural witch figure. James Sharpe suggests that despite the attention that modern scholars devote to the subject, there was actually little discussion of the connection between women and witchcraft at the time and that Renaissance society regarded it as 'a marginal and unproblematic issue' (Sharpe, p. 656). Though this seems unlikely given the illustration so far, Sharpe correctly suggests that cunning folk, in other words human witches, were thought to derive their power from the devil as much as malefic witches. Hence, many features of the supernatural hag, as discussed in chapter two, were then thought to be used in human witchcraft. This was a concern for audiences of the day because although the

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<sup>70</sup> Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The With-Hunt in Scotland* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1939), noted in John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson and Shakespeare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 98.

<sup>71</sup> Madonne M. Miner, "'Neither Mother, Wife, nor England's Queen': The roles of women in *Richard III*", in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 33-55. These terms are directly taken from Miner's text, p. 41.

supernatural witch and her powers were often theatricalised on the stage for entertainment and spectacle, there was a real fear concerning witches' supernatural abilities.

Shakespeare presents such supernatural features in the human women of *Richard III* as Margaret, alongside the Duchess of York, and Queen Elizabeth, are given the power of prophesy. However, they are not the only women in the play, as Shakespeare includes a model of female conformity to patriarchal expectations in the figure of Lady Anne, who presents a passive, stereo-typical image of the long-suffering female. Though Margaret may be a minor role in terms of plot, she is one of the most important and powerful characters in the play. The rage she feels against Richard, the perpetrator of her family's demise, causes her to curse him and those around his Court – including the women she later collaborates with – foreshadowing the events of the play:

Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses.  
Though not by war, by surfeit die your king,  
As ours by murder to make him a king.  
[...]  
And see another, as I see thee now,  
Decked in thy rights, as thou art stalled in mine.  
Long die thy happy days before thy death,  
And after man lengthened hours of grief,  
Die neither mother, wife, nor England's queen.

(*Richard III*, I.iii.194-207)

As the introductory quote to this chapter shows, Margaret implies that she has the power of prescience when she says '[a]nd say poor Margaret was a prophetess' (*Richard III*, I.iii.301). The ability to foresee every occurrence in the play, arguably, makes her the most powerful character. However, this power is not predicated on any sort of patriarchal influence. The reason for this being that like the other women in the play, and the real accused witches of Renaissance society, Margaret is a woman without status. The triad of women within the play have all lost their husbands, children and titles. They are therefore situated on the fringes of society which consequently questions the stability of their prior identities. One might assume this would make them weak and powerless, but actually it is this

marginalised position that empowers them. Though Margaret, along with the Duchess of York and Queen Elizabeth, are the most visibly powerless victims of Richard's actions, they soon become the most dynamic characters of the play when they 'receive' Margaret's power to curse and prophesise. Their power is established through language, and exemplifies Luce Irigaray's construct for a female language. As discussed in the introduction, her concept is founded on the view that language creates reality. As the reality that the women of *Richard III* reside in is patriarchal, their language must be artificial, as is the construct of patriarchy. By removing their status' and therefore themselves from patriarchy, their language becomes Irigaray's 'possible language', as a means to gain power free from the phallogocentric language of patriarchy.

This prescient ability of foresight upon the part of Margaret also raises the question as to whether or not we should see her, like the sisters of *Macbeth*, as a goddess of fate and destiny. Perhaps, as Janis Lull, editor of the Cambridge edition of *Richard III*, notes, the idea of the three fates in *Macbeth* as witches arose retrospectively from Margaret joining the Duchess of York and Queen Elizabeth to make the triad.<sup>72</sup> With the growing encouragement of the Calvinist doctrine of determinism, like the popular dramatic use of the magician figure, Shakespeare uses Margaret as a vehicle to voice the Calvinist belief that historical events are determined by God. Her curses, which predict divine punishment as vengeance for Richard's crimes against his own family, are indicative of such an authorial impetus. Shakespeare's portrayal of Margaret as a witch can only be an intentional selection, as her character evokes comment on several historical and contemporaneous events. Her curses on the broken household of Richard seem to be evocative of the long standing conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York which started when Lancastrian Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV), overthrew his cousin Richard II in 1399. The struggle between the two houses continued until Richard III's defeat by the Earl of Richmond, who then became Henry VII and the first

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<sup>72</sup> Janis Lull, "Introduction", in *King Richard III*, p. 17.

Tudor King. As Elizabeth I was a descendant of Henry VII, and of the house of Lancaster, the events of the War of the Roses had a palpable imprint upon Renaissance society. Lull notes that much criticism on *Richard III* is built around the notion that as Elizabeth was a descendant of Henry, the play must be seen to vilify Richard in order to appease her (Lull, p. 1). However, whilst it is true that Margaret's purpose may be symbolic of the historical struggle, this confirms Kurtz's perception that the history play marginalises women in suppressing full characterisation and negates her attributes of the witch figure. Therefore, there must be a deeper motive for the women of *Richard III*, and the witch figures that are subsequently read within these characters. One suggestion is proposed by Robert Kimbrough, who indicates that with the image of a woman on the throne, accepted ideas on the sexes were being questioned:

A plain, observable fact of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance is that the lines of social division, conflict and subjection between the sexes were rigidly drawn. The seemingly inferiority of women and the gender roles of "appropriate" behavior [sic] were well agreed upon. Yet, with the spread of humanistic doctrine (especially with regard to education), with the impact of the emphasis on the individual as expressed in the Reformation, and with the image and example of Elizabeth on the throne, by the late-sixteenth century in England these accepted ideas on the sexes and their relationships were beginning to be questioned – and nowhere more astutely than in the works of [...] Shakespeare.<sup>73</sup>

Shakespeare's work acknowledges that there was not as simple a division of the sexes as culture would have his audience believe. Many previous studies have shown Shakespeare to be somewhat of a feminist, presenting powerful women, most likely as a response to a woman being on the throne.<sup>74</sup> With the witch being the only female in society to have any recognition as a standalone figure separate from patriarchy, it is unsurprising that

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Kimbrough, "Androgyny Seen Through Shakespeare's Disguise", in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 33.1 (Spring, 1982), pp. 17-33, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870334>> [accessed 2 November 2010] p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> Juliet Dusinberre's work *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1975) takes this stance, along with Claire McEachern who historicises feminism in Elizabeth drama in "Fathering Herself: 'Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare's Feminism", in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39.3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 269-290, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870927>> [accessed on 16 November 2010].

Shakespeare utilises a figure that encompasses this amount of power. The use of prophesy within *Richard III* therefore signifies a very political and public matter. Margaret's supernatural abilities serve to comment not only on the historical events of the resulting reign of Elizabeth I, but the actuality of *her* reign itself.

The advantage of Margaret, and indeed the three women of the play as an assemblage, is that Shakespeare has deliberately chosen a figure to appropriate to them – the witch – which has many opportunities to critique society, both directly and indirectly. Though the political reasons above are evident, Shakespeare's use of the witch figure can also be seen as a personal comment for Elizabeth, which only became political indirectly. Due to the preoccupation with gender and monarchy, it was 'difficult to separate the figure of the witch from the queen' (Purkiss, p. 185). This was heightened due to the fact that Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, had been branded a witch, an attribute that ran in the female line. Though there was no serious thought into the idea of Elizabeth as a practising witch, the classical triad figuration of maiden/mother/crone, seen in relation to witchcraft, is assumed by Elizabeth. This figuration of three is also evocative of the women of *Richard III*. Margaret is the widow of Henry VI and mother of the slain Prince Edward. As Richard calls her a 'withered hag', she comfortably fits the crone figure. The Duchess of York is the mother of Richard and the slain Edward IV, and though she disowns and eventually curses Richard because of his heinous crimes, she acts as mother to her daughter-in-law, Queen Elizabeth. The role of the maiden is a little problematic, as the only woman left, Queen Elizabeth, is also a mother, and therefore not a maiden. However, her two young sons are killed by Richard, creating this identity loss of no longer being a mother. She does however have another child, the young Elizabeth, who as a maiden, inadvertently helps Queen Elizabeth as this stage of the triad. This trinity has many connotations and sources. As stated above, the Senecan influence on Elizabethan drama was vast and studies have compared Shakespeare's triad of

‘wailing queens’ in Act IV.iv to Seneca’s Trojan women.<sup>75</sup> Janis Lull also notes that a biblical influence may lie behind the play’s women: ‘In their scenes together, the female characters in *Richard III* suggest responses conditioned by the [Catholic] Resurrection plays, specifically by the motif of the three Marys – Mary Magdalene, Mary Salome and Mary the mother of James – at the tomb of Jesus’ (Lull, p. 9). The trinity also represents the biological stages of a woman. If we remind ourselves of Foucault’s theory, his principle of crisis heterotopias focuses on the many states of a woman. His premise of the ‘honeymoon trip’ where the virgin is both somewhere and nowhere, corresponds with the stages of these women being both in society but again without patriarchal connection, and therefore removed from it.

By the end of her reign Elizabeth was often depicted as the three faces of the trinity; the mother of the state, the crone of old age, and the Virgin Queen. It was Elizabeth’s final identity within this symbolic triad, that of the Virgin Queen who left no heir to the throne, which presented problems for the state of the notion as a whole. With no heir capable of maintaining the House of Tudor’s hold upon the throne, a succession crisis was inevitable. This was shown through the witchcraft legislation of the day. Although we recognise the Witchcraft Acts of 1563 under Elizabeth I and 1604 under James I, there was a second act passed under Elizabeth circa 1580-1 that introduced a political element to the previous legislation. It became a capital offence for the use of witchcraft to determine the length of the Queen’s reign, or the nature of the succession (Holmes, p. 8). The state had pressed Elizabeth into many marital alliances in the hope of an heir and much emphasis was placed on her feminine sexuality, due to her apparent masculine identity.<sup>76</sup> It becomes significant to note that Elizabeth’s sexuality was praised and encouraged and yet, the power held by

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<sup>75</sup> See Harold F. Brooks, “*Richard III*: unhistorical amplifications: the women’s scenes and Seneca”, in *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), pp. 721-737 for a detailed comparison.

<sup>76</sup> A comprehensive study of this topic would be John N. King’s “Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen”, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43.1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 30-74, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2861792>> [accessed 26 November 2010] and Allison Heisch’s “Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy”, in *Feminist Review*, 4 (1980), pp. 45-56, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1394769>> [access 26 November 2010].

midwives, the *folk-witch* component under our category of the ‘human witch’, was suppressed. As I noted in the introduction, the state and church opposed the midwife as a way to regulate women’s bodies and sexuality. Barbara Walker confirms that ‘[t]he real reason for ecclesiastical hostility [to midwives] seems to have been the notion that midwives could help women control their own fate, learn secrets of sex and birth control, or procure abortions’.<sup>77</sup> Shakespeare partly conforms to this view of birth and sexuality through the inclusion of Mistress Shore.

Look how I am bewitched. Behold, mine arm  
Is like a blasted sapling, withered up.  
And this is Edward’s wife, that monstrous witch,  
Consorted with the harlot, strumpet Shore,  
That by their witchcraft thus have marked me.

(*Richard III*, III.iv. 67-71)

Richard blames his deformity on his birth and associates ‘birth with the power of women, which he connects to witchcraft (*Richard III*, III.iv.69, n.). Mistress Shore therefore serves as an open comment on the common connection between witchcraft and sexuality, and as a way to mask Shakespeare’s true critique. The understanding of Margaret as a witch serves as an indirect comment on Elizabeth’s reign and the succession crisis. As we have seen Margaret’s exclusion from patriarchy emphasises her ‘otherness’. The focus of the trinity in *Richard III* is on the outsider status and unnaturalness of women, which pertains to the unnaturalness of Elizabeth not bearing children. Whilst this would usually remain a private matter, Elizabeth’s otherness is thrust into the public sphere as a political matter in the succession crisis that arose.

One would expect a history play such as this to contain a palpable form of reality. The use of the fantasy figure of the witch in such a piece would seem to negate this

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<sup>77</sup> Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 654.

authenticity and yet, the fantastical elements within *Richard III* actually encourage historical critique. The powers of curse and prophesy ascribed to Margaret, the Duchess and Elizabeth, act as a dramatic device to represent both the long standing conflict between the Houses of Lancaster and York, and the consequential reign of Elizabeth I. Furthermore, Shakespeare inadvertently considers the continuation of the Tudor/Lancaster reign through a connection of Elizabeth I and the triad of women's otherness and sexuality. With the presentation of human witches, that is to say the 'extraordinary human being' of Widdowson's historical conception, and the correlation to real social and political issues, the use of a fantasy figures does not necessarily affect the reality of history. However, in response to Foucault's notion, Shakespeare's comment and representation of the witch figure in Margaret, the Duchess and Elizabeth may only be able to be considered a fantasy, as the society in which they reside is constructed, and to a certain degree inverted. Through the loss of their husbands and children, the triad of women eventually lack patriarchal status and their connection to society; they reside in the heterotopias of deviation. Additionally, the trinity of Elizabeth I presents a crisis of female sexuality, which rejects the accustomed patriarchal role of women to bear children. The witch figure in reality therefore becomes a fusion of real history and fantasy, in which the figure and purpose of the witch is blurred.

## **Conclusion: The Actual Witch**

In this study I have examined the figure of the witch in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Richard III*. Through a consideration of a historical and etymological interpretation, I have shown the witch to be a complex figure, as I have presented diverse reasons for the variety of ways in which she is portrayed. I have elucidated how in *Macbeth* the witch is considered a dual presentation of the 'midnight hag' and the goddess, thereby representing a fantastical interpretation. *Richard III* concurrently serves to represent the human witch and is therefore an interpretation of the real witch figure. Alongside the central texts of *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, this study has been contextualised in relation to occurrences of real witchcraft, records of real witchcraft pamphlets, contemporary statutes and other writings such as chronicles and histories. With the apparent variation in Shakespeare's and contemporaneous portrayals, it is questionable whether there is an actual witch figure. As I discussed at the beginning of this study, Diane Purkiss suggests that '[w]hen we say "witch", we can hardly help thinking of *Macbeth's* witches, however we judge them politically or aesthetically' (Purkiss, p. 180). Whilst this may be the received view of the figure in contemporary society, this study has shown that there is such historical and linguistic intricacy surrounding the witch that there can be no singular traditional concept of the figure. Indeed, Purkiss' suggestion cannot even be described as an authoritative contemporary view, since we have seen there are at least seven distinct meanings for the word *witch* that remain in contemporary society, many of which correlate directly with the witch figures of history.

Through this linguistic and historical correlation, the witch exhibits a fusion of fantasy and reality, and a presentation of Michael Foucault's 'heterotopias' in which the mythical and real exist simultaneously. I have demonstrated that this is not only present in the notion of the witch figure herself, but also in her use within literature. Shakespeare's use of magic within his works may be seen as spectacle, but the use of the witch across his works

is an intentional element, as is each specific portrayal of the witch figure. I stated that this study would ascertain Shakespeare's own concept of the theatrical being, but in reality there cannot be one concept. The weird sisters in *Macbeth* present both the hags of tradition and the goddesses of their name. Likewise the witches of *Richard III* are human and presumed to be witches because of patriarchal connotation. Shakespeare's concept of the witch may not be definitive, but his purpose for the figure, in which ever guise, is explicit, in that his utilisation of each specific portrayal of the witch figure becomes a vehicle for social and political criticism. Shakespeare surpasses the theatricality and spectacle that magic presented in Renaissance drama – and the presumed comment on the real witchcraft trials of the time – to employ the witch as a reflection of the social and political changes throughout the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. *Macbeth* presents the noticeable compliment to James' belief in witchcraft and demonology, whilst denoting Shakespeare's own approval that James, like Macbeth, was fated in his actions, which for James was his right to rule. The women/witches of *Richard III* furthermore present a political and personal critique towards Elizabeth and the succession crisis that surrounded the end of her reign. Shakespeare's witch is therefore neither the current perception nor traditional presentation, but a created figure which embodies social commentary.

To explore further the purpose of particular portrayals of witches, we could return to Holinshed's description of goddesses, prophetesses and fairies. In this study I have explored two of the three figures, the goddess and the prophetesses, as they were appropriate to the fantasy and reality dichotomy. The figure of the fairy, which was briefly considered, has potential to add to this study at greater length. The connection of witches and fairies as exemplified in chapter one would allow the development and crossover of magical beings to extend further. The inclusion of the magician to take a gendered view of magic would also be a worthwhile expansion, and a text such as *The Tempest* would employ all three. A study of *The Tempest* would complement this piece due to its actual exclusion of the witch figure.

As this study has shown, Shakespeare spent time shaping varying portrayals of the witch figure so *The Tempest's* displacement of the witch figure, where Shakespeare only includes her in name, raises further questions.

This study demonstrates that ultimately there is no particular witch figure that one can conceive to be definitive. There are so many dichotomies that the witch figure can be appropriated to – fantasy/reality, malevolence/benevolence, social/political, and linguistic/historical – that it would be impossible, and unjust, to single out a definitive representation of the witch. She must remain a complexity, for it is in her multiplicity that her purpose is established.

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