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The Weird Sisters. Historical-Religious Genealogies

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Abstract: The present paper offers a historical-religious analysis of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters and their multifaceted and equivocal nature. Their ancient origins are examined, starting from the Norns and the Anglo-Saxon force of fate, *wyrd*, then proceeding into Greek and Roman mythology and beliefs, coming to the conclusion that the Weird Sisters are part of a destiny complex in which they play the role of agents in delivering Macbeth's fate. In the second part of the paper, the figure of the witch is analyzed both off stage, in popular belief and the Protestant faith, and on stage, as the Weird Sisters are moulded from fair fairies into foul witches, so as to reflect the interests of the early modern English audience. It is argued that the Sisters reflect the historical and religious changes occuring in English society as paganism is repressed and Christian elite ideas demonize all forms of magical practice and supernatural entities.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Macbeth, Weird Sisters, witch, pagan, mythology, fairy, fate.

"Fair is foul and foul is fair"[1] – nothing is what it seems in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a play in which ambiguity reigns at the crossing between the human and the supernatural worlds. The three Weird Sisters are complex and equivocal characters born from a mixture of worlds and beliefs, both ancient and Jacobean, both Pagan and Christian, encompassing several realities. Diane Purkiss writes that the Sisters' very meaning stands in their "indeterminacy, and hence chaos,"[2]

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[1] 1.1.9.

[2] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 211.

thus in their inability to pertain to only one realm, reality or identity, eluding any attempts at a comprehensible definition. In this paper, I am going to examine their underlying personas, aiming to deconstruct Shakespeare's creations into the sources that they originate from and to identify the characteristics which connect them to ancient, folk and Protestant systems of belief. Concurrently, I will identify the possible roles they play in the fulfilment of Macbeth's fate, as well as their purpose off stage, in the perception of the audience, while proving there is a strong link between the historical context and the Sisters' final form.

Firstly, I am going to proceed by turning my attention towards antiquity, locating the three figures in Nordic and Anglo-Saxon beliefs, and subsequently in Roman and Greek mythology, focusing on the way in which the Weird Sisters are connected to the notion of fate and its divine counterparts. I will attempt to demonstrate the role they play inside a fate complex that enables them to be the agents of divine will inside Shakespeare's play. In the second part of the paper, I am going to concentrate on 16th and 17th century Pagan and Christian beliefs that contributed to the Sisters' construction, which is ultimately an illustration of the ways in which early modern English society reshaped itself under the influence of Protestantism and King James I. My starting point will be *Holinshed's Chronicles* and the early representation of the Weird Sisters as fairies, which leads me to analyse popular Pagan beliefs and the ways in which these persist as an underlayer of the Sisters' identities. This will be followed by an examination of the process of demonization of magical practice and supernatural beings, and the way in which the figure of the witch was consequently viewed on and off stage. I will examine the effects the said changes had on the characters of the Weird Sisters, using significant scenes and aspects related to their status and condition, thus arriving at the significance they had for the Jacobean audience.

I will not include in my analysis the character of Hecate, nor the scenes 3.4 and 4.1, due to the fact that their authorship is unclear, many critics suspecting they might be later abridgements written by Thomas Middleton.[3] I'll take into account Shakespeare's knowledge of ancient culture and literature, as critics agree that he had read the comedies of Plautus and Terence, Seneca's tragedies, Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* as well as Plutarch, whose

[3] Janette Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 114.

Parallel Lives he used as a source for his Roman plays. He therefore must have been aware of the Roman and Greek values and myths, and able to incorporate them into the structure of the Weird Sisters. The second part of my interpretation, involving the figure of the witch in 16th and 17th centuries, is based on Shakespeare's age's growing interest in witches, to which Emma Wilby, Diane Purkiss and Robin Briggs have devoted comprehensive studies.

Much has been written about the Weird Sisters in the context of the play, by critics such as A. C. Bradley, Susan Snyder, Nick Moschovakis or G. Wilson Knight, but very few studies focus on their origins and historical context. Diane Purkiss analyzes early modern English views towards witches in connection to the Sisters, but does not explore their ancient descent. The most comprehensive study on this subject is that of Laura Shamas, who writes on the Weird Sisters from an archetypal and mythological point of view. However, she does not expand enough on their connection to the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*, nor does she explore the folk relationship between witches and fairies. In this paper I attempt to bridge the gaps, distinguishing and assembling all the sides of the Sisters' nature, by using information from books on early modern witchcraft, as well as studies on Anglo-Saxon fate written by Jacob Grimm, Adrian Papahagi, Anthony Winterbourne and Eric Gerald Stanley.

The discussion on the religious-historical origin of the Weird Sisters must appropriately begin from the source of their name, whose etymology points to Anglo-Saxon times. This implies an analysis of the familiar figures of the Nordic goddesses of fate, and the perhaps less familiar notion of the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*, which springs forth from the aforementioned triad and develops as an unshakeable force of fate. The Norns are "those women who shape what must be,"[4] meaning they preside over people's destiny and mould the course of their lives according to unseen laws. They are in the number of three, a significant number which is present throughout different mythologies which include similar figures who impersonate fate. Each of the Norns is master over a section of time: past, present and future, therefore having an intemporal quality and being placed beyond time's constraints. In literature, Norns are mentioned in the Old Norse poem *Voluspa*, where it is said that

[4] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 243.

they "allotted life for mankind,/ they decided on fate."[5] They are also ambivalent, having done "both good and evil,"[6] necessarily bringing about what has been ordained. Out of the three, the most important for our analysis is *Urðr (Urth),* whose name is taken from the preterite plural of the verb *verða*, which means "to become."[7] She thusly represents "that which has become", namely which has already been decided, and which has to manifest through her power. Such great power over humankind will permit *Urth* to be transformed in people's minds into a singular merciless force which was much feared by the fatalistic Anglo-Saxons: *wyrd*.[8]

Adrian Papahagi, in his comprehensive study on representations of Anglo-Saxon fate in literature, describes *wyrd* as having various meanings.[9] Firstly, it is fate itself, in the form of a hostile, violent and malevolent force, which is occasionally personified. In the early Glosses, it is also equivocated with the Parcae, Roman equivalents of the Norns. Eric Gerald Stanley also analysed King Alfred's Old English translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* in comparison with the original Latin text. Boethius describes fate as being ruled by the Roman Furies. However, the Old English translator, who equivocated *fatum* with *wyrd* (in this instance an impersonal element), also equivocated the Furies with the Parcae.[10] It is clear that the two triads were considered interchangeable, the Parcae becoming masters of *wyrd*, while also adopting the Furies' duty of punishing mankind's crimes. This also implies that *wyrd* was strongly associated not with a merciful, but with a punishing fate. Generally, in Anglo-Saxon poetry, *wyrd* is ruthless, a bearer of death, and it is fully inexorable. It always acts in unexpected ways and causes destruction.[11] Shakespeare's Weird Sisters are likewise associated with violence, death and

[5] Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996), 39.

[6] Laura Shamas, *We Three: The Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 73.

[7] Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology Vol. 1* (London: Forgotten Books, 2014), 405.

[8] Anthony Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism* (Cranbury: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 87-88.

[9] Adrian Papahagi, *Wyrd: Ideea destinului în literatura engleză veche* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2004), 20.

[10] Eric Gerald Stanley, *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past: The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism and Anglo-Saxon Trial by Jury* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 85.

[11] A. Papahagi, *Wyrd,* 29.

the ruin of Macbeth, and they seem to respect a form of higher knowledge that they hold.[12] Stanley admits that it is difficult to tell from each occurrence to what extent *wyrd* was personified and whether the said personification is a product of classical influence or if it developed analogously with what happened to the ancient goddesses, the Parcae.[13] Therefore, we are provided with more than one possible interpretation, which permeate into the construction of the Weird Sisters. In the Anglo-Saxon context, it can be presumed, owing to their name and prophetic abilities, that they are either personalized forms of *wyrd*, presented in a triadic form under the influence of the Norns and/ or the Parcae, or merely agents in the human realm of an impersonal and all-powerful force of fate.

Continuing this hypothesis, we can proceed with an analysis of the Weird Sisters' role in the fulfilment of destiny, through a comparison with the ancient Roman and Greek train of belief. I have mentioned that the Roman Parcae, or their Greek equivalent, the Moirai, might have influenced the personification of *wyrd*. They were divine triads whose responsibility was to preside over every man's destiny, since birth, through marriage and until death,[14] similarly to the Norns. The Weird Sisters are also individualized in act 1, scene 3, since each of them refers to a particular period of time, greeting Macbeth with a different title: the past Thane of Glamis, before winning the battle, the present Thane of Cawdor and the future "King hereafter,"[15] thus offering an overall perspective on his destiny. However, they lose the connection that the Parcae have with birth – they seem to only be interested in this particular period in Macbeth's life, delivering his decline. Interestingly, they are also missing from Macbeth's death, despite how closely related all forms of the Fates are to it. Because of this absence, the possibility of them having a role in Macbeth's tragic end cannot be seriously considered. Their function in his life seems to begin and end with their prophecies, which, although ominous and proven true, only testify that the Sisters are trustworthy messengers. Furthermore, the Parcae represent the divine will itself, with which some sources say not

[12] William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25.
[13] E. G. Stanley, *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past,* 87.
[14] Pierre Grimal, *A Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 328.
[15] 1.3.49-51.

even Zeus could mingle. They have hegemony not only over people, but even over gods, their very birth being tied to the birth of time.[16] Although both the ancient triad and the Weird Sisters are portrayed as old women wearing robes, the Parcae hold a divine dignity that goes beyond human condition. The Sisters, on the other hand, are overflowing with limitations. They are themselves victims of the passage of time and of a merciless fate, liable to be affected by shortage and old age. They are not images to be worshiped, but rather they are often to be pitied. They are far from the all-encompassing Fates who rule over time; their ancient divine nature is restricted to a supernatural influence in a limited period of time and on a set of specific events.

The Parcae are usually represented as spinning the thread of life, which ties man's destiny to the will of the divine, this tie having a fundamentally magical value.[17] Megan Cavell, in *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies,* shows that *wyrd* too was linked to binding, when examining the poem "Solomon and Saturn II", where *wyrda,* in an impersonal form, is equivocated with *ropas,* meaning ropes.[18] She further illustrates how in another Old English poem, *The Riming Poem*, *wyrd* is represented as the weaver of destiny, while also alluding to its function as a bearer of death.[19] Its ultimate task is to bind man to his death and assure the bond does not break. Although Shakespeare's Sisters do not occupy themselves with weaving, Laura Shamas, in *We Three,* claims that the way they spin fate is through the circular dances that hold ritualistic value when cursing the sailor with their incantation at the end of act 1, scene 3.[20] Furthermore, I would argue that their very prophecy is a manner of binding Macbeth to his own destiny and, ultimately to his tragic ending. Once aware of it, he cannot escape it, and is doomed to follow to the very end the thread that the Sisters tied to his soul.

The role the Weird Sisters fulfil in the context of the play can be better understood if we make a comparison with an ancient destiny complex that

[16] Irina Nemeti, "Parcae – Ursitoare. Studiu de mitologie contrastive," accessed June 1, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/4941133/Irina_NEMETI__Parcae__Ursitoare._Studiu_de_mitologie_contrastiv%C4%83, 214.

[17] I. Nemeti, "Parcae", 215.

[18] Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 273.

[19] M. Cavell, *Weaving Words*, 274-275.

[20] L. Shamas, *We Three,* 72.

E. R. Dodds illustrates in *The Greeks and the Irrational*. He talks about *ate*, which is a state described as "a temporary clouding or bewildering of the normal consciousness."[21] Under its influence, people no longer have proper control over themselves. The complex *moira-Erinys-ate* is further explained by Dodds.[22] *Moira*, spoken of in the singular, was the morally neutral fate which ought to be fulfilled. It needed a personified form which could act in its authority among humans. The Erinys, that correspond to the aforementioned punishing goddesses, the Roman Furies, are the personal and immediate agents of *moira*, whose duty is to ensure that the course of fate is respected through accordingly distributing *ate*. They too are in the number of three. Much like the Weird Sisters, their appearance is frightening: snakes are braided in their hair and they are holding the whips with which they bring terror to their victims. Most of all, they punish murderers, whom they strike with insanity.[23]

In *Macbeth*, the same principle is illustrated through the complex *wyrd-Weird Sisters-visions*. *Wyrd* is the impersonal fate which exerts its hegemony through a physical triad represented by the Weird Sisters. Their duty is to ensure that Macbeth fulfils his destiny, both of becoming king and of becoming a murderer. They do this by filling Macbeth's impressionable imagination with visions of greatness and of spilling blood. The prophecy in act 1, the vision of the bloody knife in act 3, as well as the procession of kings in act 4 irreversibly grip him because, as A. C. Bradley points out, his imagination "is productive of violent disturbance both of mind and body."[24] These visions have an effect comparable to that of *ate*, as Macbeth becomes incapable of controlling his murderous urges, and his consciousness is tormented. Thus, starting from the moment of contact with the Weird Sisters, he can only act under the visions' influence. Similar to the Erinys, the Sisters punish Macbeth's unavoidable crime with unease and sleeplessness. They become, as G. Wilson Knight writes, "avengers of murder, symbols of the tormented soul."[25] Consequently, it can

[21] E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 5.

[22] E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks,* 7-8.

[23] P. Grimal, *A Concise Dictionary*, 142.

[24] Andrew Cecil Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1926), 352.

[25] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 176.

be presumed that the three sisters are part of a more complex system of destiny in which they play a crucial role, but they do not represent the hegemonic power.

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Withdrawing from Ancient times, we can inquire into the transformation which the goddesses of fate undertook in *Macbeth*, in order to become Shakespeare's emblematic witches. Once again, we begin our investigation by taking a second, more thorough look at the etymology of their name, which allows us to understand not only their ancient legacy, but also their place in the early modern English society. F. Anne Payne attempts to reconstruct the meaning of the elusive and comprehensive term *wyrd* by examining its modern derivations. According to her, the later formed adjective 'weird' describes "an experience that an observer contemplates with uncomprehending but compelling uneasiness."[26] It is exactly such an experience that the three sisters provide for Macbeth and Banquo, as they stare in disbelief, disturbed by their appearance and prophecy. This special compelling and disconcerting quality might be a remnant of the sisters' relationship with the Anglo-Saxon power of fate, a permanent mark which is necessary in order for them to efficiently deliver people's destinies. *Wyrd,* according to Payne, is "alien to the individual; it is the force which balances his errors, punished him, at best tolerated him. Wyrd is always the Other."[27] Similarly, the Sisters are utterly foreign to the two men, being clearly situated outside human society and even seeming bizarre, unearthly creatures – they "look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth."[28] They are perceived by Macbeth as delivering misfortune upon him and delighting in causing him misery. Alien from humans, they cannot properly relate to them and, once the prophecy and the visions are delivered, they detach themselves completely from the story, being absent in the rest of the play. The Weird Sisters are therefore also *wayward*, an alternative spelling of their name, meaning outside of human nature.[29] This otherness relates not only to their status as partially supernatural beings, but also to their status as witches, ergo outsiders of society, considered the dangerous and unreliable *Other*, and persecuted for it.

[26] F. Anne Payne, "Three Aspects of Wyrd in *Beowulf*," in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. Rober B. Burlin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 15.
[27] F. A. Payne, "Three Aspects", 16.
[28] 1.3.42.
[29] L. Shamas, *We Three,* 16.

We can now proceed to examine this hostile society by unravelling the further historical-religious layers which comprise the Weird Sisters and which Shakespeare adopted and merged together. The main source that Shakespeare used for the play was *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland,* written in 1577, which preserved Macbeth's encounter with the Sisters. Holinshed presumed they were "some Nimphes or Feiries, endewed with knowledge of prophesie."[30] The illustration that accompanies the narration presents three reasonably attractive women, dressed in beautiful and elaborate clothing. This might seem odd when reading the contrasting description Banquo offers in act 1, scene 3, of women "withered, and so wild in their attire", with choppy fingers and skinny lips. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to explain how and why this transformation occurred.

Shakespeare's Weird Sisters were also initially represented as fairies on stage, if we are to believe the only explicit account that remains, written by Simon Forman in 1611. Interestingly, he makes no mention of witches, but rather describes the characters in the same manner Holinshed did: as "three women feiries or Nimphes."[31] Shakespeare did not stray from the chronicle account in the early staging of the play, perhaps still exploiting the fashion of representing fairies on stage as part of the cult of Elizabeth I, since he probably wrote the play not long after the Queen's death. This type of fairies, which he also incorporated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* was not, according to Frances Yates, a representation of popular tradition, but rather a product of courtly Arthurian tradition and Christian Cabala belief.[32] However, the three sisters in *Macbeth* have an underlayer of fairy characteristics which rather pertain to folklore beliefs.

Emma Wilby, in *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, describes how, according to many sources from early modern British times, fairy belief was very strong among the common folk,[33] who lived in a world immersed in the supernatural. While Catholicism was exercising its influence in Britain, popular and Christian

[30] Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles*, accessed August 14, 2019, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/holinsheds-chronicles-1577#, vol. 1, 243-244.

[31] Nick Moschovakis, "Introduction: Dualistic 'Macbeth'? Problematic 'Macbeth'?," in *Macbeth: New Critical Essays*, ed. Nick Maschovakis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

[32] Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 174.

[33] Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 22.

beliefs were cohabitating, since the Church was quite lenient, allowing people to continue soliciting the help of magical practitioners, while also attending mass.[34] They were careful not to upset fairies and held them in reverence, because they were ambivalent creatures,[35] thus capable of both good and harm, a description similar to that of the Norns. These beings interacted with magical practitioners and, according to testimonials from witch trials, became their familiars, directing them in acts of healing and divining.[36] It was the fairies who could foretell one's destiny, as Holinshed already knew when writing his chronicles, and that is possibly the cause for the fact that, as Laura Shamas writes, the word *fairy* derives from the Latin *fata*, meaning fate.[37]

The Weird Sisters have kept this undeniable power of precognition, which remains inherent to their origins. They are not fully human, their shape being uncertain: "look not like th'inhanitants o'th'earth / And yet are on't."[38] This may relate to the physicality of fairies, who, according to Wilby, are "somewhere on the spectrum between human flesh and bones and pure spirit."[39] Furthermore, the Sisters never physically walk out of a scene, but, as Macbeth himself remarks, "they made themselves air into which they vanished."[40] They seem to shift between matter and spirit, changing their composition at will and being both part of the human and the spirit worlds. Another fairy aspect that Shakespeare used is the connection between fairyland and the dead, since there are many accounts of people who had passed over being seen living in fairyland like they had on Earth.[41] The ease with which the sisters invoke the dead kings' procession[42] with the simple word of "Show!" seems to attest they have easy access to dead souls. On the other hand, this scene can also be interpreted using an elite mind-set, which developed during the time Shakespeare wrote his plays. The occult Renaissance was being censored

[34] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk*, 113.
[35] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk*, 23.
[36] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk*, 3-5.
[37] L. Shamas, *We Three*, 12.
[38] 1.3.42-43.
[39] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk,* 19.
[40] 1.5.4-5.
[41] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk,* 18.
[42] 4.1.107-125.

by forces such as Protestantism, which violently proclaimed its power. Elite Christian ideas started to assert themselves more brutally over paganism and "any magical beliefs which did not easily assimilate into Christian doctrine and ritual were associated with the Devil."[43] Fairies were beginning to be considered, according to James I's 1597 treatise titled *Daemonologie*, "illusions that was risest in the time of Papistrie", sent by the devil for "the senses of sundry simple creatures."[44] He goes against works such as Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584)*, which argue that devils, because of their non-corporeal nature, could not collude with humans.[45] Rather, James I fully recognizes them as powerful beings who malevolently mingle into the affairs of humans through various means, among which the figure of the witch gained notoriety. Following this mind-set, the aforementioned invocation of the kings' souls would be dismissed as part of the tricks and apparitions that the devil can fool people with, because, according to James I, "the deuil may forme what kinde of impressiones he pleases in the aire"[46] and witches "can make spirites… to follow and trouble persones."[47]

Magical practitioners were demonized and therefore became liable to be punished, regardless of the type of magic they performed. King James I was part of the movement whose goal was to prove that "such divelish arts have bene and are,"[48] and that they should be eradicated, his purpose being explicitly written in the preface of his treatise. Eventually, through the Witchcraft Bill of 1604, which made no distinction between *maleficium*, namely "the manipulation of occult forces at a distance with malevolent intent,"[49] and healing magic, the King condemned to the death penalty anyone who commuted with spirits, regardless of whether they had caused harm or not. This decision also arose, perhaps most strongly, from the fear people had regarding practitioners of magic: in the popular mind, one who could heal

[43] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk,* 47.
[44] James I, *Daeomonologie* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2002), 36.
[45] Stuart Clark, "Witchcraft and Magic in Early Modern Culture," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo, William Monter and Stuart Clark (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), 126.
[46] James I, *Daemonologie,* 20.
[47] James I, *Daemonologie,* 23.
[48] James I, *Daemonologie,* 2.
[49] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk,* 42.

by magic must surely be able to do harm with it too.[50] And it was certainly so in the mind of James I, who feared himself to be a target of the witches' malicious powers. As Emma Wilby writes, "it is here, where magical forces were at their most ambiguous, that the figure of the magical practitioner merged into that of the witch."[51]

As E. R. Dodds explains, when a new belief system emerges, it either comes to exist side by side with the old one, or the old one lives as a half-conscious part of the new.[52] The first possibility can be found in English communities in early Catholic times, when pagan tradition was still tolerated. Shakespeare's witches are instead a testimony of the second possibility. The new Christian belief in the demonic origin of witches can be found not only in *Macbeth*, but also in Holinshed's fairies and their powers: the old system of belief was merely transformed, but not erased. Therefore, Shakespeare must have adapted his play to the time and people's taste in theatre, and specifically to James I's interests. According to Diane Purkiss in *The Witch in History,* witch trials peaked in the 1580s and 1590s. By the Jacobean age, when Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, they were decreasing in number, but the figure of the witch became more and more fascinating on stage, due to the theatricality that magical practice entailed[53] and to the special interest that James I took in witchcraft as a source of entertainment.[54] It was not only a matter of pleasing the patron king, but also a matter of the audience's preferences, who delighted in plays such as Ben Jonson's *The Mask of Queenes* and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*. The fair courtly fairies became the foul witches, and their foulness became a fair spectacle for the people. Shakespeare delivered to the audience what people of his time wanted.

And indeed, the three witches are a mixture of terrifying powers and elements meant to entertain, which to a 17th century audience would make them seem frightening, despicable, and yet liable for mockery. On the surface, the Sisters seem to exercise their power over Macbeth as forces of evil who drive him to murder, and yet they are not truly capable of such an influence.

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[50] Stuart Clark, "Witchcraft and Magic," 112.

[51] Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isovel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 28.

[52] E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks,* 179.

[53] D. Purkiss, *The Witch in History,* 184-188.

[54] D. Purkiss, *The Witch in History,* 199.

As Snyder claims, "they are able only to abet human villainy rather than bring it about."[55] Their real power seems rather small, not nearly as strong as Lady Macbeth's influence, and their short-versed incantations seem childish compared to the lady's complex renunciation of the very humanity inside of her.[56] They are separated from other characters through their "incantatory verse,"[57] short and rhyming, which is meant to enhance theatricality and can be best observed in the cauldron scene:

First Witch

Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Swelter'd venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.

ALL

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

Second Witch

Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

ALL

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.[58]

[55] Susan Snyder, *Shakespeare: A Wayward Journey* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 173.
[56] 1.5.39-53.
[57] D. Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 210.
[58] 4.1.4-21.

In its entirety, the scene appears to have the same role of entertainment, because of the elements which Purkiss calls "infantile in their dirtiness:"[59] toads, bats, snakes, lizards mixed together in a foul potion, as well as parts of the demonized and scapegoated people: Jews, Tartars and even witches. Once again, the prominent status of witches as part of the Other emerges. They are associated with loathsome creatures, as well as marginalized groups who were not considered to belong in society. The public was fascinated, and yet disgusted by their nature and their shocking potion-making, which is a representation of 'demonological witchcraft.'[60] It was associated in the early modern period with a demonic pact, which is not shown or mentioned in *Macbeth*, because it is already assumed by the audience, although the witches' masters' identity remains ambiguous. It is also connected to the witches' Sabbath, a notorious procession which sparked sick curiosity into the minds of people. On the Sabbath, according to Purkiss,[61] unbaptised babies were sacrificed, an element which is indeed part of the witches' brew: "finger of birth-strangled babe."[62] Such a detail must have provided the shocking experience that the audience craved. The use of parts of corpses seems to have been generally associated with witches in people's conceptions, since James I included in the Witchcraft Bill of 1604 the illegality of grave-robbing.[63] All in all, the witches are delighted by all this foulness, declaring the charm to be "firm and good,"[64] and thus proclaiming themselves to be as unclean as the ingredients.

On the other hand, the Weird Sisters' poverty and ugliness anchor them not in the theatrical world, but in the hostile reality of the 17th century. If we are to analyse James' treatise, it is clear that the three sisters are a close image of the witch typology he describes. They are portrayed as ragged, poor women who seek, as the King writes, to "hurte men and their gudes", driven by their "great miserie and povertie", having turned to the devil himself to

[59] D. Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 213.
[60] E. Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel*, 29.
[61] D. Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 211.
[62] 4.1.30.
[63] Edward H. Thompson, "Macbeth, King James and the Witches," accessed October 10, 2019, http://faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20281b/Philosophy%20of%20Magic/Arcana/Witchcraft%20and%20Grimoires/macbeth.htm.
[64] 4.1.38.

alleviate their condition.[65] Similarly, in 1584 Reginald Scot described the suspects for witchcraft as "blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles."[66] Considering this, it is obvious why Shakespeare chose to replace the beautiful image of Holinshed's fairies with the dreadful description provided by Banquo. It was simply an adaptation to the main concerns of the times. Walter Clyde Curry moreover points out that the figure of the witch would have been more terrifying to the audience than a representation of the devil himself, which had become at least partially ludicrous for the audience.[67] The witches were rooted in a reality where the devil can take hold of humans and help them do harm. They were, in the minds of the many, a real-life danger.

The danger posed by witches, however, was usually a relative one. As Robin Briggs shows, "witches were essentially reactive, responding to acts of aggression or hostility from others."[68] Their harmful magic was mostly a form of protection from a hostile world in which they were not tolerated. Accordingly, the Weird Sisters are portrayed as being in a vulnerable position, that of begging for chestnuts. Their revenge is only enacted once they are condescendingly refused,[69] and their mode of operation is the causing of a powerful storm, a phenomenon commonly blamed on witches in Shakespeare's time.[70] King James himself held Scottish witches accountable for the storms he encountered while sailing from Denmark to Scotland and wrote they "can rayse stormes and tempestes in the aire."[71]

It is convenient, as Walter Clyde Curry[72] suggests, to consider that the three sisters have a demonic nature, due to their supernatural powers, and it would have been so for the Christian audience in Jacobean times too. He claims that they represent "the metaphysical world of evil spirits", but also admits that they are "compounded out of many contradictory elements,

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[65] James I, *Daemonologie,* 17-18.

[66] Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 36.

[67] Walter Clyde Curry, "The Demonic Metaphysics of *Macbeth*," *Studies in Philology* 30, no. 3 (July 1933): 400.

[68] R. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, 113.

[69] 1.3.

[70] E. Wilby, *Cunning Folk*, 42.

[71] James I, *Daemonologie*, 23.

[72] W. C. Curry, "The Demonic Metaphysics", 396-400.

assimilated and fused by the artistic imagination into a unified whole". Such is Shakespeare's creation. James I and his entourage could have seen in the sisters exactly what they expected and wanted to see. But the layers underneath that give the characters "a certain dignity and mysterious quality which inspires awe in the beholder" are undeniably present and form a complex nature that should not be dismissed. Their supernatural abilities are limited, their weaknesses keep them rooted into their persecuted status in the real world, yet they still exhibit remnants of their once divine identities, which instil their strange compelling quality.

In this paper I have briefly tried to explore the main mythological and Pagan figures at the core of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters, beginning with *wyrd* and the Norns, advancing towards the Parcae and the Furies, and expanding on fairies and witches, spanning over different stages of Pagan and Christian beliefs, which I have collated with the Sisters' features and roles. I have identified their position inside a system of destiny, coming to the conclusion they are most likely the agents of a power of fate, rather than fate itself, and that their divine ancient nature is restricted. Inside a magic-infused Britain, they have proven to be an assortment of popular fairy abilities and stereotypical Jacobean age witches, this combination being a testimony of societal and religious-historical change. Meanwhile, they somehow still manage to escape from being completely known and defined, a side of them always disappearing into thin air. Even after numberless studies and analyses, they still stand inscrutable and otherworldly, persistently true to their name, and waiting to once again meet upon the heath.

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