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“The Differing Portrayal of Witches in *Macbeth* and *The Witch of Edmonton*”

Introduction

The witchcraft era produced sensationalism in the social and political culture as well as in the arts. Witches are mentioned in numerous works of literature during the Elizabethan-Jacobean era. The literacy rate was quite low during the early modern era; therefore plays and the theatre were a popular form of entertainment for the masses. The rich and poor alike would enjoy various theatrical performances. Plays range from dramas foreboding the dangers of witchcraft prompting fear in its viewer while other tales heckled the ridiculousness of witchcraft. Not everyone accepted witchcraft as truth and literature reflects these differing perspectives. Some believed that the general population was at the mercy of witches and had no control over possession and spells. Others believed that witchcraft was the inner workings of a sinful mind attempting to pass moral guilt onto others. The plays *Macbeth* and *The Witch of Edmonton* reflect these two differing viewpoints.

Witchcraft plays an imperative role in *Macbeth* as three witches, the Weird Sisters, foretell (and possibly induce) Macbeth’s demise. Regardless, Macbeth is at the mercy of the Weird Sisters’ premonition. With characteristics based on actual events and symbolism from ancient mythology, the Weird Sisters are meant to be a portrayal of evil in a classic sense. Macbeth has no control over his fate as the Weird Sisters have it predetermined. *Macbeth*’s core idea is that witchcraft is a very real and dangerous phenomenon.

Another timeless play with a central theme of witchcraft is *The Witch of Edmonton*. This “tragic-comedy” takes on a different perspective than *Macbeth*. With a bit of comic relief *The*

Witch of Edmonton is a sarcastic and critical approach to the idea of witchcraft. Unlike *Macbeth*, *The Witch of Edmonton* promotes the idea of self-awareness and believes that witchcraft is merely a scapegoat for people unwilling to face their problems and deal with reality.

Macbeth

One of the most famous playwrights of this era was William Shakespeare. Still highly regarded nearly 400 years later, Shakespeare's works are timeless. One of his most prominent plays is *Macbeth*. The play, named after its neurotic main character, tells the story of an ambitious nobleman of Scotland. After a valiant victory, Macbeth and his comrade, Banquo, are crossing a moor when they encounter three unsightly witches. These witches tell Macbeth that he will become King of Scotland. The idea consumes his thoughts. After learning that the current King Duncan has announced different heirs to his throne, Macbeth knows that the only manner to take the crown would be to murder King Duncan.

After writing to Lady Macbeth regarding this possibility, his wife presses the matter. She desires the kingship for her husband and urges Macbeth to murder King Duncan. After careful planning and persuasion from his wife, Macbeth kills the king while framing the king's chamberlains. However this victory is short-lived. Macbeth becomes consumed with protecting his kingship and murdering all those who could jeopardize his future, including his good friends. Macbeth and his wife suffer from hallucinations of their murderous past doings. Likely driven to the point of insanity, Lady Macbeth kills herself and Macbeth is ultimately killed in battle. All of these events align with the witches' prophecies and Macbeth is a victim of their ominous foretellings.

Macbeth was first performed in 1611 in England during the middle of the witchcraft era during the reign of King James I. The king was quite fond of Shakespeare and supported his

works. No doubt *Macbeth* pays homage to the king's Scottish descent and alludes to the king's personal encounter with witchcraft. The Weird Sisters' actions bare striking similarity to the North Berwick witches during the winter of 1589-1590. When King James was returning home to Scotland with his bride, his ship experienced very violent storms which shifted them way off course. The ship was nearly lost. Witchcraft was suspected for this strange occurrence (Harris 40). At the trial, accused witch Agnes Tompson admitted that upwards of two hundred witches "together went by Sea each one in a Riddle or Ciue...to the Kerke of North Barrick in Lowthian, and that after they had landed, tooke handes on the land and daunced this reill or short daunce, singing all with one voice" (*Newes From Scotland* 13). This bears similarity to the dance that the witches perform shortly before Macbeth enters in Act I, Scene III. The Weird Sisters grab hands and dance around in a circle in order to "wind up" the charm.

Some of the most incriminating evidence against a witch would be his or her participation in a *sabbat*. Although scholars highly doubt that *sabbats*- where witches would join together and literally dance with the devil and partake in various debaucheries- ever existed, the people of early modern Europe found the idea of the *sabbat* particularly damning of a person accused of witchcraft. In the North Berwick case, we see Agnes Tompson admit to participating in a *sabbat*. This is reflected and dramatized in the witches' dance in *Macbeth*. Partaking in a *sabbat* fits with the stereotypical characteristics of a witch.

Keeping with the traditional idea of a witch, the three Weird Sisters all have familiars. Familiars were evil companions for witches. They were often demons morphed into animal form. The first sister calls upon a cat while the second sister calls upon a toad (I.i. 9-11). Both of these animals were commonly employed by witches to assist them in partaking in their dastardly deeds. However it is no coincidence that these same animals were used during the North Berwick

case. Agnes Tompson admitted to christening and then drowning a cat in the sea and “saying their riddles or sieves” (*Newes From Scotland* 17). The similarities between the Weird Sisters and the North Berwick case are undeniable. However it is important to note how closely the North Berwick case parallels the traditional idea and practice of witchcraft in early modern Europe.

Shakespeare even physically portrays the witches in a grotesque and stereotypical manner. Macbeth’s friend, Banquo, describes the witches as “withered and so wild in their attire” with “choppy fingers” (I.iii.44-46). One can just imagine the haggard and ugly witches would have provoked fear in Macbeth and Banquo. With androgynous features it would have been difficult for these two characters- and the audience- to distinguish not only the gender of the witches but if they were of this world. Their appearance was designed to strike fear into the audience.

Shakespeare really emphasizes their stereotypical appearance and connects the play to the North Berwick case. The connection to the trial in Scotland was to appease the king. After all, King James was the most important critic to please during this time. In a sense Shakespeare’s livelihood depended on the opinions of the king. It is even suggested that Shakespeare spent time in Scotland in the company of King James- no doubt to put in a good word for himself- to learn more about the king before James ascended the throne. A lover of drama from an early age, James’s approval of Shakespeare’s works surely solidified his role as a famous playwright (Brown). Drawing on the friendship between Shakespeare and the king, alluding to the North Berwick case in *Macbeth* creates a situation similar to an “inside-joke.” The king would obviously catch on to the allusions and subsequently appreciate Shakespeare’s cleverness. *Macbeth* was a way to flatter the king.

Furthermore, characterizing the Weird Sisters in such a stereotypical manner and making conspicuous parallels to the North Berwick case affirms the witches of Scotland's guilt. King James was a firm believer in the dangers of witchcraft and believed that witches could control others. Most likely influenced by his encounter in 1589, when James inherited the throne in 1603 he enacted witchcraft laws that remained untouched for over 130 years (Harris 40). To produce a play denying the existence of witchcraft would have been an insult to the king and possibly the end of Shakespeare's career. It was critical of Shakespeare to produce a work that reflected the contemporary beliefs about witchcraft.

The Weird Sisters do share characteristics of a stereotypical witch of the period- especially in their appearance- but it is undeniable that the Sisters possess traits that mirror figures of mythology as well. Although it is difficult to distinguish the extent in which the witches determine or predict Macbeth's fate, we find that either way Macbeth is at the mercy of their premonition. In this sense the witches possess similar qualities to the fates. In ancient Greek mythology, the fates- or *Moirai*- were three sister deities who controlled the fates of humans and gods alike ("The Fates"). In witchcraft it was believed that spells and charms could influence and control a person's life. In the opening scene we see the sisters "winding up" the charm for Macbeth. Could this be the Sisters' way of sealing Macbeth's lowly fate? Even if one does not perceive the witches as the fates, the Sisters do bear striking similarity ancient oracles and foretellers of the future.

Once the Sisters entice Macbeth and reveal his future they engage a role similar to the ancient furies. In Greco-Roman mythology, the furies were three goddesses of vengeance. Although the furies were feared throughout the ancient world, they were not inherently evil: they only punished those guilty of wrongdoings by driving the guilty people mad ("Furies"). Often

appearing as storm clouds, the furies regularly punished those who killed family members. Like the furies, the Sisters first appear in the play through a storm of thunder and lightning. It can also be surmised that the witches contributed to Macbeth's paranoia as he spirals into a neurotic murderer and turns his own army against him. It is also plausible to blame the witches for Macbeth's hallucinations and nightmares. It is a reasonable extrapolation to believe it is the Sisters who prompt Macbeth to cry out in terror after seeing Banquo's ghost at the banquet table or causing Macbeth to see a bloody dagger with the handle pointed towards himself shortly before he murders King Duncan. We also can surmise that the Sisters are the cause of Lady Macbeth's hallucinations and suicide. In a sense, Lady Macbeth can be viewed as the Sisters' familiar. Lady Macbeth plays an essential role in convincing Macbeth to murder King Duncan. She "pours [her] spirits in [his] ear" as she wants to "have [Macbeth] crowned withal" (I.v.16-20) Such diction suggests that Lady Macbeth is influenced by the witches and under the control of their spirits. It is through this manipulation Lady Macbeth convinces Macbeth to commit the dastardly deed. Although the witches only appear to Macbeth very briefly during the play, their influence and torment of Macbeth shines throughout the entire course of events. It seems as if the Weird Sisters are the puppet master to the helpless and pathetic Macbeth.

This coupling of character traits creates a complicated picture of the Weird Sisters. Judging by their appearance the witches look like traditional beings of the Jacobean period. However through their actions the witches portray characteristics of classic mythological creatures. This combination of traits presents entities that are timeless and inherently malleable to any description of evil. The common thread between the mythological and Jacobean descriptions of the witches is their ultimate control over their subject. Essentially Macbeth has no control over his future just like the fates controlled the ancient world and witches cast spells on

the people of early modern Europe. It is through this successful multi-faceted characterization of the Weird Sisters that Shakespeare is able to invoke fear into the audience- even 400 years later.

In describing the witches as despicable creatures, Shakespeare capitalizes on the prevalence of witchcraft. Author Stephen Greenblatt notes that witches “are a recurrent, even obsessive feature in Shakespeare’s cultural universe” (Greenblatt 120). However his representation of witchcraft varies depending on the particular play. Greenblatt explains that Shakespeare presents a skeptical approach to witchcraft in *The Comedy of Errors* and *I Henry IV* yet the portrayal of witches in *Macbeth* is heavily aligned with a believer’s point of view. Greenblatt accounts for these differences as Shakespeare’s seizing of theatrical opportunism (121). Just like modern day authors and artists, Shakespeare had to gauge the political and social climate of the time. He had to write his plays in order to satisfy his audience. After all, Shakespeare’s concern was “his business as a dramatist and the business of the joint-stock company in which he was a shareholder” (121). As already discussed, Shakespeare was using the witches in Scotland as a basis for the character development of the witches to appease the king. Because Shakespeare’s attitude towards witches shifts throughout his works it is difficult to pinpoint his own personal beliefs regarding witchcraft. Regardless of Shakespeare’s own opinions *Macbeth* can be considered a “pro-witchcraft” text which creates a timeless representation of evil where the main characters are helpless to the wrath of the devil.

The Witch of Edmonton

During the last nine years of King James’s reign, there were only five executions for witchcraft compared to the 35 during the first 13 years (Harris 90). One of these five executions took place in April 1621 with the execution of Elizabeth Sawyer. In December of that same year

The Witch of Edmonton was first performed as a tragic-comedy play written by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford (91).

Despite the title the main plotline of the play is concerned with the actions of Frank Thorney. In this respect is a domestic tragedy regarding Frank's bigamous lifestyle after marrying Winnifred, a pregnant maid and a minor heiress, Susan Carter. Frank first marries Winnifred although it is unclear if he is the father of her unborn child. Then through a combination of greed and vulnerability, Frank is persuaded by his father to marry Susan. Frank plans on taking Susan's dowry and running away with Winnifred. But his plans are disrupted when he impulsively murders Susan and attempts to place the blame on her scorned ex-suitor. However Susan's sister, Katharine, exposes the truth and Frank is put to death.

This storyline is intertwined with that of the namesake of the play, Elizabeth Sawyer. Elizabeth Sawyer is a classic, ugly, widow that is suspected of witchcraft by members of the town. She is in fact innocent of these crimes until she calls upon spirits to seek revenge against the people who have slandered her name. Instead of getting her revenge, her devil-dog familiar wreaks havoc on the town and ultimately ushers in Mother Sawyer's demise. In a strange turn of events, Elizabeth Sawyer is hung on the same day as Frank Thorney.

Just like in *Macbeth*, *The Witch of Edmonton* has characters based on true events. The real Elizabeth Sawyer was a young woman of Edmonton tried and executed on the grounds of sorcery and witchcraft. This account, *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer*, was published in a pamphlet by Thomas Goodcole. We see some similarities and differences between the real Elizabeth Sawyer and her character in the play. One of the most distinct differences is her age and appearance. The real Elizabeth Sawyer was a married, young woman and although blind in one eye, looked nothing like her fictitious counterpart. In the play, Mother Sawyer is

described as “poor, deformed, and ignorant... [a]nd like a bow buckled and bent together” (II.i.3-4). Mother Sawyer is characterized as a stereotypical witch. In *Macbeth*, the stereotypical appearance of the Weird Sisters is to strike fear in the reader and characterize the viciousness and ugliness of the devil and sin. However in *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer’s appearance is a part of the satirical comedy of the play showing that anyone ascribing the stereotypical appearance of a witch can be persecuted as such. The authors play into the commonality of witches being a poor and ugly widow. At first, Mother Sawyer is not guilty of witchcraft but her appearance causes her neighbors to wrongfully accuse her and even beat her. Her appearance is what drives her to practice witchcraft because her ugliness has made her an outcast and the “subject of malicious gossip” (Harris 106). It is not Elizabeth Sawyer’s innate personality that turns her to witchcraft but the public’s attack on her character that insights her to seek revenge.

The play is meant to portray Mother Sawyer as pathetic and a victim of her circumstances. One even feels remorse for her situation. The playwrights show compassion for the woman “who, initially through the malice of others and at first committing no greater wrong than foolishness, becomes enmeshed in the devil’s toils” (Harris 106). In *Macbeth*, witchcraft is viewed as a superhuman mechanism for engaging the masses in evil deeds where the Weird Sisters are supernatural beings. However in *The Witch of Edmonton*, Elizabeth Sawyer is feebly human and her execution is a major tragic element in the play. Her destruction comes not from witchcraft but from the brutal persecution by her neighbors.

In order to prove that she is a witch, the townspeople take a handful of thatch from her house and burn it. They claim that if Mother Sawyer is a witch that she will immediately come to the spot. She, in fact, does come to their location. This parallels the actual case of Elizabeth Sawyer where an:

“old ridiculous custome was used, which was to plucke the Thatch of her house, and to burne it, and it being so burnd, the author of such mischief should presently then come: and it was observed and affirmed to the Court, that *Elizabeth Sawyer* would presently frequent the house of them that burnt the thatch which they pluckt of her house, and come without any sending for” (Goodcole 8).

The angry mob searching for Mother Sawyer in the play views her as a scapegoat for their sins and misfortunes. This is why they attempt to summon Mother Sawyer with the thatch-burning. As Old Banks admits during the mob’s search for Mother Sawyer: “Our cattle fall, our wives fall, our daughters fall, and the maid-servants fall; and we ourselves shall not be able to stand if this beast be suffered to graze amongst us” (IV.i.12-14). Instead of facing their own problems and looking for alternative explanations, the townspeople take action against Mother Sawyer. The ridiculousness of their claims is heard in Old Banks’ complaint. It seems impossible that one woman could be responsible for every single negative occurrence in the town of Edmonton-especially when the townspeople are eager to form their own personal relationships with the devil, like Frank Thorney. Mother Sawyer is betrayed and persecuted by her own neighbors because of their unwillingness to accept reality and cope with their troublesome misfortunes.

Mother Sawyer’s fate is not sealed by her neighbors’ accusations but through her relationship with her familiar- the devil-dog. After calling upon spirits to help her seek revenge on the townspeople, the devil appears to her in the form of a black dog. The dog demands of Mother Sawyer her cooperation and soul. Like typical early modern accounts of witchcraft the dog asks to suck Mother Sawyer’s blood for nourishment. This is similar to the true trial of

Elizabeth Sawyer when she confesses that the devil, also in the form of a black dog, “demanded of mee my soule and body...[and] to seale this [her] promise [she] have him leave of sucke of [her] blood” (Goodcole 11). This devil-dog is the medium through which Mother Sawyer sets up the death of her enemy, Anne Ratcliffe. Ratcliffe becomes insane through bewitchment from licking some soap and runs around the town shouting nonsensical phrases and proclaiming “there's a Lancashire hornpipe in my throat; hark, how it tickles it, with doodle, doodle, doodle, doodle! Welcome, sergeants! Welcome, devil!—hands, hands! Hold” (IV.i.63-67). Her mindless ramblings are to be a sense of comic relief. This comedy is short-lived however when Anne Ratcliffe beats out her brains. It is important to note that Anne Ratcliffe is essentially Mother Sawyer’s only victim. The other victim, Susan Carter, is murdered by her husband, Frank Thorney. The connection between these two murders-and the two plotlines- is the devil-dog.

The dog persuades Mother Sawyer to partake in the satanic pact that leads to the death of Anne Ratcliffe and the dog appears to help Frank decide to murder Susan. When Frank brutally stabs his wife, the dog is in the corner of the stage. It appears that the dog has insights into the sinful thoughts of Mother Sawyer and Frank. Through this knowledge the dog is able to influence them. If Mother Sawyer and Frank did not experience impure thoughts, the devil-dog would not have control. Essentially “the moral responsibility for their actions remains their own” (Harris 97). This is evident through the actions of Cuddy Banks. Although simple-minded, Cuddy is good-natured and he is unaffected by the temptations of the dog. This reveals that evil is not a supernatural occurrence that is inevitable for man but a part of human nature that is a result of moral discrepancies. In *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters are in control of Macbeth’s fate. His actions are predetermined. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer and Frank Thorney both

have choices regarding their fate. In choosing evil, the playwrights show that morality is a matter of choice not predestination.

In the hangings of both Mother Sawyer and Frank Thorney, we see the different perceptions the townspeople have regarding the respective crimes. Before he is hanged, Frank Thorney repents his sins and asks for forgiveness. The crowd is generally sympathetic and Frank's crimes are reconciled as he dies with dignity. The same cannot be said for Mother Sawyer. Although she pleads for forgiveness and "repents all former evil" the townspeople are hostile to her words and scoff at her attempt for mercy (V.ii.130-132). The crowd even suggests that it was she who possessed Frank and induced him to kill Susan. Although Mother Sawyer is held responsible for the death of Anne Ratcliffe, she inadvertently caused her death. Mother Sawyer did not physically kill Anne but made her insane through bewitchment. It was through Anne's own actions that she kills herself. On the other hand Frank Thorney personally kills his wife after stabbing her repeatedly. It seems absurd that a woman who was at most an accessory to another woman's suicide is treated with no clemency while a wife-murderer is granted some forgiveness. The playwrights purposely do this to highlight the ridiculousness of witch executions. Crimes of witchcraft and sorcery were much more difficult to prove than crimes of premeditated murder yet the townspeople find Mother Sawyer's crime much more heinous.

By 1621 the attitude towards witchcraft was changing in Europe, especially England. Even King James, a monarch who once thoroughly believed in the evils of witchcraft, finds his strong opinions on the subject waning. Towards the end of his reign James became aware of several situations where accusers confessed to lying under oath and fabricating charges against their neighbors. When James became the King of England, the witchcraft phenomenon was at its

height. However by the time *The Witch of Edmonton* was published in 1621 skeptical beliefs towards witchcraft were becoming more commonplace (Tyson).

Conclusion

Although two popular plays with a central theme of witchcraft, *Macbeth* and *The Witch of Edmonton* present two differing views into the credibility of this phenomenon. *Macbeth* portrays the Weird Sisters as other-worldly beings with supernatural powers who control and predetermine Macbeth's fate. Drawing on King James's real encounter with witches in Scotland, the Weird Sisters exemplify the idea of evil and the control the devil has over the masses. *Macbeth* suggests that witchcraft is not only a dangerous and credible threat but a force that is beyond a person's control.

Conversely *The Witch of Edmonton* was written towards the end of the witchcraft era in England and reflects a skeptical approach to witchcraft. Based on the real trial of Elizabeth Sawyer in 1621 *The Witch of Edmonton* is a satirical tragedy about the ridiculousness of witchcraft accusations. This play suggests that evil is not a predetermined force but a byproduct of a weak moral soul and well within the control of a person. *The Witch of Edmonton* holds people responsible for their actions and criticizes the believers in witchcraft as people unwilling to accept reality and responsibility for their own choices.

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