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The Witches Brew in *Macbeth*: Illogical Nonsense or Clever Incantations?

The three witches of *Macbeth*, also known interchangeably as the Weird or Weyward Sisters, have long been a source of mystery and speculation. Others believe that he was inspired by actual pagan rituals or even “black magic”. Theories such as these are largely to blame for the supposed “curse” of *Macbeth*. However, I theorized that the Weyward Sisters’ incantations, specifically the infamous cauldron scene in Act 4, Scene 1 of *Macbeth*, are hidden cleverly insightful storytelling than use any sort of local necromancy.

As with most of Shakespeare’s masterworks, the story of *Macbeth* was inspired by- or stolen- from another source, this time the source being Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (Mabillard 1), written in 1577 (“Holinshed's Chronicles, 1577” 1). Shakespeare took the separate and sometimes interlocking tales of Macbeth, Banquo, Duncan, and Macduff, among others, from the *Chronicles*. He rearranged them, consolidated the stories, darkened it for dramatic effect, and made Macbeth the central character. These tales were also the inspiration for the three witches (Mabillard 1). In the *Chronicles*, an almost identical scene to Act 1, Scene 3 in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* occurs, in which three “women in straunge & ferly apparell, resembling creatures of an elder worlde” (“Holinshed Chronicles, 1577” Vol. 1) warns Macbeth with the same soon-to-be-true prophecies, with Banquo having a similar questioning response as he does in Shakespeare’s version.

The origins of three women has long been subject of speculation. We may look to the source material, the *Chronicles*, for clues, however, Shakespeare's tendency to put his own creative spin on stories must be taken into consideration. The *Chronicles'* narrative text describes them thus: "these women were eyther the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say y^e Goddesses of destinie, or els some Nimphes or Feiries, endewed with knowledge of prophesie by their Nicromanticall science, bicause every thing came to passe as they had spoken" ("Holinshed Chronicles, 1577" Vol. 1). The "Goddesses of destinie", as they are said to most likely be, comes from the Greco-Roman myth of the three goddesses of fate, the Greek versions known as- Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, and the Roman versions known as- Nona, Decuma, and Morta. They were said to "determine human destinies, and in particular the span of a person's life and his allotment of misery and suffering"(Britannica). They were often depicted as three old women spinning threads, the threads representing a person's life (Britannica). "Weird", the word used initially to identify them, is another spelling of the old Anglo Saxon word "wyrð", which means fate; the Sisters of Fate, or the Goddess of Destiny (the names are interchangeable). In Shakespeare's original text, the Folio, the women refer to themselves as "The weyward Sisters" in Act 1, Scene 3. Macbeth later uses this name to refer to them in his letter to Lady Macbeth as "these weyward Sisters". If one were to look up "weyward" in a dictionary or google search its meaning, you would come up with zero results from any standard dictionary or credible thesaurus. The word "weyward", after some digging, is a product of Shakespeare's love of creating and playing with words—it is a combination of the words *weird* and *wayward*; the women were referred to by the name weird in their origins (McFedries 217), and wayward seems to describe Shakespeare's portrayal of their nature well. This is why they are often known or

simply referred to as the weird sisters. This finding also adds credibility to the theory that Shakespeare's weird sisters are the same women in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, who are said to be the Greco-Roman Goddesses of Fate. This would explain the women's ability to see into the future; It would also explain Macbeth's willingness to believe their prophecies, as he most likely would have been aware of the same mythos that Shakespeare was.

The mystical ingredients in the witches' cauldron brew in Act 4, Scene 1, are a subject of much fascination but little understanding. Many believe that the ingredients are derived from a real pagan or black magic spell which Shakespeare learned from local witches at the time. This theory has largely been debunked (Sherman). Some online searching produces a definition of each ingredient, claiming that each has a negative or vile connotation. Deeper research will find papers about "Shakespeare's witches' brew as it related to the economic system of the time". While all of these may be valid, the context of the play as well as etymology of the ingredients indicates a much more specific purpose for the story. Each ingredient that the 2nd Witch contributes is specifically referenced somewhere else in the show, either before or after this scene, each relating to a specific event; either one of Macbeth's malicious deeds, or a reference to a particular moment of his growing paranoia. Thus, every ingredient was carefully chosen to represent various parts and actions from Macbeth's past, present, and future. The sisters combine all of these representations together in order to concoct his demise.

Consider the 2nd Witch's contributions to the cauldron in Act 4, Scene 1, accurate to the Folio: "Fillet of a Fenny Snake,... Eye of Newt, and Toe of Frog,... Wool of Bat, and Tongue of Dog,... Adders Fork, and Blinde-wormes Sting,... Lizard's Leg, and Howlet's wing,... Baboones Blood". What a delicious sounding concoction. A "Fenny Snake", according to

Shakespeare-online, is “A snake that lives in the fens (a swampy district of eastern England).”(Mabillard). A fen, though it could be dismissed by being defined quite generally as a “Low land that is covered wholly or partly with water” (“Fen” 1), in a historical context it more specifically refers to “a marshy lowland region in Eastern England, South of the Wash: partly drained and channeled since the 17th century” (“Fens” 1)—the 17th century being around the same time period as Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. In the story after Macbeth’s rise to power, Macduff and Malcolm escape to England, to the locale of the Fens, to plan attack when Macbeth takes power on the throne. The fillet of a fenny snake refers to Malcolm, the son of the late King Duncan, and Macduff, the nobleman and fighter who will ultimately bring about Macbeth’s demise.

Several of the ingredients are justified by one broad but telling reference: in Act 1, Scene 5, Lady Macbeth coerces her reluctant husband to murder king Duncan: “Your Hand, your tongue: looke like th’innocent flower but be the Serpent under’t.” “Serpent”, vile and villainous in connotation especially for the time *Macbeth* was written, is often used to refer to any sort of reptile or amphibian. Therefore, eye of *newt*, toe of *frogge*, *adder*’s fork, and *lizard*’s legs are all made relevant in this one line as they are all referring to Macbeth. As they all describe various body parts of various serpents, combining them paints a picture of a disgusting creature that could only be meant to create a more monstrous image of Macbeth.

Most of the other ingredients are mentioned a bit more explicitly in the text, and are often highlighted by Shakespeare himself with a capitalization. Act 3, Scene 2 is particularly full of cauldron ingredients references, including snake, tooth, eye and tongue, as Macbeth decides it is necessary to kill his once friend Banquo. “We have scorch’d the Snake, not kill’d it: Shee’le

close, and be her selfe whilest our poore Mallice Remaines in danger of her former Tooth.” But as he struggles with the decision, he cries “Present him Eminence, both with Eye and Tongue:” Wool of Bat appears in Act 3, Scene 2 as well—“ere the Bat hath flowne His Cloyster’d flight,”—all of these come as Macbeth’s paranoia begins to show, and grow strong enough to motivate action for the first time. In Act 5, Scene 3, Macbeth refutes the doctor’s claim he cannot cure something physiological, and demands him to find a tangible or physical cure to his wife’s melancholy; he cries “Throw Physicke to to the Dogs, Ile none of it”. Tongue of Dogge makes its appearance here.

Act 4, Scene 2, wherein Lady Macduff and her child speak right before they are murdered by Macbeth’s assassins, contains several references to the Sisters’ concoction as well. After she learns of her husband’s flight to England, Lady Macduff asks her son “Sirra, your father is dead, and what will you do now? How will you live?” he claims, “As Birds do Mother.” to which she responds “What, with Wormes and Flyes?” The worm here harkens back to a “blindeworme’s sting,” which is another ingredient added into the cauldron in Act 4, Scene 1. A blindworm, also known as a blind snake, is a non-venomous legless lizard—thus the sting of a blindworm would be completely harmless, which parallels the harmlessness of the Macduff wife and child (Vern). The ‘blindeworme’ is also referenced by Macbeth during Act 3, Scene 2. Macbeth calls Banquo’s son, Fleance, a worm when he learns of his escape: “There the grown Serpent Lyes, the worme that’s fled Hath Nature that in time will Venom bleed”. The sting of the ‘Blindeworme’ in this context is Macbeth’s fear of his own potential in accordance with the Sisters’ prophecy. Lady Macduff then refers to her son as a “monkey” in the same scene: “Now

God help thee, poor monkey!” A baboon’s blood is dripped into the cauldron—as baboons are closely related to monkeys, its blood represents the slaughter of Macduff’s son, the “monkey”.

When Lady Macduff learns that her husband has fled to England to avoid Macbeth’s wrath and potential, the Owl’s wing is referenced while comparing a threat such as Macbeth to an owl: “For the poore Wren (The most diminutive of birds) will fight, Her young ones in her Nest, against the Owle.” An Owl is used several times throughout the show to represent Macbeth, or the adversary at hand. Lady Macbeth uses it as such to refer to Duncan, in Act 2, Scene 2. As she awaits Macbeth to finish the deed of murdering Duncan, she speaks, “Hearke, Peace: It was the Owle that shriek’d, ... He is about it;” and then when Macbeth returns she reports “I heard the Owle schreame and the Crickets cry” (She refers to the sound of Duncan’s scream as he was stabbed to death). Two scene later in Act 2, Scene 4, this analogy is flipped on its head; as the old man speaks to Ross about the murder, he expresses “‘Tis unnatural [Duncan’s murder]... A Faulcon towring in her pride of place, Was by a Mowsing Owle hawkt at, and kill’d.” He uses a Hawk to represent Duncan, and an Owl, who should not have the power to overcome a hawk, to represent Macbeth. In every instance, the owl is used to represent the adversary in a character’s personal situation. Owls have long been considered to be omens or bringers of death, or were considered symbols of death, as the ancient Romans’ did: “In Ireland, if an owl enters the house it must be killed or it will take the luck of the house with it when it leaves”(Morris 93). This deep-set cultural connotation with this type of bird adds to its impact and meaning when used both in the text of the story and in the Sisters’ concoction.

This analysis could make a huge impact for an actor approaching this unusual role. A witch who seems to live in a world outside of our mortal understanding can be incredibly hard to

ground in reality enough to play, causing most to resort to theatricality. With this insight into the purpose of what the witches are actually doing with their cryptic, otherworldly actions, and a way to tangibly relate them to the story, the actors' job can be made remarkably easier, not to mention a noticeably more believable. This proves such dissection is incredibly pertinent to any modern day actor/production/translation/adaptation/interpretation, as well as a testament to Shakespeare's literary prowess.

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