CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

FOUL WITCHES AND FEMININE POWER: GENDERED REPRESENTATIONS OF

WITCHCRAFT IN THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES
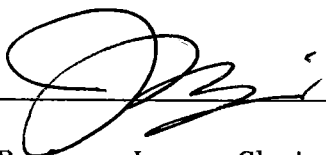

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Introduction and Methodology

"The witch, that strange woman at the edge of town – crazy, scary, ugly, disliked, but maybe, *just maybe,* smarter than anyone else in town – well, that's all of us." – Sady Doyle

On Tuesday, February 24, 2015, Sady Doyle's article "Season of the witch: why young women are flocking to the ancient craft," published in *The Guardian*, explored the beginnings of what became a conversation within the United States none could foresee would continue to this day. Rapper Azalea Banks had recently declared she was a witch on Twitter, prompting an exploration by Doyle of the rise of witchcraft in both popular culture and personal religious practice. When asked what it is about witches in particular that activists draw on for power and inspiration, Doyle quotes teacher, writer and activist Starhawk, whose 1979 book *The Spiral Dance* was an introductory manual into neo-pagan practice:

> I think that part of the power of the word is that it refers to a kind of power that is not legitimized by the authorities…Even though not all witches are women, and a lot of men are witches, it seems to connote women's power in particular. And that's very scary in a patriarchal world – the kind of power that's not just coming from the hierarchical structure, but some kind of inner power. And to use it to serve the ends that women have always stood for, like nurturing and caring for the next generation – that, I think, is a wonderfully dangerous prospect. (qtd. in Doyle)

This dangerous prospect has reverberated in feminist movements in the United States since the beginning of the suffrage movement. Kristen J. Sollée's *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* notes both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were practitioners of the Spiritualist movement, a belief system which arose in the Victorian era that "centered around communing

with the dead via séances conducted by mediums, who were often women bestowed with status and respect because of their intuitive abilities" (Sollée 50). In addition, Sollée notes the known practices of abolitionist Sojourner Truth with her "syncretic spiritual practice, which blended West African animistic beliefs, American folk magic, and Dutch Calvinism and Methodism does make her a witch in the contemporary sense of the word" (50). But it was perhaps Matilda Joslyn Gage who brought the trope of witch to the forefront of nineteenth century feminism with her 1893 piece *Woman, Church and State*, who argues witch hunts and the term "witch" was a vilifying accusation from the Christian state directed primarily towards women who possessed "superior knowledge" (52). The feminist movement of the 1960s reclaimed the term as an empowering one for autonomous women, specifically with the New York City-based W.I.T.C.H. organization, a radical feminist group who wore witch costumes, protested Senate hearings and claimed to hex the New York Stock Exchange. These women even reclaimed perhaps the most demonizing of witch depictions, the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth*, for their own protest chant: "Double, bubble, war and rubble, When you mess with women, you'll be in trouble" (53).

Since the United States' 2016 election an increasing number of Americans, particularly women, have chosen to identify as witches or Pagans. A *Newsweek* article published in November 2018 by Benjamin Fearnow titled "Number of Witches Rises Dramatically Across U.S. as Millennials Reject Christianity," cites data from the Pew Research Center that there is an estimated 1.5 million practicing witches or Pagans in America, with a focus on the millennial generation embracing a pre-Christian religious philosophy. These religious beliefs have also been integrated with political activism, such as musician Lana Del Ray's proclaiming to be a witch who casts hexes on Donald Trump and other activist groups placing hexes on Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh (Fearnow).

What is not a new trend, however, is the presumed danger of women in positions of authority by patriarchal society. While the Salem witch trials of colonial America is a prime example of the fear female power can instill in masculine authority, Europe has its own long and violent history of the persecution of witchcraft. Unlike the Puritans of Salem, Massachusetts, Europe is unique in its simultaneous celebration of the magical and the otherworldly along with its condemnation of it. This is due in large part to the nature-based religions practiced prior to the introduction of the church in Western Europe. Folklore and legends of fairies and supernatural creatures prevailed as more of a cultural element rather than a religious one, and the presence of wise women and men within a community who acted as healers, midwives or sages could not be eradicated from its centuries' long traditions. While there was a peaceful co-existence of pre-Christian pagan worship and the Church for a time, the Black Plague and an ever-growing dualistic philosophy between the Christian god as the force for good and the Devil as undiluted evil set the cultural stage for the persecution of all pre-Christian thinking (Sollée 22). Due to the rampant spread of the plague as well as the lack of technological advancements in modern medicine, accusations of supernatural evil were a convenient scapegoat (23). The most convenient of those scapegoats was a woman existing on the margins of society: an aging widow, an unmarried spinster, or just a clever and autonomous woman, who, either in actuality or theory, defied patriarchal norms. As Sollée has noted, "the archetypal witch embodied the fear of female flesh unchained. Devious and obscene, everything about her flew in the face of patriarchal authority" (22).

During the early modern era, both pagan traditions themselves and the persecution of witches that followed from them extended into the arts and entertainment of the times. Today's *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* or *Game of Thrones* was their *Macbeth* or *The Tempest*. Witches

and sorcery were a popular dramatic trope to advance the narrative, provide comic foibles or enhance the spectacle of a production (Purkiss 183). Dianne Purkiss offers an even more in depth meta-discourse on the placement of the witch in early modern drama in her book *The Witch in History*. As a figure of fear and perceived evil, the placement of the witch and magical workings in early modern drama became a sort of mirror to reflect the sociopolitical conversations of the time. Purkiss notes: "If plays do not merely reflect but produce meaning, then the impact of witch-plays on early modern audiences was to widen the gap between…skepticism and belief, print culture and oral storytelling, educated and noneducated, civic and rustic, science and superstition, men and women" (183). Witchcraft and the fear of the powerful woman remained as a figure of terror across all people groups.

Despite the fear bred against witches during the Elizabethan and early modern era, audiences continued to revel in the delight of seeing these figures of horror and malevolence brought to life upon the stage. What is particularly interesting about the Elizabethan theatrical representation of the witch is the various forms which the trope takes, particularly in regards to the gender of the figure in question. While the feminine representations of witches continued to reinforce the presupposed stigmas of vile, wicked women in cahoots with the devil to wreak havoc on any in their path, the masculine portrayal of the witch is markedly different in its imagining, offering an educated and even possibly benevolent composition. These differences are so distinctive they often ignore blatant similarities between the magical workings of two persons of the opposite gender. Perhaps even more troubling, the male witch is historically known to have been excused or forgiven his dabbling in the occult in ways the female accused never were, as will be noted later on in this project.

This paper will explore the differences present within the male and female representations of the witch in the Shakespearean plays *Henry VI, Parts 1* and *2, Macbeth*, and *The Tempest.* Additionally, the witches of some of Shakespeare's notable contemporaries will also be explored: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and *The Witch of Edmonton*, written by Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley. The question this paper seeks to answer is whether or not a clear distinction exists between binaried male and female representations of the theatrical witch in the early modern era.

I will devote a section of this paper to exploring a brief history of the European witch hunts in order to provide context for the realities of both men and women who were either accused of or confessed to being practicing witches of the age, and the comparative ways in which the genders were treated. A reference and description will be made to Reginald Scot's more skeptical approach to witchcraft in his 1584 publication *A Discoverie of Witches* as well as King James I's response to Scot in *Daemonologie*, published in 1597. These two texts along with the ideologies of the authors who penned them, particularly King James, would be a driving factor that shaped the sociological and cultural milieu of the early modern era and its subsequent literary and theatrical offerings. Additionally, a brief reference to the life and ascension of King James I himself is pivotal to a comprehension of the age, as his fascination with and condemnation of witches coupled with his absolute authority over the British monarchy colored the vision of witchcraft in the mind of his people.

But this project is not meant to be a history lesson, and while significant attention could be devoted to the myriad of documentation and historical minutiae affecting the European witch trials, the focus here is on the literary representation of these supernatural archetypes in the early modern era. Examining each of the aforementioned works chronologically from their first

production date (with the exception of *The Witch of Edmonton*, which will be compared alongside *Doctor Faustus* due to their relevant parallels in gender critique), I will argue several points regarding the female and the male witch figures during the course of these analyses. In regards to the feminine representation of the witch, she has several things in common when portrayed by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. One: she is in commune with devils or The Devil. Two: she is otherworldly, detached from the structure and regulation of society. Three: she is sexually promiscuous. Four: she vocalizes her thoughts and opinions, making her both gruesome and terrifying to the social standard of femininity during the age. Five: she is often (though not always) either of a physical appearance or stature which defies traditional gender norms. And finally, six: she is often actively working against what is portrayed as the moral authority that is the patriarchal system. The feminine representations depicted here may demonstrate part or all of these traits, but any combination stands to be a threat to patriarchal norms.

Male representations of witchcraft have unique distinctions and similarities to their feminine counterparts. Male witches may be, but are not always, in league with devils. They may or may not be of the human world, yet they are always in possession of some form of advanced education or training in the magical arts, granting them a sense of legitimacy and order to their magic that is denied the feminine witch. They may or may not be sexually promiscuous, but they are always vocal, however this is seen as a strength rather than a weakness in a male witch. Their physical appearance is not thought to defy gender norms. And finally, in direct contrast with the female witch, the male witch's brand of magic reinforces or legitimizes patriarchal rule rather than challenging it.

The remarkable and somewhat intangibly quantifiable thing about the plays of

Shakespeare is their relevancy throughout the ages. While interpretations and critiques have

shifted through the centuries, relatable and affecting content is consistently mined through his

works. With the rise of pagan practices resurging in the twenty-first century, the presence of the

supernatural in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries may also be reinterpreted for

new meaning which speaks to the present time. Throughout both of the gendered analyses of

witch characters in early modern drama, I will insert a contemporary lens of gender theory which

speaks to how an audience or reader may interpret the witch archetype today, with the hope that

these characters of Shakespeare and his contemporaries may continue to remain valuable

avenues of discourse into contemporary issues with their continued productions. The final

section of this paper will be devoted to contemporary adaptations of Shakespearean productions,

examining how twentieth and twenty-first century directors have either succumbed to or defied

interpretations of the witch and how those choices affect the overall discourse on gender-based

critique.

One note regarding the language and assignments of gender specific roles should be

clarified prior to further discussion. While it is widely recognized that gender operates on a

spectrum not limited to two specific assignments of male or female, I will be using binary

terminology as it relates to gender assignments in order to distinguish the polarity of the two

representations of the witch. This terminology may not account for the non-binary interpretation

of the transgender or gender fluid reading of certain characters (in particular the witches of

Macbeth) and is not meant to discount the queer reading of those characters. While some

attentions will be paid to the ways in which these characters defy and challenge gender norms,

for the purposes of clarity of this paper's argument, terminology of "masculine/feminine,"

"he/she," and "male/female" will be the primary nomenclature for the purposes of distinguishing the patriarchal influence present in the "masculine" witch with the persecuted and vilified other represented in the "feminine" witch. With that in mind, there are additional elements to specific characters that would not be paid justice without attentions given to a discussion on the gender fluid aspects of their depiction on stage or reading, and those aspects will also be taken into account within this paper.

Chapter One: Historical and Cultural Influences Surrounding Witchcraft in Elizabethan Drama

On Thursday, March 24 1603, Queen Elizabeth I died in her bedchambers surrounded by her ladies in waiting. But there were others waiting on the inevitable demise of the aging monarch: King James VI of Scotland, soon to be King James I of England. His succession to the throne had been meticulously crafted over the preceding years, as Christopher Lee details in his book *1603: The Death of Queen Elizabeth I, the Return of the Black Plague, the Rise of Shakespeare, Piracy, Witchcraft, and the Birth of the Stuart Era*. James, according to Lee, was a man of great intellectual prowess from a very young age, considered a scholar at the age of eight and capable of reciting the histories of every nation-state by sixteen (Lee 82). James considered himself a Calvinist, attracted by its "simplicity, rigidity, and intellectual cleanliness" (82).

It was perhaps James's religious convictions, perhaps his political prowess in combating the Jesuits and the Catholic Church, or perhaps a combination of these and other factors which lead James to his almost bizarre fixation on witchcraft. Indeed, the fear of witchcraft was not

James's alone, but a common cultural angst of the people of a centuries' old practice unbound by law and outside the realms of understanding. As Christopher Lee explores, while the understanding of the sudden death of a child, a failure of crops, or an herbal remedy given by a rural community healer can be rationalized and explained by science, this knowledge was not yet discovered at this time, and even less knowledge readily available to the rural communities of England (Lee 246, 250). In its stead was superstition and fear of the unexplained. Rather than accept the unexplainable, reasoning for misfortune was found in witchcraft; fingers were pointed at those suspected of practicing it, leading to their trials and executions. As we shall see in our later examination of *Macbeth*, a play written by Shakespeare specifically for King James, the preoccupation Macbeth himself has towards the Weird Sisters is a possible allusion to King James's own fascination. "Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence or why / Upon this blasted heath you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.3.78-81). These words, charged to the Weird Sisters after their prophecy that Macbeth will becoming Thane of Cawdor and then king, is a validation Macbeth gives credit to their presence and words. When the prophecy of Macbeth becoming Thane of Cawdor is fulfilled, the affirmation of his faith in the Sisters only grows, leading to his consultation of the Sisters in their Black Mass in Act Four, Scene One. Although James would never profess to consult with witches himself, evidenced by his *Daemonologie* text and overall condemnation of witchcraft, it is clear he and Macbeth share a belief in their power.

In March of 1563, the "Act Against Conjururacions Inchantments and Witchecraftes" was passed (Lee 247). This act, passed under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, meant the trial and execution of any person thought to be practicing witchcraft. It is interesting that despite Elizabeth's passing of this act, she is noted not to have herself personally enforced any witch

hunts or encouraged the prosecution and punishment of accused witches, as Selma R. Williams notes in *Riding the Nightmare* (Williams 90). Perhaps it was due to her own womanhood and the suspicion of herself as a female in power being accused of witchcraft, one can only speculate.

What is also both intriguing and oddly contradictory is the decline of witch trials in England after Queen Elizabeth's death (Williams 91). Trials and executions of suspected witches reached their peak in the mid-1670s and then began to decline in England afterward, although trials and executions in other parts of the world, namely France and Germany, continued in full force (Bailey 156). But while the actual numbers of persons put on trial for witchcraft may have declined, the unfavorable attitude towards witches certainly did not dissipate in England with King James's succession to the throne. Indeed, after his coronation laws against witches only became harsher: execution could be enforced if someone could be found *intending* to practice magic without actually attempting anything or even those found to be consorting with a witch in any way (Lee 247). Selma Williams argues the strengthening of laws and increased persecution of women under the guise of punishing witchcraft can be simplified into a patriarchal show of force to remain in control:

> Political scientists theorized and men believed that government was based on a compact or contract between God and men who were strong, virtuous, and intelligent. If women who were weak, prey to temptation (since Eve), and stupid should ever make a similar pact with the Devil, they would have unlimited power, but only to produce evil rather than good, anarchy instead of stability. In other words, men went round and round in circles, using the same arguments to exclude women from political power and to execute them for witchcraft (Williams 106).

In early modern drama, these ideas are illustrated in almost every depiction of women discussed in this paper. Mother Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton* is a prime example of a poor, desolate woman succumbing to temptation and using her power to instigate evil: "So I might work / revenge upon this miser, this black cur" (Dekker et al. 1.1). Joan La Pucelle, a woman who defied conventions of traditional masculinity and femininity, living as a warrior and authority figure for the French, is revealed in *Henry VI Part One* to derive her powers from devils: "Now help, you charming spells and periapts, / And you choice spirits that admonish me, / And give me signs of future accidents" (Shakespeare, *Henry VI Pt.1*, 5.3.2-4). Finally, Lady Macbeth, often described as a fourth witch in the play, invokes spirits to unsex her for the evil deed of aiding in regicide: "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (*Macbeth* 1.5.47-50). According to the masculine playwrights behind these female voices, any woman who would be seeking out power could only be doing so with nefarious intent.

In the early modern era, it was the fear of women obtaining any semblance of autonomy that terrified the patriarchal system and lead to persecution. In the twenty-first century, it is interesting how this trope becomes subverted and used as a tool not only to amplify the history of patriarchal oppression against women, but to be reclaimed by women as an empowering figure: a knowledgeable, threatening woman with access to forces incomprehensible to those who fear her. Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, a sociological exploration of pagans in America, speaks to the connection the feminist movement has made to the figure of the witch: "In a society that has traditionally oppressed women, there are few positive images of female power. Some of the most potent of these are the Witches, the ancient healers, and the powerful women of preclassical Aegean civilizations and Celtic myth" (Adler 185). As the feminist movement

found its voice, it reclaimed a character meant to demonize them and instead refashioned her into an object of admiration.

But to return for now to the early modern era; because of this already existing threat of witchcraft, it is possible James either shared the dread of witchcraft with his people, used their fear to his political advantage, or perhaps a combination of the two. There is no doubt James held a morbid fascination with witches, or at least with their prosecution. In 1590, thirteen years before James's coronation as the King of England, Christopher Lee cites James's attendance of the trials of accused witch John Feine (Lee 253). In addition, the publication of *Daemonologie* by the future king of England in 1597 as a rebuttal to Reginald Scot's *A Discoverie of Witches* proves James's insistence on the existence of malevolent supernatural forces. Scot's *Discoverie,* published in 1584, takes a hardline skeptic's view on witchcraft. According to occult scholar Marion Gibson, Scot's perception of the witch trials amounted to little more than the product of human superstition and "demonic delusion," perhaps entertaining stories but essentially unreal (Gibson 25). It should be noted briefly that Reginald Scot was in no way in defense of those accused of witchcraft, particularly women. As Selma Williams observes in *Riding the Nightmare,* the tone of Scot's text is indeed rather misogynistic, in one part observingly tauntingly that the devil has no need of old, sickly women to do his bidding (Williams 89).

King James, on the other hand, had no such doubts regarding the formidable power women could yield. Selma Williams notes the abandonment of James by his mother, Queen Anne of Scots, and murder of his father, suspected at the hands of Anne and her lover. Queen Elizabeth eventually had Anne put to death; after which began a long wait for the crown by James, with Elizabeth dangling it before him without ever promising his succession outright (Williams 95). James also experienced his own brush with witchcraft when his longtime political

enemy the Earl of Bothwell was accused of using witchcraft to cause a shipwreck that would

have murdered King James and his future bride, Anne of Denmark (96). For a further allusion to

the similarities between James and Macbeth, it is interesting Shakespeare wrote Macbeth to have

similar struggles with women in authoritarian positions who challenge or subvert the male lead.

Because of this and other experiences, and perhaps coupled with a dislike towards female

authority figures, James composed *Daemonologie* to counter Scot's *Discoverie* (Williams 103).

The contents of King James's counter-text *Daemonologie* are a dialogue between two scholars,

Philomathes and Epistemon about the existence and doings of witches. Philomathes is the

skeptic, unsure of the existence of witches or supernatural power, who is continuously proven

wrong in the text by Epistemon (Tyson 28). One may speculate this to be a sort of imaginary

conversation between James himself and the skeptic Reginald Scot. However, it is clear King

James got the "last laugh" as it were, ordering all copies of *A Discoverie of Witches* to be burned

almost immediately after his coronation (Bailey 167).

Within the text of James's *Daemonologie*, the reader is able to bear witness to the

genuine fear, repulsion and sincere conviction he felt regarding the existence of witchcraft.

Within his text, James cites what he determines to be clear evidence for the existence of witches

based on scripture from the Bible: "As first, in the law of God it is plainly prohibited (Exodus

22), but certain it is that the law of God speaks nothing in vain, neither doth it lay curses or

enjoin punishments upon shadows, condemning that to be ill what is not in essence, or being, as

we call it" (Tyson 58). James also writes in detail about the alleged practices of witches,

including transporting themselves to various locations via spirits (121), turning themselves into

animals (122), and bewitching the wills and physical wellbeing of others (129).

But there may also have been some political motivations behind James's persecution of accused witches, as evidenced by Gary Wills's examination of the Gunpowder Plot and its connections to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was a failed attempt to assassinate King James and the whole of Parliament. This attempt was committed by a group of Jesuits who installed kegs of gunpowder in a vault under the Parliament building with the intent to be ignited by munitions expert Guy Fawkes but was foiled when Fawkes was caught with the detonator (Wills 14). Wills goes on to detail the monarch's response to what would have been a catastrophic event akin to the destruction of the United States' Capital building while in session. The British monarch calmed the people by way of a formal address and distribution of pamphlets emphasizing not only the King's omniscient power to foresee and prevent the nefarious plot via divine intervention, but the vilification of the Jesuit assassins as witches and instruments of the devil (18). While it is impossible to determine James's true motivations or internal process, it does appear that whether his convictions were sincere or not he and his advisors effectively utilized the public's fear of witchcraft to their political advantage.

Those fears certainly existed prior to the reign of King James. As mentioned, the execution of witches was at its peak during the Elizabethan reign. The integration of the Church with pre-Christian pagan thought and practice created a strange mishmash of superstitious ideology, some harmless fun and some fear-mongering tools for government sponsored torture and murder. Ronald Hutton's account of witches in a global context throughout history in *The Witch* offers a combined perspective of how the innocuous and the malevolent seemed to coexist. Fairies and other supernatural beings were a part of pre-Christian mythos in Europe long before the insertion of the Church. Hutton cites several accounts of persons claiming to have learned magical skills from fairies and dealings with the fairy kingdom (Hutton 220-21). Fairies, notably,

are not to be confused with witches; witches being mortal humans and fairies being otherworldly

creatures. However, the confession of a person having dealings with a fairy often could easily

result in the person being accused of practicing witchcraft, as fairies could easily be converted

into demonic beings in superstitious lore (221). It is interesting that Hutton notes the necessity of

fairies to be presumed to be devils in disguise in order for an alleged witch to be convicted,

which suggests that the presence of fairies and other magical beings besides fairies were

culturally unobjectionable and even celebrated in the early modern era. These beings were so

integral to the culture that, in order for the Church to successfully integrate, compromises had to

be made on Pagan and Christian holidays and an infusion of the two in order to satisfy the

cultural of the English community and common folk. As noted in "Popular Festivals and Court

Celebrations" in the critical edition of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and

Contexts*, the Maygames and Midsummer festivals which may have inspired Shakespeare's fairy-

filled romp were a vital component of cultural morale amongst the people (Howard and Werstine

90). Thus, a cognitive dissonance could be suggested to exist amongst the people of Europe at

this time for their celebration of fairy folk and condemnation of witchcraft. Though perhaps this

dissonance could be circumvented if a person wanted to accuse another of witchcraft, with the

fairy and devil figure being easily interchangeable.

   While it is true not all witches were women, records indicate women were the

predominant persons convicted of witchcraft (Lee 247). Diane Purkiss, who takes a perspective

on witches in the early modern era that is met with some controversy, paints an image of a witch

– or at least a woman who may be accused as a witch – as a woman willfully seeking social

standing in the community. With little opportunity for autonomy outside the household for

women of the time, power might be found in the ability to practice healing or other magical arts

through herbal remedies and potions, or to serve as a midwife in the community (Purkiss 94).

But a desire for some sense of liberty within the early modern patriarchal society had its

repercussions, as infants who were stillborn or died in infancy could easily be traced back to the

midwife as evidence of black magic. These indirect accusations are demonstrated in drama with

The Witch of Edmonton, where all the calamities taking place in Edmonton are blamed on

Mother Sawyer.

On the other hand, male practitioners of witchcraft, while they could stand to be accused

just as females could, seemed in contrast to occasionally be able to operate outside the

boundaries of the law or even cultural stigma against practitioners of the occult. One such

example is John Dee, Queen Elizabeth I's astrologer. According to James Sharpe, Dee was a

Cambridge scholar of Welsh descent who eventually found himself the astrological advisor to

Queen Elizabeth. Although his education and exploits did result in accusations of witchcraft or

suspected assassination attempts of other monarchs by way of sorcery, Dee eluded the fate of so

many others who were executed for even the suspicion of practicing magic (Sharpe 39-40). The

reasons why Dee's actions were not considered punishable by law are up for debate: perhaps it

was his protection by way of the Queen, perhaps his status as an educated man, or more likely

some combination of the two. However, his favor of the Queen did not exempt him from the ill

favor received by King James after Elizabeth's death. Donald Tyson notes in his translation of

Daemonologie that while James saw no value in trying Dee for accusations posed against him for

witchcraft, it is widely regarded that James detested Dee and refused to offer him financial aid in

a time Dee was in great need. Still, Dee lived out his days free from the persecution faced by

others for the crime of witchcraft (Tyson 85). The representation of the learned and respected

magician who are, unlike their female counterparts, free from persecution, is represented in early

modern drama with characters such as Doctor Faustus and Prospero. As will be explored in the next chapter, the distinction of the learned male magician from the uneducated female magician in the context of Shakespearean and other Elizabethan drama is a significant one that presents the reader with an explicit double-standard of the practice of magic between the masculine and feminine person.

Chapter Two: Comparative Analysis of Masculine and Feminine Representations of the Witch

Witch, wizard, sorcerer, magician: these are just a few of the appellations given to a character who practices the magical arts. Prospero from *The Tempest* is a learned magician, yet Sycorax is a villainous witch, despite evidence of their comparable abilities. *Doctor Faustus* tells the tale of a respected doctor who dabbles in the magical arts; *The Witch of Edmonton* the tale of a poor, oppressed woman who does the same. Why is one revered and the other condemned? For that matter, why are all female practitioners of magic criminalized while their male counterparts are either excused or even celebrated for strikingly similar actions? As the previous chapter explored, despite the fact that a woman sat on England's throne, ideology towards women in the early modern era was unfavorable. Adding a dread of magical capabilities to the unease felt towards women compounded this fear, barring any woman perceived as practicing magical arts to be seen in a positive light. This is clearly represented throughout early modern drama.

As noted, fear of witchcraft in England did not begin with King James I. As Marjorie Garber notes in her book *Shakespeare After All,* the portrayal of the so-called history plays in

Shakespeare's folio may have served as a simultaneous celebration and slight against the reigning Queen Elizabeth I. While Elizabeth's ascendants may be traced directly from the War of the Roses and the history plays which chronicle this lineage (*Henry VI Parts 1-3* and *Richard the Third,* among others) may be perceived as a celebration of her rule, they may also be interpreted as a subtle undermining of her reign with the portrayal as witches of the characters Joan La Pucelle (contemporarily referred to as Joan of Arc) and to some lesser extent Margaret of Anjou (Garber 91). Both women, as Garber describes, present strikingly different while equally intimidating representations of an autonomous female figure. Joan La Pucelle is a "cross-dressed martial" who easily bests men in single combat during Part One, while Margaret is "seductively feminine" in appearance but with an intellect and lust for power that places her in a position of dominance over her husband, Henry VI, in Part Two (91). Both women are a threat to the patriarchal society and simultaneously the crown. Interestingly, Shakespeare's depiction of Joan La Pucelle is not a far stretch from his original source material, *The Holinshed Chronicles*, the historical account of British history. The document presents Joan as "of person strongly made and manly, of courage great, hardy and stout" whose accolades were quickly abandoned, her heroic persona cast aside and Joan condemned as a witch (Hosley 154-55). Joan subverts patriarchal norms in every sense: her status, her appearance, even her physical prowess. She readily challenges Charles Dauphin in hand to hand combat: "And while I live, I'll ne'er fly from a man," and easily bests him (Shakespeare, *Henry VI Pt. 1*, 1.2.105).

Though Joan claims her superior strength derives from divine intervention, Part One of *Henry VI* culminates in Joan La Pucelle's sorcery being found out and her put to death as a result, as Marion Gibson notes (Gibson 26). Richard Hosley's translation of *Holinshed* also includes Joan's supposed confession of practicing witchcraft, similar to its dramatic rendition in

Shakespeare (Hosley 158). Gibson's commentary on the witches in the *Henry VI* plays is

succinct and a part of a larger chapter commentating on several witches in early modern drama.

Gibson's inattention to Joan La Pucelle is somewhat of a detriment to her otherwise insightful

work, as Joan is a clear example of the dramatic representation of a feminine historical figure

defamed, and Joan's strength, either physical or intellectual, is attributed solely to the influence

of witchcraft. What may be interpreted by this portrayal in *Henry VI Part One* is that the

feminine form is incapable of possessing or exercising any show of power or act not explicitly

conforming to the patriarchal definition of a woman's role, and any deviance from this norm is

undoubtedly a product of witchcraft.

Due to the *Holinshed Chronicles'* vilifying account of Joan La Pucelle, Shakespeare and

his collaborators cannot be primarily responsible for their negative portrayal. As H.W.

Herrington notes in "Witchcraft and Magic in the Elizabethan Drama," the historical account of

Joan La Pucelle in *The Holinshed Chronicles* also attributes her prowess in battle to communion

with devils (Herrington 473). Liberties are certainly taken, however, within the narrative of

Henry VI Part One. The primary scenes of witchcraft occur in Act Five, when Joan reveals her

involvement in witchcraft and attempts to invoke demonic spirits to aid her in the face of defeat.

"Now help, you charming spells and periapts / And you choice spirits that admonish me / And

give me signs of future accidents…Appear, and aid me in this enterprise" (*Henry VI Part One*

5.3.2-4, 7). Joan's plea to the supernatural fails and she is captured by the English heroes of the

narrative. Here Herrington notes the play's compatibility once again with the early modern

historical record of *The Holinshed Chronicles* in Scene 4 of Act 5, or Joan's trial. First denying

the acts of witchcraft, then pleading for a stay of execution due to pregnancy, and finally after all

fails going forth to her execution. But Herrington is also sure to note that the play elaborates on

the language and the drama of the trial itself, likely pulling from accounts of actual witch trials

taking place at the time (Herrington 474). Though Shakespeare perhaps need not have resorted to

such elaborate drama to distinguish the threat Joan La Pucelle's character would have instigated

from an early modern audience; as Garber notes, merely her presentation as a warrior and female

defying feminine norms alone was enough to be seen as a menace to the norms of acceptable

gender standards (Garber 96).

Margaret of Anjou's bewitching qualities are far subtler, but arguably from Garber even

more dangerous in the eyes of an Elizabethan audience. While Joan may present as an affront to

norms of womanly behavior Margaret is the embodiment of it, at least in aesthetic. As Garber

notes, Margaret's power asserts itself right as Joan's is quelled; the very scene after Joan is sent

to be executed, Margaret of Anjou appears on stage with Henry VI, who might be suggested to

be spellbound with love for Margaret (99). "Her sight did ravish, but her grace in speech, / Her

words yclad with wisdom's majesty, / Makes me from wondr'ing fall to weeping joys, / Such is

the fullness of my heart's content" (Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part Two* 1.1.35-38). As is revealed

in Part Two of *Henry VI*, however, that love is not reciprocated. Margaret of Anjou is in love

with another, Suffolk, and uses her domineering nature to control King Henry to suit her own

ends. Although she does not practice witchcraft in the play, her subjugation over her own

husband and assertion of presumed masculine qualities carries a similar tone to the emasculating

Lady Macbeth, a character who would come into being approximately a decade later (Garber

107). But Margaret, despite her cunning nature, is not strictly a witch: that title for this

installment is given to Margery Jordan and Roger Bolingbrooke, solicited by Eleanor, the

Duchess of Gloucester, in an attempt to see her husband usurp the throne from Henry VI (108).

As Herrington notes, the sinister conjuring of the spirit Asmath is quickly foiled, Eleanor

banished and the witches put to death (Herrington 474). But the tone of these plays cements a sense of fear and aversion to female authority figures in early modern England, justifying their power either through sexual manipulation or outright witchcraft.

These three distinct characters portrayed in *Henry VI Parts 1-2* all represent various aspects of dangerous females who instill dread in the hearts of the patriarchal system to this day. Joan La Pucelle is the androgynous warrior; Margaret of Anjou is the seductive femme fatale and Margery Jordan the canonical witch; all three subvert standards of what is deemed acceptable feminine behavior. King James cites in *Daemonologie* that women are the most prone to succumbing to temptation of the Devil, "For as that sex is frailer than man is, so it is easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil, as was overwell proved to be true by the Serpent's deceiving of Eve at the beginning" (Tyson 128). The ideology of women being a "frailer" sex is not an idea that has faded into obscurity with the passing of time. Published almost two hundred years after *Henry VI Part One* is Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Wollstonecraft challenges the judgment of women as feeble-minded and more susceptible to immorality: "If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea" (36). To return to and parallel this ideology with Shakespeare's depiction of Joan La Pucelle, who fought for the French and her own dedication and love for her country and its people, her own sense of national pride and conviction to use her abilities to stand for the people of France is equal in virtue to the Duke of Gloucester's allegiance to England, yet Gloucester is heroic and Joan is vilified. While this could certainly be attributed to the play's focus on England's war with the French, it is only Joan who is portrayed as a witch among the French people due to her rejection of gender roles and seizure of power in a

traditionally masculine setting. Charles Dauphin, the prince of France, is never hinted at practicing witchcraft, as he is a male in his societally accepted position of authority.

In regards to Margaret of Anjou, her exertion of feminine wiles in an attempt to obtain her own goals, seen as a villainous and bewitching quality, is another illustration of men's fear of female self-assurance. Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that the subject of sex, from the Middle Ages on, has increasingly become one of repression, a tool for members of the church clergy and governmental institutions to induce shame and exercise control (Foucault 33-35). Conversations around sex morphed into a mechanism with which to control the institution of marriage, the means of procreation and, in effect, the submission of a wife to a husband (37). In addition, the physical body of a woman itself becomes an object to be controlled and regulated. Sandra Lee Bartky explores the latter concept in her essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." Bartky emphasizes the goal of a patriarchal subjugation against women's physical form is to "produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those that are directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (67-8). When those demands of the patriarchy are rebelled against, or perhaps more dangerously complied with on the surface but employed in its own act of rebellion against the patriarchy, the woman becomes an enemy to the institution; such is Margaret of Anjou in *Henry VI Part Two*. King Henry esteems her beauty at the beginning of the play: "For Thou hast given me in this beauteous face / A world of earthly blessings to my soul / If sympathy of love unite our thoughts" (*Henry VI Part Two* 1.1.24-26). In turn, Margaret responds with lip service, gracious of his compliments but not necessarily returning them in kind: "With you, mine alderliefest sovereign, / Makes me the bolder to salute my King / With ruder terms, such as my wit affords"

(1.1.31-33). Her position as the Queen puts her in a place of authority and influence over King Henry, who is so infatuated by her beauty it may cloud his own judgment. And so it does, as he fails to see Margaret's later affair with Suffolk and her plot to kill the Duke of Gloucester. This portrait of a female figure who appears to meet with patriarchal conventions and yet simultaneously defies them seems to communicate that no man is safe, that any woman in any position could be seeking to usurp masculine authority with their undetected abilities, whether supernatural or not.

While Shakespeare reinforced the image of powerful women as forces for evil in his *Henry VI* plays, Christopher Marlowe's take on the supernatural presented a masculine portrait in *Doctor Faustus*. Published for the stage in 1592, the same year as *Henry VI Part One*, Marlowe's depiction of a learned scholar led astray by hubris and dark forces which ultimately result in his damnation is markedly different from the cross-dressing warrior Joan La Pucelle or the traditional trope of the demon-summoning witch Margery Jordan. Faustus practices magic as a form of science, "mastered only after the most arduous and prolonged study" (Herrington 459). Herrington's commentary on Faustus depicts a protagonist, not a villain, who like other "learned magicians" are "gentlemen, scholars, and philosophers…torn in conscience like all of us, kindly in motive with the best of us, impelled toward their unholy and dangerous studies through very human ambitions for knowledge and power" (459). This is a differentiation from other representations of witches previously discussed. It is the portrayal of a fully formed human character fallen from grace. Considering Faustus engages in the summoning and controlling of demons, not unlike *Henry VI Part One's* Joan La Pucelle, it is curious what specific distinctions there could be that would make Faustus an empathetic character and Joan an unapologetic villain.

The legend of John Faustus, a German alchemist and magician, was an inspiration for Christopher Marlowe and, as H.W. Herrington postulates, a source of personal inspiration for the playwright (Herrington 461). Faustus's quest for knowledge and power leads him to a subsequent rejection of religious and scientific thought and eventual commitment to magical practice at the expense of his soul (461). The fact that Faustus is a historical figure is a direct correlation to Shakespeare's characterization of Joan La Pucelle, also a real figure in history. However, Faustus was a known practitioner and student of occult arts, while Joan was only accused of such by history due to her defiance of gender norms. These dramatic representations of one male and one female historical figures as witches demonstrates a double standard in methodology behind accusations dependent on gender. For the male figure, he is permitted to self-identify: Faustus claimed to be a practitioner of the occult arts and thus was presumed to be so. For the female, however, accusations are made regardless or in spite of how she wishes to present herself to the world. Joan of Arc sought to be a warrior and defender of her people as well as a practitioner of the Catholic faith, but due to her shirking of traditional gender roles was condemned as a witch. The liberty to identify oneself, it seems by these examples, is limited only to male figures.

As John S. Mebane postulates of *Doctor Faustus* in his book *Renaissance Magic & The Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition & Marlowe, Jonson & Shakespeare*, Marlowe's play is not a morality play, but rather a "tragedy which dramatizes a conflict between two irreconcilable systems of value" (118). These systems of value, human authority and autonomy pitted against religious conviction, are again only debatable through the personage of a masculine figure. Joan La Pucelle claimed to have fought on behalf of her spiritual faith, but none of this human conflict is seen in her characterization. Throughout the play, Faustus is

confronted again and again with the opportunity to repent from his pact with Lucifer and that he will be forgiven. He is tempted by Mephistopheles and other demons, but he also rejects the notion of redemption by speculating that he cannot possibly be forgiven. "The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus" (Marlowe 5.2.15-16). These are Faustus's own words shortly before he is condemned to hell, and not unlike a number of other moments where he is given the opportunity to repent. Indeed, Faustus seems to spend more time fretting over his eventual descent to hell than he does enjoying the powers bestowed on him. Though Marlowe does not deny the audience shows of his power, as noted by Marion Gibson in *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft.* The mocking of knights, popes, displays of fireworks, many appearances of devils and apparitions provides a spectacled display of fantastic feats which create an oddly ambiguous narrative: is the play condemning Faustus, or is Faustus condemning himself? Gibson believes Marlowe's show of magic suggests the author's moral position on magic may be a bit vaguer than the polarized view which its protagonist takes ("Rediscovering," 26). Gibson goes on to comment on the play's ambiguous nature in *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550-1750,* noting that Marlowe seems to intentionally be composing a portrait of a magician for which the audience can feel sympathy, due to Faustus's constant plight over his own choices ("Witchcraft," 171). This too is another departure from women practicing magic in early modern drama, whose moral authority is not left open to interpretation, at least not by the audiences of the era for which they were written.

Another early modern depiction of witchcraft aside from Shakespeare, though published several years later than Marlowe and Shakespeare's works mentioned here is *The Witch of Edmonton*, co-written by Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley in 1621. I will briefly examine this play directly after *Doctor Faustus* despite its later timeline as the narrative and the

character of Mother Sawyer, the witch in the play, is a commensurate example to illustrate the stark contrast between the male and female witch figures in the character of Mother Sawyer, who arguably was never permitted by her own extenuating circumstances to define herself or lay claim to her own moral authority, unlike Doctor Faustus.

Mother Sawyer, or the resident witch in *The Witch of Edmonton,* is introduced in Act II, gathering sticks in a field and lamenting her lot in life. "And why on me? why should the envious world / Throw all their scandalous malice upon me? … Some call me witch / And being ignorant of myself, they go / About to teach me how to be one" (Dekker et al 2.1). It is made apparent Sawyer's claims are not unfounded, as promptly townsperson Old Banks arrives in the scene to torment Sawyer and wrongly accuse her of practicing witchcraft. The townspeople's presumption and condemnation of Mother Sawyer as a witch appears to derive only from the fact that she is a woman who is poor, old and unmarried. Sawyer has already been tried and convicted by the court of public opinion as a witch. As a result, when the Black Dog appears to Sawyer introducing himself as "the devil" who can "Do any mischief unto man or beast" on Sawyer's behalf on the condition she sell her soul, Sawyer readily agrees and thus affirms the status already enforced on her by the Edmonton community (2.1).

While the similarity of an individual making a pact with the devil for power is shared between Mother Sawyer and Doctor Faustus, there are several distinctions between the two that illustrate the distinctions of the two persons reinforced by their respective genders. Firstly, the status of each: Doctor Faustus is unmarried, and was born into poverty, but by the support of his community became educated and respected: "Now is he born, his parents base of stock…Of riper years, to Würtemmberg he went / Whereas his kinsmen chiefly brought him up. / So soon he profits in divinity…That shortly he was graced with doctor's name" (Marlowe 1.1.11,13-15,17).

Contrarily, Mother Sawyer's background is never even bothered to be revealed. It is presumed by the audience she is reviled merely for her existence as an old, unmarried woman of low status. Rather than excise charity towards her when Old Banks discovers her on his land struggling to collect firewood, he forces her to abandon her measly findings, drives her from his land and beats her (Dekker 2.1). While Faustus was supported and lifted up by his community, Mother Sawyer was always vilified.

The status of these two individuals therefore effects the ways in which they come into their supernatural power, as well as the ways they interact with the demons charged to them. The Black Dog who visits Mother Sawyer following her desperate pleas for revenge upon those who wrong her seems to capitalize on both Sawyer's despair and her lack of education. "Ho! Have I found thee cursing? now thou art / Mine own" (Dekker 2.1). The Dog immediately ensnares Mother Sawyer, persuading her to believe she has no choice in the matter to sell her soul to him. In fact, the Dog threatens violence on Sawyer if she doesn't comply: "If thou deniest, / I'll tear thy body in a thousand pieces" (2.1). While Sawyer is clearly conflicted regarding the moral implications of selling her soul and that her original rage and cursing appeared to be mostly an act of venting frustration, the Dog has convinced her she has no choice in the matter at this point.

This forcing of the hand was not in the least Doctor Faustus's experience. Indeed, Faustus seems to have to persuade Mephistopheles to enter into a contract with him rather than the other way around: "I am a servant to great Lucifer / And may not follow these without his leave. / No more than he commands must we perform" (Marlowe 1.3.40-42). Mephistopheles makes it clear to Faustus he is not in a position to allow Faustus to sell his soul, nor can he assist Faustus in any magical workings until he obtains approval from the management. Faustus convinces Mephistopheles to obtain permissions from Lucifer. Ultimately Faustus, as Mother Sawyer does,

enters into a blood pact, selling his soul to the devil in exchange for power. But the distinction between the two plays is clear: Faustus, even after selling his soul, always retains his autonomy. He is implored again and again to repent, forsake his sorcery and return to God. Faustus continues to reject these pleas from his friends and angelic beings until the time of his death. Mother Sawyer, on the other hand, never seems to possess any sense of self-governance. She is either at the mercy of the abuse of the townsfolk or the whims of the Black Dog, the latter of whom using her primarily to fulfill his own mischief then abandoning Sawyer to be burned as a witch by the community. When Mother Sawyer is captured and accused of causing the death of a villager, she implores the Dog for help. In response, the Dog refuses to assist Sawyer, furthermore insisting there is no salvation or repentance for her: "Thy time is come to curse, and rave, and die; the glass of / thy sins is full, and it must run out at gallows" (Dekker 5.1). Sawyer is never allowed the opportunity to repent, and unlike Faustus she even desires it: "Bear witness, I repent all former evil; / There is no damnèd conjuror like the devil" (5.2). Her words fall upon deaf ears, however, as she is subsequently carried off to be executed. Faustus, on the other hand, refuses again and again to repent, feeling he is beyond redemption despite everyone insisting otherwise: "But Faustus' offence can ne'ever be pardoned. The / serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus" (Marlowe 5.2.41-42).

Comparing Faustus and Mother Sawyer presents us with two distinct and yet strangely convoluted perspectives of the witch figure. As Diane Purkiss notes in *The Witch in History*, "usually, the stage is read as complicit in witch-hunting, but [*Edmonton* is] uneasy about what exactly [it wishes] to endorse or how to read the increasingly cloudy figure of the witch" (246). *Doctor Faustus* likewise presents us with an equally ambivalent subject matter by a playwright who was a suspected atheist. Because of Marlowe's contrary or at the very least unverified

personal worldviews, the context of *Doctor Faustus* is highly interpretive, perhaps "an endorsement of contemporary atheism [or] a condemnation of it" (Gibson 171). Gibson goes on to define Faustus as "the Renaissance magus, a learned man who treads a dangerous line between satanic and divine, and who may or may not remain on the side of the angels" (172). This is considerably more reverence than that which is granted to Mother Sawyer, although this may perhaps be the intent of the playwrights. While it is impossible to know for certain, the emphasis with which Dekker and his co-writers detail Sawyer's abuse at the hands of the townsfolk and her seemingly inescapable turn to the devil present Mother Sawyer more as a victim than transgressor. In this way, *The Witch of Edmonton* may be inadvertently more progressive than first appearances give it credit, as it demonstrates a more practical and sympathetic narrative of lower class women accused of such crimes regardless of the truth of the matter (Gibson 125).

In contemporary feminist commentary, Mother Sawyer's plight might be compared to the 2015 Roger Eggers' film *The Witch*, the story of a Puritan family exiled from their community and forced to survive on their own who encounter witches in the woods outside their land. The oldest daughter, whose youth and burgeoning sexuality is threatening to the other family members, is demonized and tormented by her mother, and eventually forced into the same impossible choice as Mother Sawyer: "the protagonist can't beat Satan, so she joins him…a choice the young girl makes to survive within the existing patriarchal system" (Sollée 116). Unlike Sawyer's fate, however, four hundred years of progressive feminist thought allows *The Witch* to be viewed as a liberation from patriarchal norms rather than a cautionary tale for defying them.

While *Doctor Faustus* and *The Witch of Edmonton* are not as well known to anyone not well versed in early modern drama, another witch-focused tale by William Shakespeare is

perhaps one of his most noted and oft-adapted works: the Scottish play, or *Macbeth*. After his

portrayal of Joan La Pucelle and the other witches of *Henry VI,* Shakespeare took an intermission

from plays directly dealing with or involving witches which lasted approximately a decade

("Timeline of Shakespeare's Plays"). *Macbeth,* first performed in 1606 and three years after the

coronation of King James I, is often considered to be a play written specifically for the new king

(Williams 12). As George Walton Williams argues in "Macbeth: King James's Play," the

references within the text to the historical records found in the *Holinshed Chronicles* as well as

Shakespeare's allusions to the direct line of succession leading to James's reign would have been

of particular interest to the king (13-14, 18). Seeing witches, figures of which James had a

particular fascination with and revulsion towards, represented on stage in this way may have

been intentional of Shakespeare to pique James's interest, particularly as it is based on the

Holinshed's historical record of the actual Macbeth's consorting with witches (14). The

Holinshed's account of the witches is more or less aligned with Shakespeare's retelling, from

Macbeth and Banquo's encounter with three "weird women" who predict Macbeth's eventual

kingship and Banquo's line of succession after (Hosley 17). In the *Holinshed*, however, Banquo

assists Macbeth with the regicide and Macbeth's reign is for a time peaceful until his paranoia

overtakes him and he becomes a tyrant, killing Banquo for fear of the Sisters' prophecy (20).

King James's similar paranoia regarding witches, as has previously been discussed in this

paper, clearly had an impact on his reign. The failed assassination attempt that was the

Gunpowder Plot, as discussed in Gary Wills's *Witches & Jesuits*, and the propaganda released by

the monarchy accusing Jesuits of being witches certainly would have brought the subject of

witchcraft into the forefront of culture at the time. The Weird Sisters of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

play both a central and political role to the plot in a not dissimilar way that James accused the

Jesuits (Wills 35). The accusation of witchcraft against the Jesuits was an easy target for the

monarchy with the former's use of healing relics and frequents exorcisms. Making the jump to

the Jesuits' organization of a Black Mass to organize the Gunpowder Plot did not seem so far-

fetched in comparison (36).

A direct parallel can be drawn from this speculation of a Black Mass by the Jesuits to the

Black Mass of the Weird Sisters and Macbeth in Act Four, Scene One. Macbeth, who seeks out

the Sisters for counsel after his terrifying visit from the murdered ghost of Banquo, engages in a

sort of Black Mass with the Sisters, who conjure spirits which inform Macbeth, albeit elusively,

of his fate. Macbeth's dealings with the witches directly in this conjuration of prophetic spirits,

making him an active participant in the magical workings, have caused Wills to hypothesize

Macbeth himself is a witch (56). Wills's argument is that Macbeth seems to be in tune with the

language of the Weird Sisters. He talks of his "black desires," "night's black agents," and "pale

Hecate's offerings" long before he attends the Black Mass with the Sisters, invoking and

acknowledging their power (56). Macbeth is channeling their power, but he is not the fount of it

in the way the witches themselves are. Macbeth solicits the Weird Sisters' supernatural authority

in an attempt to design his fate to suit his own desires. He is ignorant, however, of the magic he

is invoking, as evidenced by his misunderstanding of the prophecies foretold in the Black Mass.

Macbeth's failed appropriation of the Weird Sister's power for his own ends may be

interpreted as both a veiled reference to the dangers of feminine authority and an inadvertent

incursion on the failure of patriarchal systems to respect the abilities and knowledge of women.

King James notes in *Daemonologie* of the Devil's granting supernatural power toward primarily

women who enter into contract with him: "either for obtaining of riches, or for revenging them

upon any whom they have malice at: who, granting their demand, as no doubt willingly he will

since it is to do evil, he grants them the means whereby they may do the same" (Tyson 127). If the Weird Sisters are in contract with the Devil as James purports and have been granted supernatural abilities to bend wills and inflict harm, Macbeth in turn is meddling in forces beyond his comprehension; therein lies the danger. If women cannot obtain power from any source aside from the Devil, any power or authority exercised by a woman must be evil. But Macbeth continues to seek with increasing desperation this power that derives from women, from the Weird Sisters as well as his wife, Lady Macbeth. Macbeth's recognition that he has no real dominion over these supernatural forces is an admission to the fears of limited masculine authority (Adelman, "Born" 90).

Lady Macbeth, like Margaret of Anjou's femme fatale, is a prime example of an autonomous female figure directly associated with evil workings, though a notable difference here is that Lady Macbeth also participates in witchcraft. Upon Macbeth's communication to her of the Weird Sisters' prophecy, she invokes supernatural forces to remove her femininity in order to carry out the plot to murder Duncan. Her impassioned soliloquy as Act One draws to a close could be interpreted as a sort of incantation: "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty…Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.5.47-50, 54-55). These words seem to command and direct the spirits with a specific intention and focus of will, just as a spell might. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth invoke supernatural forces to aid them. Likewise, both are summoning powers which they do not fully comprehend and which has catastrophic effects not just on the course of the narrative, but their own mental states. As Marina Favila states in "'Mortal Thoughts' and Magical Thinking in *Macbeth*," Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's accessing supernatural natural power has repercussions: "before

the play is over, these mortal thoughts turn and rend the thinker" (1). Gary Wills, however, does

not see Lady Macbeth as a witch. He argues that Lady Macbeth "does not enter into any

supernatural dealings with devils or their agents. There is no reciprocal activity of the sort that

Macbeth engages in at the necromancy" (Wills 83). While Wills acknowledges Macbeth's

invocation of spirits and Hecate as an act of witchcraft, Lady Macbeth's own conjuration of

spirits to unsex her is not perceived in the same fashion.

What Wills fails to acknowledge, however, is the distinct similarity in the actions

between husband and wife. Respectfully, this author would heartily disagree. While Lady

Macbeth is not in attendance at the Black Mass nor any of Macbeth's other interactions with the

witches, this does not make her own personal invocations any less powerful. Lady Macbeth

conducts her own Black Mass of sorts when she calls on spirits to unsex her. Further, this appeal

to spirits to be "unsexed" is essentially an appeal to take up the mantle of a masculine persona, to

reject the precedent confining her as a submissive wife to Macbeth and renounce the feminine

shackles that limit her autonomy. Lady Macbeth is more witch than her husband, as she claims

ownership of the forces which King James professes to be the tool with which women gain

power, however questionable the moral implications.

This is not to suggest Macbeth is not, in his own sense, a practitioner of witchcraft; rather

that he is simply an unskilled one. Favila's article suggests Lady Macbeth to be the sole

instigator of the plot to kill Duncan, as well as the instigator of her husband's own magical

thinking. But this is not supported by the text. It is in fact Macbeth who first identifies and

entertains this magical thinking: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill; cannot be

good...My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man /

That function is smother'd in surmise, / And nothing is but what is not" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth,*

1.3.143-144, 152-155). Furthermore, Macbeth sees his magical thinking fulfilled as, almost immediately after the witches' prophecy of his becoming Thane of Cawdor and he entertains the notion himself, he learns that he has indeed been declared Thane of Cawdor. This wish fulfilment serves to feed the beast, as it were, and encourage Macbeth to set his invocational sights higher to the king's crown (Favila 8). In this way, Macbeth could certainly be labeled a magical practitioner. Macbeth's own assertion of will is in its own sense a magical act, though it is channeled through the actual power of the Weird Sisters and their own prophecies. In contrast, Lady Macbeth's magical assertions are carried out without the assistance of any external forces, making her a truer witch than her husband.

In regards to the Weird Sisters, it is clear the witches in *Macbeth* seem to exist outside the boundaries of humanity. Favila notes they are "on the earth, but not of the earth; women, but bearded ones; they conjure yet are controlled by superior spirits" (10). Marion Gibson notes in *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* that while "*Macbeth* is very clearly about witchcraft, [it] makes the witches difficult to define" (28). Is a witch strictly these supernatural creatures existing outside the boundaries of society and gender normativity, or are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth included in the categorization? And what are these beings, specifically, human or something more? Moreover, what does their presence have to contribute to the larger discussion of the witch as a feminist figure?

Let us first address the physical appearance of the witches, notably the original stage direction of the characters being bearded. In "Bearded Women in Early Modern England," Mark Albert Johnston discusses the sociopolitical implications of a woman being bearded in the early modern cultural climate. For a man of the time, the presence of a long, full beard was a mark of "socioeconomic and sexual viability of its host" (1). In the same way a copiously muscled

physique or an Armani suit might be a visual representation of contemporary masculine success, so was a beard in this time. But for a woman to possess such a physical accessory prompted an uncomfortable shift in the social power dynamic between the masculine and feminine. As Johnston posits, "the female facial beard confronted early modern English culture with a profound contradiction that symbolically threatened the gendered economy of patriarchy with economic and sexual castration" (2). Beardedness, as Johnston further states, may be the actual presence of facial hair or also a suggestion of "an overtly sexual or economically independent woman" (2). The contemporary equivalence of "beardedness" or androgyny in any non-cisnormative persons persists as a perceived threat to gender normativity. As Diana Crane notes in *Fashion and Its Social Agenda: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*, the introduction of women wearing trousers in the late nineteenth century was the cause of significant uproar. While women sought more comfortable alternatives to corsets and endless petticoats, the notion of ambiguity of gender being introduced into society with the act of women wearing trousers was a scandalous suggestion (112). In the United States during the feminist wave of the 1960s and 70s, women's fashion evolved considerably, with the introduction of more masculine garments, suits, and footwear, all of which was met with persistent backlash (124). The mere act of costuming oneself in dress that diverts from gender normativity threatens the construct of gender itself.

The witches of *Macbeth* possess both physical facial hair as well as implied autonomy. They are specifically directed to have facial beards, but also operate autonomously without the subjugation of a masculine overseer. Although they allude to answering to masters in Act 4, Scene 1, the only being who physically appears to command the witches is Hecate, also a female. While Macbeth demands to see the "masters" in question, they appear as vague spiritual entities, thus leaving their true origins and/or genders open to interpretation. The armed head and

bloodied child are not defined by gender constructs. The procession of kings is a bit more

specific, but this display could also certainly be an illusion. While the witches' power alone is

enough to cause vexation from the male gaze, as these are women who are outside the

boundaries of their control, the physical presence of facial hair "def[ies] male desire and

refuse[s] to be defined by an artificially naturalized binard in which their beardedness – the

visual signal of their *weirdness* – figures as a hairy secret that must be negotiated, hidden, or

erased" (Johnston 21-22). In parts of his paper unrelated to Macbeth, Johnston explores the

unease of the male gaze on a female figure with facial hair, as there is an implicit correlation

with hair on genitalia, inferring a sexual distress and confusion on the part of the male gazer (3).

Banquo's initial identification of the beards on the Weird Sisters may be read as an implication

of some such discomfort: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret /

That you are so" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* 1.2.47-49). This identification of the presence of beards

by Banquo be not only a confusion on the classification of these creatures he and Macbeth have

encountered, but a veiled declaration of his own insecurities after being confronted with beings

who defy traditional gender norms.

While there are some suggestions that the character of Hecate was added at a later date by

another playwright, Gary Wills suggests this may have only been done to replace some other

form of Black Mass within the original text where the witches conjure their visions for Macbeth

(45). Though Wills goes on to suggest that, even if the play were altered at a later date, he is of

the belief that Hecate was not completely an addition by a later author but appeared in some

form within the original 1606 play (46). Wills cites Macbeth's multiple invocations of Hecate

throughout the script in support of this: "Witchcraft celebrates / Pale Hecate's offerings," and

"ere to black Hecate's summons" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* 2.1.52, 3.2.41). Macbeth, as a male

witch, is thereby invoking Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. Similar to Lady Macbeth's verbal allusions of emasculating her husband; "Wouldst thou have that / Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life / And live a coward in thine own esteem" (1.7.45-7); Macbeth's own constant reliance on feminine power is an emasculation of a sense of male autonomy and a vindication of female power, as Macbeth seems to identify his own abilities are incapable of achieving his goals, and the skills he must access are outside the scope of patriarchal capability. This also further asserts the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth as those in actual possession of authority over Macbeth.

The presumption of dominion in the hands of female persons is more than likely not something that was perceived to be the case by audience members of the early modern era, yet contemporary viewers may analyze these characters with a more feminist lens. Likewise, directors of *Macbeth* productions may also choose to portray these women in a more self-possessed light. Some examples of these depictions in contemporary cinema will be explored in the next chapter. Indeed, the persistent quality of Shakespeare's appeal seems to rest partly on his work's accessibility to be reinterpreted and molded to fit the contemporary conversations of the time. Perhaps no other work of his is a truer example of this evolution than this final play composed alone, *The Tempest.*

The Tempest is another play in which a masculine figure either usurps or adopts characteristics of the witch while still being unable to deny the origin of that power being rooted in the feminine. *The Tempest* was at the time of its production and for many years after considered to be the Bard's swan song to the theater (Clark 104). More recent critical review, however, has brought the play's reception into a somewhat more sinister spotlight, citing the blatant colonialism and appropriation of indigenous land and peoples not dissimilar to the British

colonizers. As Marjorie Garber notes in *Shakespeare After All,* modern critiques of *The Tempest* presently fall into two categories: "as a fable of art and creation, and as a colonialist allegory" (852). Prospero's reclaiming of the land and its resources for his own and his abduction of the magical book and overthrowing of the witch Sycorax to pave the way for his rule of the island has strong overtones to the appropriation of indigenous land and culture committed by colonizers for centuries (853). The relationship between Prospero and Sycorax, a character who is never on stage but whose presence is felt throughout the course of the narrative, offers a clear study of the contradictory representations between the male and female witch. Furthermore, Prospero's strong colonizing overtones place particular emphasis on the ways in which his theft of Sycorax's power and authority serves to further subjugate feminine autonomy by patriarchal rule reclaiming feminine power.

Prospero is a magician seen by some critics as being a primarily benevolent individual. Cumberland Clark in *Shakespeare and the Supernatural* declares *The Tempest* to be "[Shakespeare's] returning to the freedom and happiness of his youthful fairy fantasy," and Prospero himself as a merciful man who forgives his treacherous brother Alonso and his murder-plotting slave Caliban and sets free his other captive servant Ariel (105-6). John Mebane in *Renaissance Magic & the Return of the Golden Age* lauds Prospero's image of the magus to be "the most fully developed expression of Renaissance hopes for the development of humankind's moral, intellectual, and spiritual potential" (Mebane 176). But if we return to *Doctor Faustus,* this claim seems easily disputed. Even male magicians, though more respected and perhaps allowed to practice occult studies without legal repercussions such as Queen Elizabeth's astrologer John Dee, were no less feared by the early modern culture. Yet Shakespeare does appear, at least in the confines of the time in which he was writing, to paint a portrait of a

benevolent sorcerer. Clark suggests Prospero may be an avatar of Shakespeare himself, a manifestation of his life's work in the guise of a magician (Clark 109). While these scholars recognize and celebrate the possible motivations of Shakespeare's penning of *The Tempest*, other academics have done work to explore its more problematic areas, which center around Prospero himself and the never-seen witch Sycorax.

Sycorax, the "foul witch" who ruled the island prior to Prospero's arrival, imprisoned the sprite Ariel and gives birth to one son, Caliban, prior to her death, has an unseen presence within the production despite her physical absence (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.309). It is Sycorax's magic that Prospero repurposes for himself after arriving on the island. He may be a learned man, but for all his formal education did not possess magical powers until his theft and appropriation of Sycorax's own magical elements were made available to him upon his arrival on the island.

The Tempest opens in the midst of a great storm, conjured by Prospero to bring his brother Alonso's ship on to the island. The ability for witches to manipulate the weather and create storms was a commonly suspected magical ability in the early modern era. As previously mentioned, King James suspected witchcraft when his bride-to-be's ship was set off course by a storm. Shakespeare's Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* clearly have the ability to control the weather: "And the very ports they blow; / All the quarters that they know / I' the'shipman's card. / I'll drain him dry as hay" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.3.16-19). While Prospero does not directly reference Sycorax as having power to conjure storms, this may be inferred by both the assumptions of witches' power in general as well as her ability to manipulate nature in other ways, such as her imprisonment of Ariel: "And in her most unmigitable rage, / Into a cloven pine, within which rift / Imprisoned thou didst painfully remain / A dozen years" (Shakespeare,

Tempest, 1.2.329-332). It may be inferred that the power to manipulate nature was originally that

of Sycorax's, stolen by Prospero for his own use, and in this way makes him similar to Macbeth,

a man of power who is still indebted to more powerful female beings.

Dianne Purkiss describes the witch figure as a woman "always located on the edges, at

the margins…The stage-witch, too, is conceptually and topographically removed from the center

of the dramatic action; either she is isolated from community affairs or she is geographically

located elsewhere" (250). So too is Sycorax by her death prior to the events of *The Tempest*.

Purkiss argues that understanding colonization and the ways in which the British people of the

early modern era viewed others around the world is integral to the understanding of Sycorax's

shroud of mystery. A common thread of humanity is the struggle to understand experiences

outside of ourselves, and that which cannot be understood is often feared. It is a smooth if not

dangerous transition to see the leap toward suspicion of practices and traditions by people from

other parts of the world as witchcraft, perhaps due to their already existing fears of witchcraft

within their own communities (252).

Sycorax is further othered by her origin from Algiers. As Rachana Sachdev argues in

"Sycorax in Algiers: Cultural Politics and Gynecology in Early Modern England," Sycorax's

hailing from Algiers was no accidental insertion, but rather an intentional choice by Shakespeare

based on the strong negative bias Europeans had toward that particular area populated with

persons of color, primarily due to piracy as well as traditions of female circumcision (219).

Sycorax in turn represents "the quintessential representation of the moral and religious

corruption associated with the land and provides visual contrast between the 'civil' Europeans

and the 'barbaric' Algerians" (220). There is no textual evidence aside from Ariel's accounting

and Prospero's condemnation that Sycorax is an evil witch. Prospero himself uses the very magic

he obtained on the island that was once Sycorax's to control. The presumed benevolence of

Prospero and malignance of Sycorax have a great deal more to do with Sycorax's race and

gender than they do with her magical capabilities, while Prospero's appropriating of the island

and its magic for his own purposes and at the sacrifice of the native peoples of the island goes

unnoticed.

The problematic components present in Prospero's subjugation and appropriation of

Sycorax's power and repossession of her island is only confounded in contemporary gender

critique by the implication that Sycorax was a woman of color. The liberation of persons of

color, particularly women of color, has been oppressed in the United States not only in

association with white cisgender men, but white women as well in their own crusade for

suffrage. Angela Y. Davis explores this checkered history in *Women, Race and Class*, noting

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's campaign against legalizing the vote for persons of color at the 1867

Equal Rights Convention, fearing white women would only be further oppressed by its passing

(75). Indeed, the slogan "Woman first and Negro last is my program" was the phrase coined and

touted both by Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (81). The refusal of two of the most esteemed

women in the suffrage movement to recognize the necessity of all persons obtaining the right to

vote left the voices and rights of women of color in the cold.

This dissolution persisted throughout the feminist movement, with the rights and voices

of black women being continually ignored in favor of white feminist voices. As bell hooks states

in *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, "No other group in America has so had their

identity socialized out of existence as have black women…when women are talked about racism

militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the

focus tends to be on black *men*, and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white*

women" (7). In early modern drama, no other character is a more glaring or significant example than that of Sycorax; a woman of color who not only has had her power stripped and reclaimed by a white man, but who has been completely silenced by both Prospero and Caliban, incapable of speaking on behalf of herself.

Chapter Three: Contemporary Adaptations of Shakespeare's Witches and Concluding Remarks

The exploration of witch characters present in early modern drama and their contemporary critiques are rendered ineffective if productions are not made which explore their alternative facets. While contemporary representations of the witch have considerably evolved over the years and, as noted at the beginning of this paper, individuals are reclaiming the title of "witch" as either a personal spiritual and/or feminist title, there has also been an evolution in the ways in which witches are depicted in popular culture and entertainment. In the conclusion of this paper, I will explore some of the contemporary illustrations of the witch in Shakespearean film adaptations.

While there is little source material to critique in regards to theatrical productions or films of Shakespeare's contemporaries, there is certainly a plethora of material within the Shakespeare folio which has been adapted with regularity. *Macbeth,* for example, has had many contemporary film adaptations, from 1948's Orson Welles production to Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), as well as more recent productions such as Patrick Stewart's in 2011 or the 2015 film starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard. Upon closer examination of the directorial

choices made for the witches in these various adaptations, it is possible for the viewer to see the subtle but progressive changes in perceptions of women, and further how the character of the witch becomes an empowering rather than demonizing tool.

Orson Welles's 1948 version utilizes voodoo witchcraft implemented by the witches, a choice which has its own set of problems. Welles's choice derives from his 1936 stage play of *Macbeth* in the neighborhood of Harlem, where he cast black actors and created a Haitian jungle-themed spectacle, utilizing voodoo magic tableaus and drums. Contemporary critics may take issue with the white Welles appropriating black culture to be portrayed as villains; they certainly did during the 1936 stage play, which took place during the Harlem riots. The play was accused of making fun of black culture and called the "'voodoo Macbeth'" (Guntner 284). Aside from the cultural appropriation element, the choice to have Macbeth under the control of a voodoo spell changes the entirety of the play. Whereas before Macbeth was listening to the counsel of the witches but acting primarily of his own volition, Welles's insertion of a voodoo doll creates a "zombie-like" Macbeth who is no longer in control of his own faculties (284). This gives considerably more power to the witches and removes the volition of Macbeth, along with maligning the witches as automatic villains wreaking death and destruction upon the now innocent Macbeth and his community. Welles's choice thereby backtracks on an interpretation of benevolent autonomy granted to women by means of supernatural power, making the witches not impartial forces but arbiters of Macbeth's tyranny and eventual demise. It is unsurprising such a nefarious portrayal of the supernatural elements was met with such harsh critique, particularly as it has the added emphasis of further denigrating people of color in a society where such defamations of character are already a regular occurrence. Davis dedicates a chapter from her book to address the ways in which black men specifically have been accused of higher incidents

of rape against women, both white and of color. Davis chronicles not only the targeted

accusations of black men as rapists, but other critics who blame women of color for being raped

due to their "loose morals" (182). These accusations and slanderous assumptions were

unfounded on any real evidence yet served to continually oppress the black population in

America (192). Welles's choice to utilize voodoo culture as evil, an African cultural tradition

rooted in its own history and spiritual practice, is not only an insult to the black population due to

its disparaging commentary on their race and traditions, but also an appropriation of their own

culture not dissimilar to Prospero's reclaiming of Sycorax's island and power.

  Slightly less than ten years later, Akira Kurosawa presented to the world his take on

Macbeth. Rather than Welles's choice to appropriate other cultures for nefarious use in his own

story, Kurosawa reworked Shakespeare's source material into a samurai film honoring his own

Japanese culture and mythos. Kurosawa's 1957 *Throne of Blood* presents the viewer with a

single supernatural entity rather than three witches. This being is further separated from

patriarchal constructs as it is androgynous, or its gender indeterminate. This representation is in

keeping with Japanese legends of androgynous seers, making Kurosawa's choice "exactly right

for the world of this film…this unutterably strange spirit, chanting and spinning, mesmerizing as

we cross from reel to reel" (Forsyth 288). This act of spinning adds another element to these

scenes aside from the spinning of the threads of fate: that of the spider. Here we see the element

of danger or evil present, as explored by J. Lawrence Guntner in "*Hamlet, Macbeth,* and *King*

Lear on film." Guntner describes this spinning done by the seer as "spin[ning] the threads of

ambition in Washizu's mind that will eventually entrap him as a spider entraps a fly" (126). This

interpretation of the witch figure in *Throne of Blood* grants both authority and intent to the

figure, who may or may not be operating with ill intent toward Washizu (the Macbeth figure).

However, the viewer may also receive this witch representation as one who exists outside of the boundaries of human or even moral authority. Washizu enters a space he may not have business occupying, in the same sense Macbeth attends the Black Mass with the Weird Sisters, invoking power outside the realm of his own understanding. Like the Sisters, Kurosawa's witch figure's presence in relation to Washizu may exist merely as an impartial supernatural entity; one that reinforces Washizu's lust for power but does so not of its own design but based on Washizu's own projected desires. The choice of Kurosawa to restructure the witches in such a way not only celebrates the Japanese mythos but gifts the audience with a compelling new way to interpret these witchy characters. Like the original source material which specifies the Weird Sisters possessing beards (1.3.48), this figure also defies gender. Also, like the Weird Sisters, this figure seems to further emphasize the ambiguity of its intent. Is the seer's participation in the course of the story the seer's own design or the result of Washizu's invocation, just as Macbeth continues to invoke and consult with the Weird Sisters? Either way, the possession of the seer's power or its androgyny is not a valid reason for the being to be vilified in the same ways Macbeth treats the Weird Sisters; on the contrary Washizu regards the seer with fear and reverence, signifying a move away from the maligning of the witch figure in contemporary film.

After a little more than another decade, another adaptation of *Macbeth* presented an even softer and more benevolent image of the witch, though with less clarity and overall success in execution. In "Shakespeare the illusionist: filming the supernatural," Neil Forsyth critiques Roman Polanski's 1971 *Macbeth* adaptation for "lack[ing] any context, real or invented, with which to represent the sheer strangeness of the play" due to Polanski's strict adherence to Hollywood film conventions which left him "rather lost when it came to the supernatural bits" (281). The result of this unclear direction are witches who are presented as "rural women, not

devilish spirits: they keep goats, they live in daylight…they are apparently worshippers of the

earth-goddess, at least as such creatures might be imagined in California, and they function as a

modern coven" (281). It appears Forsyth's problem with the presentation of the witches lies

more with their lack of villainy than their supernatural capabilities. As we remember, historically

women who were targeted as witches were often healers or midwives in their community; in that

way, Polanski's is perhaps a more accurate portrayal of what a true witch might look like. In

Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, she confirms these practices of self-identifying

witches. While her book reinforces the countless and diverse traditions of practicing pagans, the

majority revolve around a reverence or worship of nature and naturalistic leanings towards daily

living (Adler 98).

However, Forsyth makes a valid critique of Polanski's interpretation with the Black Mass

scene. Polanski's imagery is an odd mix of these earth-goddess worshipping witches and the

traditional devil worshipping creatures, leading Macbeth down into Hell to take part in a

psychedelic and drug-infused hellish vision quest, while dressed in their simple peasant garments

(Forsyth 281-82). For characters who already have ambiguous intent towards Macbeth, this

interpretation seems to make for a disjointed presentation of the witches with their intentions all

the more ambivalent.

Jumping ahead a few decades to a more contemporary but less confusing take, Rupert

Goold's 2010 adaptation, initially played on stage, is a return to a more sinister portrayal of the

Weird Sisters in an Orwellian dystopia backdrop, an environment that already possesses enough

of a sense of danger. In Charles Spencer's review for *The Telegraph*, he notes the witches are

"initially encountered as nurses in a field hospital, killing rather than curing the victims of battle,

and later become the sullen, silent household staff in the Macbeths' less than welcoming home."

Their terrifying presence endures throughout the film, as during the feast where Banquo's ghost

appears they act as servants, albeit visible only to Macbeth. The witches seem to hover around

the periphery at all times, emphasizing the darkness which consumes Macbeth and his

household. After Lady Macbeth's death, her body is seen at the end, wheeled out on a gurney

and presented to Macbeth for viewing by the Sisters. Following title character Patrick Stewart's

deliverance of the "Tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy and goes off to face his doom, the sisters

carry Lady Macbeth's corpse into the darkness. While this sinister presentation may appear a

step backwards from a more reverential treatment of women as figures of power, upon closer

inspection this may not be the case. Throughout the primary source material as well as each

adaptation, the morality of the witches remains inconclusive. The ill-defined intent of the

characters may therefore be presented as more benign or malevolent without losing the reverence

for their position of authority. In this film, these witches clearly have a great deal of authority.

Patrick Stewart's interactions with the Sisters never seems to wander far from unease at their

presence, though not the sort of unease to suggest they were inferior to them, quite the contrary.

In a sense, allowing the witches to maintain a sinister nature may be in some ways be equally as

progressive as removing the negative stigma from their power. This film does not present the

Sisters as caricatures, but as real, terrifying beings operating for their own unknown reasons, not

to be trifled with. In the same way a male figure does not always need to be a force for good for

their authority to be respected, this vicious depiction of the Sisters breaks the convention of a

woman's power to be necessarily an altruistic force in order to gain respect.

The latest depiction of *Macbeth* in film, Justin Kurzel's 2015 adaptation, is a return to a

more benevolent portrayal of witches, not dissimilar to Polanski's version though perhaps more

successfully executed. Kurzel's witches are even more ambiguous in their nature and intent:

three women and a child who stand on the edge of a bloody battlefield with concern in their eyes over the gruesome proceedings, then plainly state to Macbeth his future as Thane of Cawdor. As Rachael Sampson notes in her review of the film for *Film Inquiry,* "The Witches did not come across as the stereotypical evil demons in the way that Shakespeare suggests they are. Instead, they were a gentle symbol of death, almost a warning sign for the inevitable instead of being one of the causes/blame for his decline." Compared with the harshness and brutal aspects to the rest of the film, the appearance of the witches is almost a welcome sight, a strange turn from other interpretations. This gentler portrayal subverts the trope of powerful women being evil by default, as well as affirms said power as a force for benevolence.

However, Kurzel's maintaining of their ambiguity grants a similar impression of Goold's portrayal, though it is perhaps two sides of the same coin. While Goold allows the witches to exist unchecked in their wickedness, Kurzel allows the witches to exist unchecked in their ambiguity. The women stand on the edge of the beginning battle scene, surveying the carnage as they recite the first speech: "When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?...When the hurly burly's done / When the battle's lost and won" (1.1.1-4). The lines are spoken almost emotionlessly, as beings who know the exact nature of the "hurly burly" that is to come. These witches are not arbiters nor influencers of Macbeth by their own design, with no stake in the events that transpire, but are willing to divulge information to Macbeth as he requests it. Kurzel's depiction of the witches here grants them the possession of knowledge which translates to power, not for any known reason, and it is perhaps this pervasive ambiguity which is the most empowering depiction of the Sisters. In this film, they are under no obligation to explain nor define themselves as being for good or for evil, and there are no external

implications within the film aligning them either way. They simply exist with their powerful knowledge.

To turn to a Shakespeare production less often adapted for film, Julie Taymor's 2006 adaptation of *The Tempest* had one very critical change: Prospero becomes Prospera, portrayed by Helen Mirren. The shift from a male to female Prospero is significant, changing the relationship between daughter Miranda to one that "sheds some of its traditional, patriarchal dynamic. Instead, a mother-daughter bond fraught with envy, protectiveness and identification blossoms into something newly rich and strange," as stated by A.O. Scott in a *New York Times* review. But Scott does not explore the ways Prospera redefines the figure of the magician, which in the larger context of witch representation is a compelling turn with a female figure whose autonomy is neither challenged nor persecuted. However, in Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest,* she explores the combined role of patriarch and matriarch in the character of Prospero and the ramifications it has on daughter Miranda. Adelman notes that the removal of Sycorax, or a biologically feminine force, and the subsequent rule of the patriarchal Prospero emphasizes the authority of the patriarchy (194). But how does the substitution of a Prospero for a Prospera change the message? One possibility is that it may divert the conversation from gender to race; the wise Helen Mirren's Prospera conquering over the "foul witch" from Algiers and reclaiming Sycorax's power for her own presents a new discussion for the ways in which white women repress women of color in order to gain their own autonomy. This returns us to bell hooks's assertion of white women silencing black women's issues or ignoring the systemic racism present in society:

If women committed to feminist revolution, be they black or white, are to achieve any

understanding of the 'charged connections' between white women and black women, we

must first be willing to examine woman's relationship to society, to race, and to

American culture as it is and not as we would ideally have it be. That means confronting

the reality of white female racism (hooks 124).

From this perspective, the casting of Prospera as a woman is somewhat of a missed

opportunity by Taymor. While a benevolent female witch is empowering in its own right, the

inescapable question of Sycorax as the subjugated and silenced witch of color reinforces

Prospera's status as an oppressor regardless of gender.

The plays of William Shakespeare have been one of the primary cruxes of drama for over

four hundred years. His works are reinterpreted and adapted to suit the climate of the present

moment in which they are performed. Even though critical reviews and conversations about

Shakespeare's work have expanded through the years, as is clearly evidenced in *The Tempest*, his

plays have a unique ability to carry messages and thematic elements which are able to resonate

and evolve with the times.

The current moment of the #MeToo movement, political and feminist backlash against

policies of the Trump administration and the rise and practice of nature-based religions by

female identifying and queer persons may present, among other things, a significant opportunity

for Shakespeare's voice to continue to evolve. Addressing the cultural relevancy of the rebirth of

practicing witches in twenty-first century society through Shakespearean drama could be a

method not only of speaking to the current moment in history, but also of addressing and

possibly redefining the conventions of the identity of a witch. In addition to Shakespeare, the

plethora of witchcraft characters of his contemporaries, from Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* to

Dekker et al's *The Witch of Edmonton* to other works not mentioned in this paper (Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*, Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* or John Martson's *Sophonisba*), which are not often performed on stage nor ever adapted into film, are merely lying in wait for the opportune moment in which they could revive their cultural relevancy. If any such time is going to arrive, this is that moment. While present-day civilization does not commonly hold such superstitious fears of witches making pacts with devils and fairy creatures stealing away children in the night, we are in a time where the conversation surrounding female autonomy has once again been called into question and brought to the world's stage. In response, groups of women are voluntarily adopting the witch persona, this time as a rebellious badge of honor to reaffirm their own identity. In the same way, the humanities and future adaptations of Shakespeare's witchcraft-centered plays and those of his contemporaries may be reclaimed for similar purposes.

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