DE GRUYTER
OPEN

LINGUACULTURE No. 2/2017

SHAKESPEARE'S WEIRD SISTERS – IN BETWEEN OUTLANDISH WOMANHOOD AND PROPHESING *MOIRAE*

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Abstract

This study intends to map the meandering expression of *otherness* when womanhood constructs an epiphanic encounter with time and fortune. Hereinafter, hegemonic, oppressive masculinity meets peripheral, prophesying femininity in an intricate exercise of doing and becoming Shakespeare's *Weird Sisters*, forming a complex mythological construction, whose uniqueness arises from the duality of their personae, reflection of displaced femininity, somewhat grotesque, peripheral within the realm of marginality itself. They are not only *weird* expressions of the *Other*, they are the *other self* of themselves, as alter ego expressions. There is a constant, minutely woven border crossing that does not only (re)define the geometry of becoming, but it also permeates gender constructions, making femaleness look androgynous and ruthless. Foretelling dreams of glory, mightiness or summoning lost humanity, these three *Parcae* rewrite the myth of the androgynous and its story about the quest of the *Other*. It is this *Other* that will be explored from a variety of angles that speak of masculinity, femininity, sanity, irrationality, consciousness, unconsciousness, freewill and fate.

Keywords: *renegade women, peripherality, otherness, dichotomy, gender*

In one of her studies, entitled *Gender and Dichotomy*, Nancy Jay mused on gender relationships as part of a stratification system arguing that "That which is defined, separated out, isolated from all else is A and pure. Not-A is necessarily impure, a random catchall, to which nothing is external except A and the principle of order that separates it from Not-A" (45). Analysing this spectral game from the point of view of society, as a cohesive construct, Judith Lorber considers that "one gender is usually the touchstone, the normal, the dominant, and the ***other*** is different, deviant, and subordinate. In Western society "man" is **A**, "wo-man" is **Not-A**" (32; my emphasis). Outstretching Jay's mathematical

10.1515/lincu -2017-0021

perspective upon gender, we are just about to approach a marginal sign that we encrypt as *w* € {A, Not-A}. Although uttered and printed in the twentieth century, these thoughts have not managed to entirely blur the line that stands in between them and William Shakespeare's Renaissance age, configuring thus a rippling horizon of time and space, heavily imbued with the 'law of the father', the absolute ruling principle that has inflicted severe wounds onto the centuries to come.

It is not about *Not-A*, but rather about a marginal sign within the very framework of marginality itself that we have decided to write about, as womanhood is summoned to spell its name at the crossroads of emerging polysemic identities that dwell on boundaries and weave a knotty texture of liminal existence. Phantasmal figments, suspended above time itself, sometimes ethereal and yet, often enough, imprisoned in maimed expressions of dry and rotted flesh, the *Weird Sisters* of Macbeth walk between the realms of gender and order, supernatural and mundane, in whirling dances and enchanted rhythms. So powerful Shakespeare's characters are that they have almost reached archetypal valences and, as Diane Purkiss points out, the witch as we know and imagine today is organically linked to the Scottish play. In her book *The Witch in History*, she argues that "when we say witch, we can hardly help thinking of Macbeth's witches" (Purkiss 180), a perspective doubled by the natural curiosity of the modern reader towards the image witches must have had among the audience who went to see the play when it was first performed in 1606; one further aspect that needs to be considered when talking about witchcraft is that we are constantly confronted with a *dichotomous perspective* that has travelled the centuries, permeating people's collective imaginary.

Envisaging the architecture of the ripples that bloom their roundedness from the point where the silvery line of water is broken by a stone brings us closer to the first element of analysis, namely the perspective that both '*popular'* and '*elite'* traditions opened towards the idea of witchcraft, a term "labile, sliding across a number of different and competing discourses" (Purkiss 93). William Shakespeare, once again, proved his unrivalled talent the moment he dipped his brush in both chromatics, adding a unique sense of proportions to their portrayal. Following the Scottish popular tradition, Macbeth's witches are part of a coven, a sort of *sorority* that cackles with mischief and performs all sort of magic acts, a concept hardly found in English witch-stories, according to Anthony Harris (3). The apparatus itself tells the same story of intrigue, spell and mystery as does the cauldron and the disgusting 'ingredients' it hosts to boil in Act IV, scene 1. The very presence of the cauldron in the story is a cross-cultural element of witches' representation, for cauldrons were used in Continental, as well as Scottish folklore, and never in the English stories; furthermore, in England, witches were land-bound, since they could not fly; nevertheless, being the characters of a Scottish play, the witches in Macbeth

hover "through the fog and filthy air" in Act I, scene 1, dancing and sailing. Although it was the 'elite' tradition that offered Shakespeare the source of inspiration for the three *Weird Sisters*, namely Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* of 1577, it was the 'popular' tradition that shaped their image according to what witches are supposed to look in the eyes of the ordinary people - filthy, ragged, warty, ugly old women; filth follows closely the characterisation of the *Sisters*, marking the concept of peripherality they embody in the painting technique of impasto, made up of thick, almost naturalistic brushstrokes. In Shakespeare's England, it was not only the uneducated who believed in the supernatural and its destroying, demonic powers; it was also the higher classes that were under its 'spell'. According to the rural tradition, the witch, as Diane Purkiss argues, was constructed as an 'antihousewife' or an "antimother […] a powerful fantasy which enabled women to negotiate the fears and anxieties of housekeeping and motherhood" (93).

Deborah Willis describes the witch as a "malevolent mother", seen as "usurping" the natural privileges of the housewife of control over her domestic sphere (111). Regardless of the angle of approach, be it elite or popular, the perspective remains the same, disruptive, annihilating. Either a threat for the domestic sphere or to the authority of both God and Sovereign, the witch dims the light and brings chaos and confusion. It is with this very last aspect that the presence of the elite tradition in the Scottish play comes on stage. This time it is the patriarchal authority that is challenged and sieged (Stallybrass 206), and not the domestic arena that fails to offer the 'dramatism' of rebelling against the sign of absolute power. An interesting details comes with the successor of Queen Elizabeth I, the new King, James VI of Scotland and I of England, who imported some of the demonological discourses from the Continental views on witchcraft (expressed in one of the most famous medieval treatises on witches *Malleus Maleficarum*, the Latin for "The Hammer of Witches", written in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, and first published in Germany one year later), thus blending beliefs, fears, traditions beyond horizons of understanding, as mere variations on the same theme, that of "disturbing" the "peace" as Garry Willis would put it (85). Elizabethans, as well as Jacobeans, believed that the macrocosm could be challenged and even ridiculed by microcosmic turbulences that had the power to suspend or even, most dramatically, annihilate the *status quo* of things.

When the two discourses come together, we run into Macbeth's *Weird Sisters*, at the crossroads of popular and elite conceptions of witchcraft. Richard Whalen brings the duality of the witches' personae into discussion, considering that

> [t]he comical witches' alter egos are the prophesying Weird Sisters, and the Weird Sisters' alter egos are the witches. They are the "other self" of

> themselves. This brilliant conflation drives Macbeth's fatal self-deception; he fails to recognize the folly of taking witchcraft seriously and acting on the prophecies of the Weird Sisters, who personify his dark, innermost impulses (60).

A look at the dialectic of Plato's *Cratylus* concerning the "correctness of names", introduces us to another duality, represented by the positions of Socrates' interlocutors, Hermogenes, the supporter of 'conventionalism' and Cratylus, the voice behind the concept of 'naturalism'. It is the perspective of the former that we intend to refer to, as it argues that the same names could refer to quite different objects, whereas the same objects could bear quite different names, as long as the users of the language respect the conventions. In what Shakespeare's *Witches* are concerned, the stage directions in the First Folio refer to them as *witches*, introducing them as the First Witch, Second Witch, Third Witch, although they are never called witches in the dialogue, nor do they call themselves other than *sisters*. We find ourselves having a double-lensed spyglass to look at them, one lens reflecting common people's beliefs, anguishes and fears towards the woman magician, the other the perspective from within, from that point where a "person's name seems to have a direct relation to that person" (Barney 5), as revealed by the etymology of the onomata itself *[sister]*, probably deriving from the Proto-Indo European roots **swe*-"one's own"+**ser*-"woman" (Klein). Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* speak of Macbeth and Banquo's sudden encounter with

> three *women* in strange and wild apparel resembling creatures from the elder world. […] Afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the *weird sisters*, that is (as ye would say) the *goddesses of destinie*, or else some *nymphs* or *feiries*, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, bicause everie thing came to pass as they had spoken (quoted in Harris 34; my emphases).

The three *Weird Sisters* in Macbeth are the mythical characters of the Greek and Roman mythology who knew and could dictate a mortal's fate; they were known as the three *Moirae* - *Clotho, Lachesis* and *Atropos*, in ancient Greece, or as the three *Parcae* or *Fata* - *Nona, Decima,* and *Morda,* in the Roman tradition. The etymology of the word *fatum*, the singular of *fata,* describes the perspective towards prophetic utterances, for this is what the Latin lexeme means. Furthermore, the word "weird" seldom used in Elizabethan English, comes from the Old English, meaning "fate" or "destiny," thus having no connection with today's connotation of "strange" or "bizarre." It was precisely the word "weird" and its fate-control interpretation, that made critics consider that Shakespeare knew about the goddesses of destiny in Norse mythology, the Norns - *Urdr*, *Verdandi*, and *Skuld*, the "three sisters wyrd" that

govern their own temporal realm of destiny, the past, the present, and the future, thus ruling over the universe. No wonder that their prophecies speak about Macbeth's past, present and future. The first *Weird Sister* welcomes Macbeth with his inherited title, Thane of Glamis, the second discloses what is yet unknown to him, that he is also Thane of Cawdor, while the third predicts that he will be king of Scotland. In *We Three, the Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters*, Laura Shamas argues that

> Shakespeare had an excellent working knowledge of classical mythology. The Wyrdes, the Norns, the Fates, the Moirae, the Parcae and the Sibyls (with the nine Sibylline books) are all part of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters. (qtd. in Whalen 68)

According to the same Northern legends, the Norns dwelled at the base of Ygddraisil, the World Ash-tree, whose roots they tended with clay and water, and it is also there where they spun and wove the great fabric of existence, the 'Wyrd'. Another detail that seems to go well beyond its scenographic valences is the presence of the 'desert place' that brings them 'on stage', for this is the very image the tragedy opens with and this is also where the Norns live and belong to, the Wasteland, suspended as it is somewhere between the worlds. Even the presence of the cauldron that appears in Act IV, scene 1 may be considered as a cross-cultural element, that speaks not only of sorcery practices, as it also points towards the same Nordic goddess, the keepers and guardians of the 'cauldron' of all origins.

The triad and its threefold projection infuse the storyline with a subtle, nevertheless robust dramatism. Evil seems to be intimately linked to the magic symbolism of trinity, which we would like to refer to *as reversed trinity* of utmost outlandish expression that corrodes the rules of the universe, bringing chaos, confusion and destruction; nine, three times three triples this malevolent trinity, deepening the mystery and closing the circle as only nine can do.

Three, as a numerical symbol, encapsulates the three elements of faith, namely *knowledge*, *assent* and *confidence*, and it may be said that it is precisely this triad that steered Macbeth into action, for he had knowledge the moment he heard the prophecies, he assented to their treacherous charm, only to blindly confide in them and head towards his disgraceful downfall. Three are the realms of time the prophecies speak about, the past, the present and the future; the play itself opens with its first three characters, the three *Witches*, that are later described as,

> The weird sisters, hand in hand,
> Posters of the sea and land,
> Thus do go about, about:
> Thrice to thine and thrice to mine

> And thrice again, to make up nine. (1.3.33-38)
> ……
> First Witch: Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.
> Second Witch: Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined. (4.1.1-2)

The symbolism of three, and three times three can also be interpreted as hyperbolising projections of cavalcades of unchained energies the three supernatural creatures unleash - "And munch'd, and munch'd, and munch'd" (1.3.5), "I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do" (1.3.11). The whirls of these drives seem to describe the ascending axis of dramatism and tension that builds itself with every line.

Not only does the play contain three witches and three murderers, it spins its webbing around the three predictions uttered by the three witches that make Macbeth embody a threefold dimension of becoming,

> First Witch: All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!
> Second Witch: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!
> Third Witch: All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter! (1.3.50-52)

and it also displays an interesting character, Hecate, who introduces herself as "the mistress of your charms, / The close contriver of all harms" (3.5. 6-7). Although initially represented as one body, in the Greek Classical Period of the late 5th century BC, Hecate was depicted in triplicate, while Egyptian-inspired Greek esoteric writings describe her as a three-headed goddess, wearing the head of a dog, a serpent and a horse. Thus, if Hecate is *three* at the same time, at any time, we may look at Macbeth as an entity driven by a triple-ambition, to become thane of Glamis and Cawdor and King. Hecate's triplicity is also echoed by William Blake himself in one of his most iconic pictures, *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy*, also referred to as *The Triple Hecate*, drawn in 1795, inspired, as it may seem, by the return popularity of the Scottish play, presumably performed nine times at that moment (sic!)

The three zoomorphic symbols that accompany Hecate are also to be found among the 'ingredients' the three witches threw into the cauldron. Blake's pencil study manages to capture the malevolence that Hecate herself confesses, aspect revealed by Geoffrey Keynes when he writes that "Hecate, an infernal Trinity, crouches in the centre. An evil winged spectre hovers over her. On the left, an ass is grazing on rank vegetation, while an owl and a great toad watch from between rocks" (18). There are voices that say that the Hecate scenes are not authentic but added later by Thomas Middleton "...three passages (111.5; IV.1.39 43; IV. 1,125-32) in the witch-scenes, which can be distinguished from the genuine text by the introduction of Hecate, by the use of the iambic instead of a trochaic metre, and by prettiness of lyrical fancy alien to the main conception of the witches (Chambers quoted in Hartnoll 40). In Act III, scene 5 there is a stage direction: 'Music and a song within': 'Come away, coma away' during Hecate's speech. In the following Act IV, scene I, between lines 43 and 44 'Music and a song' there is a reference to 'Black spirits'. The words are not given and no other information is provided but it can be argued that the audience would have recognised the song from its brief description. It has been suggested that Shakespeare did not include the songs in Macbeth and that they were included by Middleton himself when he was revising the work in 1609-10 (Middleton, XV). Musicologist Ian Spink suggested that it was Robert Johnson who wrote the music to these songs because this would fit in with his time working for the 'King's Men' from 1609 onwards. Whether it was Shakespeare or not who thought of Hecate in this play may still be a debatable issue; what is beyond doubt are the thoughts of another musicologist, Edward Dent who believes that "Shakespeare had himself laid down the principle that music […] was generally to be associated with supernatural characters and happenings" (155).

Approaching the cross-border nature of these supernatural entities portrayal takes us to the first encounter of Macbeth and Banquo with the 'juggling fiends', when the latter is struck by their unearthly, androgynous appearance "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.47-9). Witches, from a cultural, anthropological perspective seem to have unsexed bodies, challenging androgyny and having long lost any trace of femaleness the moment maternity attributes have dried out completely. The popular tradition describes witches as women in the winter of their lives, and looking at the functions and attributes of the aged body makes one realise that they either slow down, or dry out completely, as blood thickens, and the absence of breast milk only echoes barrenness and death. With nothing else but her biological data, the witch continues the disruptive part it plays in the universe, imperilling life with everything she stands for, all circumscribed to a damned concept of womanhood.

No wonder then that the presence of any womb-like symbols appears as an external projection adjacent to their body architecture, such as the cauldron that comes to host all the bizarre ingredients (a sweating toad, eye of newt and toe of frog, a bat's fur, a dog's tongue, a lizard's leg, scales of dragon, a wolf's tooth, dried flesh from a corpse, the contents of a shark's stomach, a goat's gall bladder, a Turk's nose, a Tartar's lips, a Jew's liver, a tiger's guts, the finger of a stillborn baby and a piece of hemlock root—all cooled with the blood of a baboon) *impregnated* with their malign spells, whereas the cave that reunites the three sisters at the beginning of Act IV, may be interpreted as a cold barren and cold womb.

> F i r s t W i t c h: Round about the cauldron go;
> In the poison'd entrails throw.
> Toad, that under cold stone
> Days and nights has thirty-one
> Swelter'd venom sleeping got,
> Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.
> …….
> S e c o n d W i t c h: Fillet of a fenny snake,
> In the cauldron boil and bake;
> Eye of newt and toe of frog,
> Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
> Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
> Lizar's leg and owle's wing,
> …….
> T h i r d W i t c h: Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,
> Witches' mummy, maw and gulf
> Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,
> Root of hemlock dig'd i' the dark,
> Liver of blaspheming Jew,

Gall of goat, and slips of yew
Silver'd in the moon's eclipse,
Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,
Finger of birth-strangled babe
Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,
Make the gruel thick and slab:
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
For the ingredients of our cauldron. (4.1.4-34)

Shakespeare's *Witches* remind us once again of the Norns, who too dwell on the threshold that separates this world from the underworld, in a cave at the roots of the Tree of life and near a waterpool fed by the nine rivers; once more, ambiguity is the background against which the story of these entities prolongs its shadows. Although spatially adjoining life-engendering elements (roots, water, fire – all vital for the germination of the sprouts of life), they are as far as one can be from the idea of procreation and sustenance.

There is ambiguity in the witches' construction, as it is not only the very obvious question of gender that is highly disconcerting about them, but also the language they choose to pour into their prophecies, "When the hurlyburly's done, / When the battle's lost and won" says the second Witch in Act I, scene 1 and later on, the all three say "Fair is foul, and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air". Thus, we reach another aspect of the Weird Sisters' 'sin against nature' as Gary Wills sees it, namely their equivocal treatment of language (95). Stepping out of the laws of the universe, of gender itself, Shakespeare's witches disrupt the natural order of things with their confusing utterance; once more, a deliberately hesitant, misleading treatment of language echoes a similarly chaotic state of affairs in the universe, whose peace and hierarchy have been severely shaken by deeds "without a name" (4.1.50) – that is, actions opposed to the natural sphere to which language belongs. Vanity, self-centredness voice sins that, when uttered, shatter the peace of the universe, otherwise lost forever the moment they become deeds that cannot be named. It is as if not uttered, a deed dissolves itself, almost denying its corporality. "They speak of it mutedly, obliquely, with euphemism, and with extensive reliance upon it and other pronouns without antecedents" (Jorgenson 47).

For Jacques Derrida, Western thought is founded on the notion of an originary 'logos', a term borrowed from the Greek which Derrida variously glosses as truth, reason, meaning, thought and speech. Heraclitus sees logos as something eternal, always present, that can be heard and which should reach people in more comprehensively complex structures than the utterance itself; for it is logos that people follow when unfolding their actions. According to the Greek philosopher,

> This logos, although eternal (constant), it is neither understood by men before they listen to it, nor immediately they have heard it. Although everything happens according to this logos (in connection to it), people seem to lack the experience (they resemble the unexperienced ones), even if (at the same time when) they experience the exact words and things I talk about, to the extent that I explain (differentiate?) each according to its nature (its essence) and talk (explain) how it is (how it behaves). (qtd. in Coşeriu 50)

Thus, logos *becomes* reality, recommending itself as *the* law of reality and its linguistic expression, so much so that it becomes a reflection of the law governing the universe, as Ernst Hoffmann suggests (qtd. in Coşeriu 53). He adds that "there is no doubt that for Heraclitus logos refers to the universal law; *but* this universal law bears different names: dike (justice), nomos (the spirit of law), wisdom, reason, necessity, *fate*, the one, the universal; and withal, it is identical to the fire, even to the cosmos itself". (qtd. in Coşeriu 54)

We may argue that Shakespeare magnificently 'distorts' the laws of universe, by replacing *logos* with a sort of *mislogos* (a coinage that we propose in-between *misleading* and *logos*) that he entrusts the three *Weird Sisters* with, that not only displaces Macbeth from the epicentre of what Derrida refers to as *phallogocentrism*, but in doing so almost annihilates him as a creator of fate, whilst offering him only the status of doer, mere executant. The misleading logos comes with the ambiguous prophecies the *Weird Sisters* make, pouring the intoxicating venom of grandeur into Macbeth's ear. If Hamlet's father was poisoned by a substance poured into his ear while he slept, Macbeth goes to his doom the moment he allows himself to follow the treacherous path the prophecies foretell, as he puts his consciousness 'to sleep'. Falling out of *logos* seen as the "conscious harmony or attunement of the created universe" (Geldard 75), he is falling out of the rules and laws of Creation. The witches poison Macbeth's mind with dreams of glory, pushing him into committing murderous acts that challenge the *status quo* of the universe itself, for what is rebellion against God's anointed if not crime against nature itself? "Saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm" (Psalms 105:15, King James Bible version). Rebelling against the logos of God marks the Adamic disobedience and the fall from Heaven, disintegration, dissolution, total denial as entity created through 'dike, nomos, wisdom, reason'.

The play is constantly wrestling with the nature of masculinity, femininity, displacing canonical borderlines of gender towards an evanescently fluid geometry of being, imprisoned in anonymity, crafting 'deeds without a name'. "In their final appearance, the three witches / *Weird Sisters* will again switch from one alter ego to the other, from contemporary witchery to supernatural prophesying" (Whalen 66), sarcastically, almost malevolently, emphasising on the power of their *mislogos*, that, while suspending time, has disrupted the ways of the world. Their final presence in the play merges the

cross-border nature of their portrayal into one singular dimension, that of poisoned utterance that led Macbeth to damnation, pushing him into the turmoil of the fate he thought they prophesied for him "That this great king may kindly say,/ Our duties did his welcome pay." It is this *mislogos* of theirs that makes the play end in "a sarcastic farewell of dramatic irony" (Whalen 68) that seals the story of a great man trapped into the deceitful song of land-bound 'mermaids'.

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