

Macbeth and the ‘Weird Sisters’ – on Fates and Witches

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It is said that good things come to those who wait. To an academic, good things include answers to questions asked a long time ago, and it is such an answer I propose to present here. One rainy afternoon in a small house on a Norwegian hillside a while back, I was reminded of a brief investigation into *Macbeth* that I had made while working on my PhD. It turned out to be a curious cul-de-sac, but in the present article, I revisit that cul-de-sac because I believe I have now found a plausible way out of it.

My PhD focused on the supernatural female beings called the norns, who represent the concept of fate in Old Norse mythology, and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* had some relevance because of a detail, which I knew to be included, but which turned out to be different from anticipated. That, at least, was the conclusion I came to at the time and since the issue was not central to my thesis, I did not pursue it very far.¹ Shakespeare’s play was first performed probably in 1606 (Muir 1984: xvii-xx) and the text of the play was published in the so-called First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays in 1623, while my research focused on pre-Christian and early medieval world-views in the Nordic area, and the chronological and cultural gap between these two contexts rendered *Macbeth* marginal to my exploration of the Old Norse concept and personifications of fate. I now note that a decade of oblivion and a rainy day in Norway has rekindled my interest in the issue.

As is well known, Macbeth has his own dealings with fate and with three female figures, who present him with enticing notions of what the future holds for him. In the play’s list of characters, these three females are described as ‘witches’, while most people know them as ‘the weird sisters’. Yet, these females are not referred to in *Macbeth* as ‘the weird sisters’; the description simply does not occur in editions of the text that are based on the First Folio from 1623 – here, they are described as the ‘weyward / weyard sisters’ – although editions that follow Lewis Theobald’s emendations from 1733 refer to them as the ‘weird sisters’.² The adjective ‘weyward / weyard’ is used six times about the witches, all instances occurring as part of the spoken dialogue; in the stage directions they are consistently referred to as ‘witches’.

The term ‘wayward’, of which ‘weyward’ and ‘weyard’ are probably variants, has quite a different meaning from ‘weird’³ – the former means ‘unruly’ or ‘obstinate’,

¹ It took up footnote 144 of my thesis (Bek-Pedersen 2007: 72; note 16 of ch. 3 in my subsequent book on the norns, 2011: 116).

² See Theobald 1733: 392–3; Furness 1963: 37–38; Muir 1984: 14.

³ The oldest senses of ‘wayward’ listed in *OED*, with references from the late 1300s and 1500s, are: a) disposed to go against the wishes or advice of others or what is proper or reasonable,

the latter means ‘peculiar’ in modern English, but previously meant ‘fateful’ or ‘having to do with fate’ – and this discrepancy is really quite substantial. I think it unlikely that a man of Shakespeare’s linguistic sensibilities would accidentally use the wrong word and simply write ‘wayward’ if he intended ‘weird’. It therefore seems more plausible to me that there is another explanation. Perhaps an intended *double entendre* might be in play, an attempt to invoke the meanings of both ‘wayward’ and ‘weird’ at the same time. Alternatively, using a word with vaguely similar sonorous qualities could be an intended attempt at creating a mock version – you think the witches are going to call themselves ‘the weird sisters’, but it comes out as ‘the wayward sisters’. Such an intended double meaning could explain how witches and personifications of fate apparently come together in the same characters, since fate and sorcery are normally quite separate things.⁴ However, there could also be entirely different things in play, as I will discuss below.

A number of sources tell of the historical Macbeth, who was king of the Scots c. 1040 until his death in 1057, but for the present purposes I will only consider those that include the episode with the ‘weird sisters’.⁵ I am aware of six such accounts and intend to consider them closely here in order to establish what each of them has to say about these figures.

The earliest is Andrew of Wyntoun’s *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, written c. 1420.⁶ In many respects, this differs markedly from all known subsequent accounts and I will therefore treat it in some detail here. Wyntoun’s work is political in that it aims to glorify the Canmore-dynasty and one of the ways in which this is achieved is by comparing Macbeth unfavourably to his successor, Malcolm Canmore.⁷ In this process, Macbeth is portrayed not only as an illegitimate bastard, but in fact as the biological son of the Devil himself and, moreover, as a man prone to believing in dreams, marvels and prophecies. Wyntoun is not the first to portray Macbeth in a negative light, since this happens already in John of Fordun’s chronicle from c. 1360

intractable, self-willed, perverse; and b) of judgement: perverse, wrong, unjust (*OED* s.v. ‘wayward’). ‘Weyward’ is listed as one of several variant spellings.

⁴ See Simpson 1995: 11 and Bek-Pedersen 2011: 145–7. For a brief discussion of the scholarly debate on witches vs. ‘weird sisters’, see Wentersdorf 1980: 431–2. When compared to personifications of fate, such as the *norns* from Old Norse tradition, there can be no doubt that the witches in *Macbeth* are, indeed, witches and not ‘weird sisters’ (*cf.* Bek-Pedersen 2011: 61–6).

⁵ The earliest accounts that I have been able to consult are the so-called *Verse Chronicle* from the early 1200s (Anderson 1936: xxiv) and the *Chronicle of Melrose*, c. 1270. These describe Macbeth’s reign as a period of fertility and note that Malcolm gave him a cruel death (Anderson: xxv and 220). The earliest account to draw a negative portrait of Macbeth is, I believe, John of Fordun’s *Chronica Gentis Scottorum* (*Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*), Book 4, ch. 44 to Book 5, ch. 7 (Skene 1872: 180–92), written c. 1360, which portrays Macbeth (in Latin the name is rendered *Machabeus*) unfavorably and as a usurper, but makes no mention of anything supernatural relating to his career. Walter Bower’s work *Scotichronicon* from c. 1445, which is an expanded reworking of John of Fordun’s work, echoes Fordun’s account of Macbeth’s ascension to the throne very closely in Book 4, ch. 51, without any mention of supernatural aspects at all (*Scotichronicon II* 1989: 426–7), nor do any such details appear in the account of Macbeth’s subsequent death (*Scotichronicon III* 1995: 16–19).

⁶ Earlier accounts are all in Latin; Wyntoun’s is the first in the vernacular.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of these comparisons, see Purdie 2016.

(see footnote 5 above), but he may be responsible for first incorporating into the Macbeth story supernatural elements that seem to have their origins in oral traditions.⁸ It is these supernatural motifs that are of interest here, especially when considered in relation to how Shakespeare portrays them in his play.

In Book 6, Chapter 118 (or 18) of Andrew of Wyntoun's work, Macbeth sees in a dream three strange women who appear to predict his future by attaching to him titles, which he does not yet hold.⁹ As in the later play, this happens early on in Macbeth's career and becomes the catalyst for his ambition to be king. In this narrative, the women are entirely part of Macbeth's dream-vision and he is alone in knowing what they say to him.¹⁰ Andrew of Wyntoun's work, which is composed in poetic metre, is extant in several manuscripts, but there are no significant differences in the renditions of the passage concerning the dream.

Book 6, Chapter 118 of the Wemyss manuscript, lines 1895–1908, reads:¹¹
 A nycht him thoct in his dremyng
 That he wes sittand neire the king,
 At a seit in hunting sua,
 And in a lesche had grewhundis twa.
 Him thoct, till he wes sa sittand,
 He saw thre women by gangand,
 And þai thre women þan thoct he
 Thre werd sisteris like to be.
 The first he herd say gangand by:
 “Lo, yonder þe thayne of Crumbaghty!”
 The toþer sister said agane:
 “Off Murray yonder I see þe thayne.”
 The thrid said: “Yonder I se þe king.”
 All þis herd he in his dremyng. (Amours 1906: 272 and 274)

This is clearly a portrayal of fate, albeit fate experienced in a dream. Interestingly, the ‘weird sisters’ are given no introduction at all, so the reader must be expected to know who they are. They are in no way accosted by Macbeth and carry out no special actions at all, but as they walk past him and look at him, they volunteer the information about what they see – the first referring to him as Thane of Cromarty, the second as Thane of Moray and the third as king. Nothing is said about them or their appearance, they require no aids, but act much like people with second sight; what they see is obvious to

⁸ See Purdie: 55–6 and Chadwick 1949: 191–2.

⁹ It is made clear in the *Orygynale Cronykil* that, at the time of having this dream, Macbeth does not possess any of the titles, but that he acquires the two titles of thane very soon after. Lines 1909–10 read: “Sone efter þat, in his youth heid, // Off þai thayndomes þe thayne wes maid” (Amours 1906: 274).

¹⁰ In the overall frame of Wyntoun's work, the women should probably be regarded as conjured by his own imagination rather than as real beings who visit him in his dreams, but that is a minor point in the present exploration.

¹¹ I cite Wyntoun from the Wemyss ms.; Amours' edition also contains the text of the Cottonian ms, which in the relevant passages differs mainly in orthography and only slightly in wording (Amours 1906; see also Laing 1872).

them, although it is in no way obvious to Macbeth himself. However, once the words are spoken, the future thus predicted appears to be settled and events progress accordingly.¹²

Regarding the prophecies that concern Macbeth's death, Wyntoun's story deviates markedly from subsequent accounts (discussed below). Lines 1940–87 (Amours 1906: 276–81) present a flashback to before Macbeth was born and tell of how Macbeth's mother went to the woods where one day she met a stranger, whom she thought the most handsome man she had ever seen and whom she fell in love with. She became pregnant by this man, who then told her that their son could not be killed by a man born to a woman: "And na man suld be borne of wif // Off power to reif him his lif" (lines 1967–8; Amours 1906: 278). He also tells her of other events that will happen in the future, but no details regarding these are presented. This stranger is later referred to as the *deuill*, 'devil', (line 1963), making it very clear what we are meant to think of him as well as his offspring.¹³ The fact that Wyntoun chooses this story about Macbeth's birth from among other stories is evident in the comment he adds immediately after: "As of him sum story sais; // Bot quheper is sa were or oþer ways, // As to be gottin naturally, // As oþer men ar generaly" (Amours 1906: 278–81), thus revealing that there were other stories, which told of more ordinary birth circumstances.¹⁴

The first prediction thus made regarding Macbeth's apparent invulnerability is the same as the one occurring in subsequent accounts, but the circumstances of how it is made and the nature as well as gender of the character who utters the prediction are details that vary significantly between this and later sources.

The second invulnerability prediction is entirely separate from the first in Wyntoun's account. When, much later, Macduff comes to kill Macbeth, he employs the trick of making it look as if Birnam Woods are moving towards Dunsinane, lines 2267–84 (Amours 1906: 298), and it is only at this point made clear that Macbeth is watching a prophecy coming true: "At he trowit neuer for to be // Discomfit till at he mycht se // The wod be brocht of þe Brynnane // To þe hill of Dunsinnane" (lines 2271–4). Wyntoun presents it as part of the 'fantasy' that Macbeth has put his faith in, and we are probably to understand it as one of the events foreseen and related to his mother by the stranger from the woods.

The next two accounts of the Macbeth story to include the 'weird sisters' are Hector Boece's¹⁵ *Historia Gentis Scotorum*, written in 1527, and its translation into Scots by John Bellenden in c. 1536 with the title *Hystory and Croniklis of Scotland*. I

¹² See e.g. Bek-Pedersen 2011: 186–91 for the relationship between fate, prophecy and speech.

¹³ Incidentally, Andrew of Wyntoun manages to include a remarkable amount of information about all the good deeds that Macbeth carried out during his reign, but these are overshadowed by the negatives highlighted (*cf.* Purdie: 56–7).

¹⁴ Andrew of Wyntoun was prior of St. Serf's Inch Priory in Lochleven from c. 1393, and Macbeth and his wife, Gruoch, were documented benefactors of St. Serf's (Lawrie 1905: 5–6, no. 5; *cf.* Chadwick 1949: 197–8 and Purdie: 57). This may explain how Wyntoun knew of potential oral traditions about Macbeth then in circulation locally. St. Serf's Inch was home of a Culdee Monastery that was later absorbed into the Augustinian priory founded there in c. 1123, and Wyntoun's ill-will towards Macbeth may stem from differences between the two ecclesiastical bodies (Chadwick 1950: 25).

¹⁵ The name is sometimes Latinized as Hector Boethius.

consider these two as separate accounts because of the linguistic discrepancy – Boece writing in Latin and Bellenden in Scots – and because it shows that Bellenden’s translation was somewhat free. With these two accounts, the Macbeth story made famous by Shakespeare becomes recognizable and all three prophecies mentioned by Andrew of Wyntoun – Macbeth’s future titles foretold by the ‘weird sisters’ and the two prophecies regarding his death foretold by someone else – are present also in Boece and Bellenden, but they are contextualized in ways so different that Wyntoun cannot have been the immediate source of either.¹⁶

Although Boece’s work is obviously the earlier one, I will look at the translation first since Scots is more readily comparable to the other accounts than Latin. In Book 12, Chapter 3, Bellenden describes the encounter that Macbeth and Banquo have with the ‘weird sisters’, and immediately the major differences from Wyntoun’s account are apparent: Macbeth is no longer alone and he is no longer dreaming; what he sees is also seen by his companion. The women are thus part of the same reality as the two men.

The relevant passage of Book 12, Chapter 3, reads:

Nocht lang eftir, hapnit ane uncouth and wonderfull thing, be quhilk followit, sone, ane gret alteration in the realme. Be aventure, Makbeth and Banquho wer passand to Forres, quhair King Duncane hapnit to be for the time, and met be the gait thre wemen, clothit in elrage and uncouth weid. Thay wer jugit, be the pepill, to be weird sisteris. The first of thaim said to Makbeth, “Hale, Thane of Glamis!” the secound said, “Hale, Thane of Cawder!” and the third said, “Hale, King of Scotland!”¹⁷

...

[On being questioned by Banquo, the women then also prophesy for him in exactly the same way as they do in Shakespeare’s play.]

...

Yit, becaus al thingis succedit as thir wemen devinit, the pepill traistit and jugit thame to be weird sisteris.

(*Bell. Boece* 1821: 259)

We see that they are first presented as simply ‘thre wemen’ strangely dressed, who are then retrospectively deemed to have been the ‘weird sisters.’ Not long after, Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor, still in Chapter 3:

Than said Banquho, “Thow hes gottin all that the first two weird sisteris hecht. Restis nocht bot the croun, quhilk wes hecht be the third sister.”

¹⁶ The discrepancies may be explained by various oral traditions being in circulation (*cf.* Chadwick 1949: 202); however, since the material is so sparsely recorded, this explanation remains speculative.

¹⁷ In this account, Thane of Glamis is Macbeth’s inherited title, as is evident from Ch. 1 of the same book (*Bell. Boece* 1821: 252); Thane of Cawdor is the title bestowed upon him immediately after this prediction, while king is a title he will acquire sometime in the future. In this sense, the three titles describe his past, present and future, and the ‘weird sisters’ can be seen to represent these three time periods – an extremely common notion attached to the three female figures. On the complex relationship between fate and time, see Bek-Pedersen 2011: 88–91 and Winterbourne 2004: 17–18.

Makbeth, revolving all thingis as thay wer said be thir weird sisteris, began to covat the croun; and yit he concluded to abide quhil he saw the time ganand thairto, fermelie beleving that the third weird suld cum, as the first two did afore.

In the mene time, King Duncane maid his son Malcolme Prince of Cumbir, to signify that he suld regne eftir him. Quhilk wes gret displeseir to Makbeth: for it maid plane derogatioun to the third weird, promittit afore to him be thir weird sisteris.

(*Bell. Boece* 1821: 260)

In this passage, the description 'weird sisters' is consistent. The scene (and, indeed, plot) made famous by Shakespeare is now entirely recognizable.¹⁸ But the three females nonetheless still act as harbingers of fate, who as they pass by along the road simply state what is to come, rather than as witches, who perform magic in order to discover the future.

An interesting further detail to note is that, later, in Chapter 6, where Macbeth has come to regard Macduff as a serious threat to him, mention is made of a second prophecy, but this time using different terminology. Macbeth would have killed Macduff were it not for a certain witch:

wer nocht ane wiche, in quhom he had gret confidence, said, to put him out of all feir, That he suld nevir be slane with man that wes borne of wife, nor vincust, quhill the wod of Birmane wer cum to the castell of Dunsinane.

(*Bell. Boece* 1821: 269)

There is no handsome stranger and no 'weird sisters' involved at this point. This is a different woman altogether, there is only one woman making this second prophecy and she is referred to as a *wiche*, 'witch'. It is quite clear that, as in Wyntoun's account, we are dealing with two separate instances involving two distinct types of female figures; the 'weird sisters', who foretell future events, and a 'witch', who leads Macbeth to believe he cannot be killed by describing seemingly impossible events. These events, however, turn out to be illusions that can be and, indeed, are circumvented by reality. In Chapter 7, where Macbeth is watching Macduff making Birnam Woods move, the witch is mentioned once again:

Makbeth, seing him cum in this gise, understude the prophecy was completit that the wiche schew to him.

(*Bell. Boece* 1821: 273)

This involvement of a 'witch' subsequent to the appearance of the 'weird sisters' is extremely noteworthy. And Bellenden's translation in this respect remains true to Boece's Latin work.

Hector Boece's *Historia Gentis Scotorum* describes the same plotline, albeit with fewer embellishments. The encounter with the 'weird sisters', who salute Macbeth with titles he does not yet possess, occurs in Book 12, Chapter 9, where they are

¹⁸ Other embellishments on the story also appear in Bellenden's work, such as the ambitious Lady Macbeth (who is in one place described thus: *impacient of lang tary, as all wemen ar*, *Bell. Boece* 1821: 269); however, for the purposes of this article these other aspects are not relevant.

described as: *tres apparuere muliebri specie* (“three apparitions of a womanly appearance”); Bellenden here has *thre wemen* (Boece 2010). At the end of the same chapter, it is said that people thought of them as: *Parcas aut nymphas aliquas fatidicas* (“the Fates or some prophetic nymphs”); Bellenden has *weird sisteris* (Boece 2010). In Chapter 10, Banquo, addressing Macbeth, refers to them as: *illae sorores* (“those sisters”), and later in the same chapter they are termed: *illas deas* (“those goddesses”); in both instances Bellenden has *weird sisteris* (Boece 2010). These ‘apparitions’ are not mentioned again in Boece’s Latin work. But in Chapter 19, a new character is introduced on whom Bellenden clearly models his *wiche: muliercula praescia* (“a certain old prophetic dame”) who tells Macbeth that he cannot be killed until Birnam Woods come to Dunsinane, nor by a man born of a woman (Boece 2010). When Macbeth is killed in Chapter 26, however, Boece mentions no female figures, while Bellenden here includes a reference to the *wiche*.

Although Bellenden can be accused of producing an embellished translation, he does not invent this discrepancy between the three ‘weird sisters’ who appear first and foretell the future and the single witch whom Macbeth consults subsequently and who describes to him the seemingly impossible circumstances surrounding his death. Also in Boece’s work, this fourth female character is quite separate from the first three, and that difference is reflected in the vocabulary.

The chronologically fourth source is English, namely *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* from 1577, which is generally considered to be one of Shakespeare’s main sources for his dramatized Macbeth story (Muir 1984: xxxvi–xli; Furness 1963: 379–95; Boswell 1907: ix–xv; Bullough 1973: 478). *Holinshed’s Chronicles* contain the account of Macbeth’s reign and how he came to be king, and according to this, Macbeth and Banquo are journeying towards Forres where they are to meet King Duncan when they go off together without companions. While thus by themselves, the two men experience the strange encounter:

[T]here met them thrée women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world, whome when they attentiuely beheld, wondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said; “All haile Makbeth, thane of Glamis” (for he had latelie entered into that dignitie and office by the death of his father Sinell.) The second of them said; “Haile Makbeth thane of Cawder.” But the third said; “All haile Makbeth that hereafter shalt be king of Scotland.
(Holinshed 1808: 268)

After also communicating to the men that, although Macbeth will become king, he will come to an unlucky end, while Banquo will become the ancestor of many kings of Scotland, these women vanish and, in due course, events progress much in the way that previously Bellenden and subsequently Shakespeare have them.

Here, the women are described as being of strange and wild appearance and as resembling creatures of ancient times, but no specific designation is used about them; they are simply ‘women’. A little later, they are mentioned again and this time they are – as in Bellenden and Boece – described differently:

[T]he 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, because euerie thing came to passé as they had spoken.
(Holinshed 1808: 269)

Holinshed's terminology, however, is confused. They are described not only as supernatural (goddesses, nymphs or fairies), which in itself would account for their abilities to see into the future, but they are also engaging in activities relating to witchcraft, such as necromancy. Although the women are not referred to as 'witches', this seems thus implied. Holinshed, in applying this whole range of designations to them, appears somewhat at a loss in trying to understand what these women are, and his confusion is striking when compared to the Scottish sources (see above and below), which in contrast introduce them with great simplicity as 'the weird sisters' – a designation that apparently needs no introduction at all (*cf.* Simpson 1995: 11). This is interesting, because it is only with Holinshed's descriptions that the three females who foretell the future acquire witch-like qualities instead of simply being the Fates.

Furthermore, Holinshed – like Bellenden and Boece – involves an entirely different prophetess in connection with Macbeth's death:

[H]e had learned of certeine wizzards, in whose words he put great confidence (for that the prophesie had happened so right, which the three fairies or weird sister had declared vnto him) how that he ought to take heed of Makduffe, who in time to come should seeke to destroie him. And suerlie herevpon had he put Makduffe to death, but that a certeine witch, whome he had in great trust, had told him that he should neuer be slaine with man borne of anie woman...

(Holinshed 1808: 274)

In this case, there are both wizards and a witch. It is not entirely clear who the wizards are, but they appear to be distinct from the 'weird sisters' as well as from the subsequently mentioned witch. Holinshed thus presents a whole array of supernaturally engaged characters while employing a bungled terminology in relation to specifically the 'weird sisters'. If *Holinshed's Chronicles* are, indeed, Shakespeare's primary source for the involvement of supernatural agency in the story, it is no surprise that he presents them as 'witches' – witches, after all, were a hot topic in Shakespeare's time.

When Birnam Woods come to Dunsinane Castell, Macduff mentions to Macbeth the unusual circumstances of his birth:

I am euen he that thy wizzards haue told thee of, who was neuer borne of my mother, but ripped out of her wombe.

(Holinshed 1808: 277)

The description 'wizards' in this instance refers to the characters who have informed Macbeth about the impossible circumstances surrounding his death and thus led him to believe that he cannot be killed. Strictly speaking, this information was said earlier to come from the witch, whereas the wizards were said to warn him about Macduff, and there seems to be some conflation of the terms if not the characters.

Next is George Buchanan's *History of Scotland*, originally in Latin: *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*, which was written shortly before his death in 1582.¹⁹ Book 7,

¹⁹ John Leslie's history of Scotland, *De Origine, Moribus et Rebus Gestis Scotorum*, from 1578 is sometimes said also to include the scene with the 'weird sisters' (Muir 1984: xl), but this appears not to be so. In Book 5, ch. 84 of this work, the story of how Macbeth treacherously killed Duncan and usurped the crown is told, but it is simply said that: *spiritus ita Machabeo inflauit inanis* (Leslæo: 205), which in James Dalrymple's translation of the work into Scots

Chapter 84, Section 4 gives a detailed portrait of Macbeth's personality, describing him as: "a man of penetrating genius, a high spirit, unbounded ambition, and, if he had possessed moderation, was worthy of any command however great" (Buchanan 1827: 328). Later, in Section 8, the prophecy is mentioned:

Macbeth ... cherished secretly the hope of seizing the throne, in which he is said to have been confirmed by a dream. On a certain night, when he was far distant from the king, three women appeared to him of more than human stature²⁰, of whom one hailed him thane of Angus, another, thane of Moray, and the third saluted him king.
(Buchanan 1827: 331)

Interestingly, Buchanan's description reverts all the way back to Wyntoun, who also describes the prophecy as part of a dream. A little later in the same section, the three women are referred to as "his nocturnal visitors" (*ibid.*),²¹ but – which is probably very telling – in Chapter 85, Section 13, where Macbeth is killed by Macduff, there is no mention at all of any further prophecies. Buchanan simply notes – as if foreshadowing theatre yet to be written – that: "Here some of our writers relate a number of fables more adapted for theatrical representation, or Milesian romance, than history, I therefore omit them" (Buchanan 1827: 336). In all likelihood, this refers to the information that makes Macbeth believe himself invulnerable, namely the circumstances of Macduff's birth and Birnam Woods moving towards Dunsinane. But it also reveals Buchanan as a very rational chronicler who does not include any old tale, but only what seems to him to be sound, historical facts. Arguably, he manages to both have his cake and eat it here, since he says that such tales are known, but then refuses to include them. By putting the 'weird sisters' back into a dream, Buchanan may be said to present them as part of his detailed, psychological portrait of Macbeth, his personality, temperament, merits and, not least, shortcomings. In other words, by combining Wyntoun's dream-vision and his own rational thinking, Buchanan comes up with a fairly realistic and plausible historical version of Macbeth's encounter with the 'weird sisters'.²²

Finally, there is the English poet William Warner's *A Continuance of Albion's England* from 1606.²³ This comprises additional material on the history of England and, in Book XV, chapter 94, it tells the story of Banquo's son, Fleance, and his beloved Paragon, who is the daughter of King Gruffyths. She asks Fleance to tell her whether "the Storie of Fairies that foretold thy Father's fate" (Bullough 1973: 473) is true, to which he replies: Three Fairies in a private walke to them appeared, who

Saluted Makbeth King, and gave him other Titles too:
To whom my father, laughing, said they dealt unequall dole,

from 1596, *History of Scotland*, is rendered as: *Machabie inspirit with sum ill spirit* (Cody 1888: 305).

²⁰ In the Latin original, they are described as: *tres feminas forma augustiore quim humana* (RHS 1727: 174).

²¹ Here, the Latin original has: *visum nocturnum* (RHS 1727: 175).

²² Buchanan's work is held by some to be one of Shakespeare's major sources for his play, which is particularly likely with regards to Macbeth's psyche (Muir 1984: xl).

²³ As the title says, this is a follow-up to his earlier *Albion's England*, which is a verse-history of England first published in 1586 and subsequently in various expanded versions until 1602.

Behighting nought thereof to him, bot to his Friend the whole.
 When of the Weird-Elfes one of them, replying, said that he
 Should not be king, but of his Streen a many Kings should be.
 So vanish they: and what they said of Makbeth now we see.
 (Bullough 1973: 473)

We recognize the scene where Banquo and Macbeth encounter the three women, who are said here to have appeared to them. In Warner, the impression is that the terms are jumbled much in the same way as in *Holinshed*, whom Warner echoes rather closely in his designations for the women. Especially the compound 'Weird-Elfes' attracts attention because it includes the element 'weird', which appears otherwise to be reserved for Scottish versions. However, the additional descriptions of 'fairies' and 'elves' may serve to clarify what sort of beings these are – something that appears unnecessary in the Scottish texts. Strictly speaking, it is not mentioned that these are female figures, nor is this revealed elsewhere in the text, but we may assume that this is how Warner conceived of them.

It is uncertain whether Warner's work can have inspired Shakespeare's play in the same way as the five other texts discussed above, since it was only published in 1606, which is the year when *Macbeth* is thought to have been first performed. But it does predate the First Folio edition of 1623.²⁴

Thus the sources, which precede Shakespeare, and which may to a greater or lesser extent have inspired his portrayal of the three witches in *Macbeth*. The witch-like aspects of the 'weird sisters' are perhaps first introduced by *Holinshed*, who nonetheless retains the description 'weird sisters' when they are first mentioned, thus echoing both Andrew of Wyntoun and John Bellenden. All the more interesting that this is exactly where Shakespeare digresses from all preceding sources.

The 'weird sisters' were known in England prior to *Holinshed's Chronicles*, as is evident from the mention of them in the *Catholicum Anglicum*, dated 1483, an English-Latin dictionary containing this entry: "Wyrde systres – *parce*" (1881: 420).²⁵ It must be assumed that the vernacular phrase was known, although we cannot know how common it was; indeed, the indications are that it was a Scottish rather than an English phrase. English writers from the seventeenth century refer to it as a Scots phrase (see below), but the Scottishness of it is also evident from other contemporary and earlier Scottish and English sources that mention the 'weird sisters'.

Arguably, this shows also in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I am not aware that the *Oxford English Dictionary* claims to be exhaustive in terms of referring to all known examples, but it is striking that of the six references to usages of the adjective 'weird' occurring prior to Shakespeare, only two point to English while four point to Scottish

²⁴ Another contemporary mention of the meeting with three strange women appears in Matthew Gwinn's poem *Vertumnus Sive Annus Recurrens* from 1607 (Bullough 1973: 470-1), but this will not be discussed here. Partly because it is in Latin (the women are referred to as *Sibyllae*, 'sibyls', *Sorores*, 'sisters', and *fata*, 'fates'), and partly because they are said here to foretell only Banquo's future, while *Macbeth* is not even mentioned (Bullough 1973: 470-1).

²⁵ References listed in *OED* as earlier than the 1400s do not employ 'weird' as an adjective, but only as a noun referring to the abstract power of fate as such; instances of the Old English noun 'wyrð' are found in Boethius, *Seafarer* and *Beowulf* (*OED* s.v. weird n.).

works.²⁶ There is, in other words, a preponderance of Scottish in comparison to English references.²⁷ Moreover, the description ‘the weird sisters’, in various orthographic renditions, appears in a whole range of Scottish sources from the 1500s and one from the 1400s. Not all of these are equally relevant here, but I have decided to include all of them for the sake of completion. Apart from the references specifically to Macbeth discussed above, *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* lists a further nine references to the ‘weird sisters’, six of which refer to the Classical Fates, while three refer to folk tradition.²⁸ Chronologically listed, these additional Scottish examples are:

The so-called *Scottish Troy Book* from c. 1400, a Scottish version of Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (Caddick 2014: 36), recorded by the fourteenth-century Scottish poet John Barbour.²⁹ In this rendition of the Trojan War, lines 2803–18 describe the wife of King Menone:

Now tellis þis story successive
 That þis king Menone had a wyf
 Richt faire, and scho come opinly
 To Menonis graif and apertly
 Gart opyne It and furth has tone
 Kyng Menonis bones euerilkone
 And in one weschell of gold fyne
 Thame put, and, all folk seand syne,
 With þe weschell and þe bones
 From þare sicht wanyst all-attones
 Richt as one cloude, and (n)euir syne seyne.
 For quhiche sume sayis þat sche but weyne
 Was wplifted as one goddes,
 Or þane one goddeß douchtere wes,
 And vperis said sche was, I trow,
 A werde-sistere – I wait neurir how.
 (Barbour 1882: 298)

The term ‘a werde-sistere’ appears in line 2818. The description of this woman’s actions recalls Holinshed’s reference to necromancy: She opens her late husband’s grave to take out his bones and put them into some sort of golden container upon which the bones apparently vanish in a great cloud of smoke. For this, it is said, some believed her to be a goddess, the daughter of a goddess or one of the ‘weird sisters’. The *Scottish*

²⁶ For sources prior to Shakespeare, *OED* lists: the *Scottish Troy Book* (under the name of the “Scottish Trojan War”), Wyntoun’s *Cronikyl*, the *Catholicum Anglicum*, Douglas’ *Eneados* (under the name of *Æneid*), the *Complaynt of Scotlande*, and *Holinshed’s Chronicles*.

²⁷ Six is admittedly a small amount to base any statistics on, but if there are abundant English references, then it seems odd that *OED* lists so proportionately many Scottish sources.

²⁸ Of the total of twelve references to the ‘weird sisters’ listed in *DOST*, the *OED* concurs in only two (*Eneados* by Douglas and *The Complaynt of Scotlande* by Wedderburn). However, it is of course not necessarily the task of an English dictionary to list all relevant Scottish examples.

²⁹ This *Scottish Troy Book* survives only in fragmentary form in two mss: Cambridge, University Library Kk.5.30 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 148 (Caddick 2014: 36). The cited passage is found only in Douce 148.

Troy Book thus presents just one woman, who is strongly linked to Classical tradition because she figures in a story about Troy.³⁰ The boundaries between human witch and supernatural representative of fate are somewhat blurred, possibly due to the difficulties of distinguishing between legendary human beings and divine beings.

Interestingly, the very next lines, 2819–20, say: “Bot leif we now suche fantasy // And torne we to þe trewe story”. It seems the unknown poet of the *Scottish Troy Book* concurs with Buchanan in taking a rational approach to historical details, although he has just included a tale he apparently considers to be fantasy.

Also *Eneados*, Gawin Douglas’ translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* into Scots from 1513, clearly refers to Classical material. In Book 5, Chapter 13, Venus makes her requests of Neptune for her son, Aeneas. The lines containing the reference read:

Admit myne asking, gif so the fatis gydis,
Or gif that my desyre may grantit be,
Or yit werd sisteris lift geif thaim that cuntre.
(*Eneados* 1839: 291, lines 18–20).

This brief mention clearly equates the ‘weird sisters’ with the Fates and refers to their ability to determine future events.

The *Asloan Manuscript* from 1513, a compilation of Scots prose and poetry, contains a section headed ‘The Sex Werkdayis and Agis’ (*Asloan* 1923: 299–330), which is a parallel between the biblical six days of creation and the six ages of the world.³¹ The brief reference to the ‘weird sisters’ occurs in the section pertaining to the fifth day with its corresponding ages and seems to form part of a long list of Classical deities and legendary figures. It stands out as the only part of this passage given in both Scots and Latin:

[T]hre sisteris fatall callit cloto latis & antropus thre werd sisteris *versus*
Cloto colum baiulat latiþ trahit antropus occat Hec tres fatales fatum
duxere sorores.
(*Asloan* 1923: 324–5).

There is no doubt in this case either that ancient Greek tradition is invoked, given the names Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, and the passage shows that a direct parallel was perceived between the Classical and local versions of these three female figures.

The *Complaynt of Scotlande*, by Robert Wedderburn, 1549, mentions among a whole number of tales from Classical tradition also “the tail of the thre veird systirs” (Leyden 1801: 99). No further details are given to elucidate what the tale thus mentioned concerned, but Classical tradition is again cited.

John Rolland’s poem *Court of Venus* from 1575 likewise refers to Classical tradition. “The central action [of the poem] concerns the trial of Desperance, an allegorical protagonist who offends the goddess of love by the vehemence of his attack

³⁰ By ‘Classical tradition’ I mean to refer to both ancient Roman and ancient Greek tradition. I am aware that there are significant differences between these two and that it is in many ways false to regard them as one (Morales 2007: 3–4 *et passim*), but for the purposes of the present exploration, I do not consider these differences central.

³¹ Incidentally, the *Asloan Manuscript* also contains a section headed ‘The Scottis Cronikle’, chapters 56–58 of which tell of the reign of Macbeth (*Asloan* 1923: 259–60); it calls him a ‘traitor’ and describes how he killed Duncan to obtain the crown. The account is very brief and contains no supernatural aspects.

on Esperance” (Lyll 2005: 111). In the Secund Buik, Desperance in despair approaches Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos in order for them to tell him whether good or evil awaits him. The relevant passage reads:

Chan he but baid into thair sicht did go.
 ...
 Vnto thir thre, kneilling downe to the eird:
 Quhilk for to Name the first is callit Clothe
 Lachesis uirt: and syne efter thir two,
 Atropos third: thir thre sa weill ar leird.
 To Ilk man geuis in warld his fatall wen
 Quhidder it be to weill wappit or wo
 ...
 He tuik gude nicht ar thir weird sisteris than ...
 (*Court of Venus*)

It is interesting that Desperance intentionally seeks out the Fates in order to consult them. Their ability to foretell and determine the future for human beings is clearly portrayed.

John Arbuthnot’s poem “A General Lament”, extant in the Maitland Folio Manuscript from sometime during the period 1570–1586, portrays a sense of being hard done by in life. Stanza 1, lines 4–6 read:

O ewill aspect in my natiuitie
 O weird sisteris quhat alis yow at me
 That all dois wirk this contrair my intent.
 (*Maitland* 1919: 49)

This reference is to the forces of fate personified by female beings who have attended the narrator’s birth and at that time determined what his life would be like; it is clear that he is not very happy with what he has been allotted. The reference invokes an understanding of the Fates, which is extremely common in much folklore and persists in popular traditions known today, namely that when the ‘weird sisters’ make their pronouncements, evil can be expected, although they are equally capable of granting good things (*cf.* Bek-Pedersen 2011: 34, 40–1). It seems correct to consider this a reference to popular folk traditions rather than to the Classical Fates as such, although the distinction is not unequivocal.

In George Buchanan’s work from *c.* 1566-70, *Commentary on Virgil’s Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid*, the Latin term *Parcas* is glossed as ‘weird sisters’ (Finlayson 1957: 281). The gloss, which refers to *Aeneid* I, 22, adds little to the picture already established, but simply confirms it. It corresponds exactly to the gloss in *Catholicum Anglicum*, only in the reverse direction: from Latin into the vernacular.

A reference very similar to Arbuthnot’s is found in *The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart* from *c.* 1580, composed by Alexander Montgomerie in connection with his successful attempt to outdo Patrick Home of Polwarth and become court poet for King James VI of Scotland (Meikle 2014: 334). In this very popular poem, Montgomerie ridicules Polwart, among other things describing how he was visited by the ‘weird sisters’ shortly after his birth and how they foretold the future for this

extremely ugly infant.³² The full prediction takes up lines 287–381, but I cite only the very first and the very last lines (lines 281–4 and 385–6).³³

The wurd sisteris wandering, as they wer wont than,
Saw revinis ruge at þis rat be ane rone-ruite.
They musit at þis mandrak mismaid lyk ane man;
Ane beist bund with ane bunwyd in ane auld bute.

...

Fra þe weird sisteris saw the schaip of that schit,
“Littill luk be thy lot,” quod they, “quhair þow lyis.”

...

(Stevenson 1910: 150, 158)

In this entertaining passage, the ‘weird sisters’ are appalled by the ugliness of the baby they come across and grant it a whole range of negative gifts, bordering on outright curses. They themselves are not described at all, but (as in Wyntoun’s *Cronykil*) simply walk by the person for whom they prophesy. It is especially interesting that Montgomerie makes a very sharp distinction between the ‘weird sisters’, who arrive first and determine the future, and the witches, led by the enigmatically named Nikniven, who arrive subsequently and carry out all sorts of witchcraft rituals with the infant.³⁴ This distinction recalls the equally separate characters involved in Macbeth’s career according to the pre-Shakespeare sources.

Lastly, a reference in the same vein as Arbuthnot’s and Montgomerie’s is found in the medieval romance *Clariodus*, extant in a manuscript from c. 1550, although the work itself appears to be somewhat earlier and “may at least be referred to the close of the preceding century” (Piper 1830: ii). This is a Scottish translation and versification of a fifteenth-century French prose romance known as *Cleriadus and Meladice*, which tells the story of the hero Cleriadus, who is the son of the count of Asturias, and his beloved Meladice, daughter of the king of England (Piper 1830: iv–ix; Caddick 2014: 43). The reference appears in *The First Buik of Clariodus*, where the hero fights and kills a lion with his sword after which a knight appears and expresses his profound gratitude to Clariodus for lifting the awful curse that had turned him into an animal. Lines 1023–7 read:

My father was of Portingall ane knicht
And eke my mother was ane lady bricht
To Wairdis then was given grite credence,
Thairfore my mother gart with diligence
The Waird Sisteris wait quhen I was borne

³² This reference was first brought to my attention by Dr. Neil Martin from the University of Edinburgh, who was the internal examiner at my Ph.D viva in December 2007. At the time, Dr. Martin questioned me about the relevance of Montgomerie’s ‘weird sisters’ to my research on the Old Norse *norns*; more than a decade on, I believe I now have an answer to his question.

³³ This is from the Tullibardine ms, which uses the heading ‘The Secund Invective’ for this section (Stevenson 1910: 150); the edition cited here also contains the version extant in the Harleian ms.

³⁴ The name Nikniven may originally stem from an historical woman condemned as a witch (cf. Simpson 1995: 11–17), but it appears to have become part of Scottish folklore traditions about witches.

To heir quhat waird thay sould lay me beforne.
(Piper 1830: 33).

This reference reflects exactly the same popular belief as do Arbuthnot's and Montgomerie's respective poems, namely that the 'weird sisters' determine the course of a newborn child's life by granting it a number of positive and/or negative gifts and that the emphasis is usually on the 'negative gifts' or curses.³⁵

The impression thus gained from the Scottish sources is that the 'weird sisters' were well known under that epithet in Scottish folk tradition. The wealth of Scottish material combined with the consistent Scottish no-frills approach to introducing the 'weird sisters' on the one hand and the relative dearth of English material combined with Warner and Holinshed's confusion about what these 'weird sisters' actually are on the other hand justifies the opinion that a high degree of Scottishness was attached to the 'weird sisters' in the overall sixteenth and seventeenth century British context. This finds support in the fact that, apart from Holinshed and Warner, one other English source near-contemporary with Shakespeare – writing after the play was composed – describes the story of Macbeth including his encounter with the 'weird sisters', but not under that name: Peter Heylyn in his *Mikrokosmos, A Little Description of the Great World* from 1633, drawing on Holinshed, states that Macbeth and Banquo "were met by three Fairies, Witches (*Weirds* the Scots call them)" (Heylyn 1633: 507). Heylyn's comment suggests that the label and phenomenon the 'weird sisters' had especial currency in Scotland, as does Theobald's remark that it is a "Scotch Term" (Theobald 1733: 393). The English playwright Thomas Heywood in his poem *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angells* from 1635 refers to the story, stating that Mackbeth and Banco "Riding alone, encountered on the way (In a darke Groue) three Virgins wondrous faire, As well in habit as in feature rare" (Heywood 1635: 508), which seems a far cry from the hags of Shakespeare's play, although not unsuitable for the Fates.³⁶

Moreover, the argument for Scottishness may find further corroboration in the fact that some English authors of the seventeenth century, such as the playwrights Heywood and Brome (in their co-authored play *The Late Lancashire Witches* from 1634) and Tate (in the libretto for Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* from c. 1688),³⁷ opt for the phrase 'wayward sisters' rather than 'weird sisters', probably inspired by Shakespeare's wording, but possibly also oblivious of any alternatives.³⁸ Both these drama-related English examples, incidentally, use the phrase in the context of witchcraft – like Shakespeare – and Heywood and Brome even refer directly to a Scottish link: "You look like one o' the Scottish wayward sisters" (*Brome*). If

³⁵ Regarding this emphasis on the negative aspects, see also Bek-Pedersen 2011: 34, 40–1.

³⁶ Heywood's reference, incidentally, appears among other descriptions of spirits that govern water (Heywood 1635: 507–8).

³⁷ Nahum Tate was Irish, born in Dublin in 1652, but he later moved to London and worked there, becoming poet laureate in 1692 (*DNB*: 379–80).

³⁸ *The Late Lancashire Witches*, Act I, line 439: "Is this a fit habite for a handsome young gentlewoman's mother, as I hope to be a lady, you look like one o' the Scottish wayward sisters" (*Brome*). This looks more like a reference to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* than anything else. *Dido and Aeneas*, Act II, Scene 1, set in the sorceress' cave, opens with the sorceress addressing the witches thus: "Wayward sisters, you that fright // The lonely traveller by night // Who, like dismal ravens crying, // Beat the windows of the dying, // Appear! Appear at my call, and share in the fame // Of a mischief shall make all Carthage flame. // Appear!" (*Dido and Aeneas*). Both these works are likely inspired by Shakespeare's choice of words.

Holinshed's uncertainty regarding the nature of the 'weird sisters' reflects, as seems plausible, more than just a personal puzzlement, it likely contributes to explaining the complete merging of 'weird sisters' with 'witches' in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: they were not as well known in England as in Scotland. Ironically, the designation 'the weird sisters' has nonetheless become firmly and specifically associated with this play.³⁹

The question of Shakespeare's use of, understanding of and intention behind 'weyward'/'weyard' versus 'weird' is by no means new. In order to enter into this part of the discussion, it is necessary to consider exactly what happens in the six instances in *Macbeth* where the terms 'weyward' and 'weyard' are used.

Act I, scene 3; the three witches speak to and about themselves in connection with a charm they are creating as Macbeth approaches:

The weyward Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the Sea and Land,
Thus doe go, about, about,
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice againe, to make vp nine.
Peace, the Charme's wound vp.
(Furness 1963: 36–8)

There is clearly some sort of ritualistic behaviour going on here, which reveals that the women are witches; were they representatives of fate, such behaviour would be wholly unnecessary. Alongside their witchlike antics and their descriptions of bawdy and evil actions they have carried out, the term 'witch' is used in the immediately preceding lines where one of the witches cites a sailor's wife telling her to go away: "Aroynt thee, Witch!" (Furness 1963: 31). Furthermore, Theobald commented on 'wayward' that: "This word, in general, signifies *perverse, froward, moody, obstinate, intractable* etc. and is everywhere so used by our Shakespeare" (Theobald 1733: 392). Contrary to what Theobald seems to think, I find these to be rather precise descriptions of the three witches; indeed, what Shakespeare portrays on the very first introduction of the witches seems to be exactly "the characteristic topsyturviness of witch behaviour" (Simpson 1995: 14). Their utterances and manners are entirely comparable to being 'wayward' in the senses listed by Theobald: *perverse, forward and moody*. On the basis of this, my suggestion therefore is that it is, in fact, the witchlike aspect that is pushed to the fore when the audience first see these females on stage. It even seems quite possible that 'weyward' is intended to underline their status as witches.

Act I, scene 5; Lady Macbeth is reading aloud to herself a letter from her husband in which he describes his and Banquo's strange encounter with the women:

They met me in the day of successe: and I haue learn'd by the perfect'st report, they haue more in them, then mortall knowledge. When I burnt in desire to question them further, they made themselues Ayre, into which they vanish'd. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came Missiues from the King, who all-hail'd me Thane of Cawdor, by which Title before, these weyward Sisters saluted me, and referr'd me to the comming on of time, with haile King that shalt be."

³⁹ On searching for 'the weird sisters' on the internet, all references that come up point either to Shakespeare's play or to fictional characters that have in all likelihood been inspired by Shakespeare's play.

(Furness 1963: 69–70)

This passage mentions neither behaviour nor looks, Macbeth is simply repeating the women’s description of themselves and the gist of what they have foretold for him. In his letter, he uses the same term as the witches used about themselves: ‘weyward’.

Act II, scene 1; during a late-night conversation when they are alone, Banquo says to Macbeth: “I dreamt last Night of the weyward Sisters: // To you they haue shew’d some truth” (Furness 1963: 117). Again, this is simply a repetition of how the women referred to themselves. Macbeth responds that he does not think about them, but the conversation is immediately followed by his vision of a dagger after Banquo leaves him and he is alone. Clearly, the prophecy, as he and Banquo now both understand the women’s statements to be, is preying on his mind.

The orthographic shift comes in Act III, scene 1. At the very opening of this scene, Banquo is speaking to himself, saying:

Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weyard Women promis’d, and I feare
Thou playd’st most fowly for’t: yet it was saide
It should not stand in thy Posterity,
But that my selfe should be the Roote, and Father
Of many Kings. If there come truth from them,
As vpon thee Macbeth, their Speeches shine,
Why by the verities on thee made good,
May they not be my Oracles as well,
And set me vp in hope.
(Furness 1963: 173)

Banquo is wondering about the prophecies, about the way in which they have come true for Macbeth and about whether they will come true for himself, too. One difference here is the changed orthography, ‘weyard’, another difference is that the women are referred to as ‘women’ rather than ‘sisters’. It is the only one of the six references that does not use the term ‘sisters’.

Act III, scene 4; Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are talking, he is deeply troubled by the murders he has committed and worried about where he is heading. He says to his wife:

I will to morrow
(And betimes I will) to the weyard Sisters.
More shall they speake: for now I am bent to know
By the worst meanes, the worst, for mine owne good,
All causes shall giue way.”
(Furness 1963: 230)

Macbeth, thus, decides to approach the three women of his own free will in order that they may tell him more. This corresponds to the historical accounts where Macbeth consults the witch, except in the play there are three witches and they are exactly the same characters as those who initially prophesied about his future. This is a striking digression from the historical accounts.

Act IV, scene 1; the scene opens with the witches accompanied by Hecate preparing for Macbeth’s arrival upon which he requests information and they show him a whole range of apparitions, the last of which resembles the murdered Banquo. Macbeth is horrified. When the witches vanish, Lennox enters and Macbeth asks him:

“Saw you the Weyard Sisters?” (Furness 1963: 265). Lennox denies and communicates instead the news that Macduff has fled to England.

This appearance of Hecate arguably corresponds to the single witch, whom Macbeth consults in the historical accounts. She has a similar cameo appearance in Act III, Scene 5, where she instructs the witches in their evil deceptions of Macbeth as a sort of ‘chief witch’ (Furness 1963: 232–6 and 253–4).⁴⁰ In Classical tradition, Hecate was a chthonic goddess associated with the night, death and fertility, but she was also a goddess of magic, witchcraft and necromancy (Grant and Hazel: 151–2; *Theoi*) and it is in this capacity she appears among Shakespeare’s witches (*cf.* Simpson 1995: 14–18). She is not one of the ‘weird sisters’.

Regarding the orthographic shift from ‘weyward’ in the first part of the play to ‘weyard’ in the latter part, there is scholarly agreement that this is a discrepancy between Compositor A, who typeset the former part of the play, and Compositor B, who typeset the latter part of the play in the First Folio edition.⁴¹ Moreover, the argument has been made that the spelling ‘weyard’ actually represents a dialectal pronunciation that has the same sonorous quality as the modern English ‘weird’.⁴² This may be so, but I nonetheless find the explanation unsatisfactory; it seems a short-sighted solution to rely on a pronunciation local to a completely different place from the setting of the play’s action. Moreover, if Shakespeare intended the witches to be termed ‘the weird sisters’, then why did he not write ‘weird’? Why use a different word?⁴³

Shakespeare’s use of the description ‘weyward sisters’ has, according to Theobald, arisen as the result of some copyist’s error; ‘weird’ was, to Theobald’s mind, the intended word (Theobald 1733: 393). Were this the case, this mistake by the typesetter(s) would seem to support my argument that the ‘weird sisters’ were not so well known in England, although I am not convinced the error argument holds. Instead, I would like to entertain the idea that Shakespeare either intentionally used ‘wayward’ instead of ‘weird’ or that his intention was for the two terms to seem to merge. After all, the theme of ambiguity is laid out right from the very opening of the play – Act I, Scene 1: “faire is foule, and foule is faire” (Furness 1963: 12) – and the perverse aspect of ‘wayward’ is blatantly exemplified by the bawdiness of the witches in Act I, Scene 3 – behaviour that completely undermines the dignity and mystery of the ‘weird sisters’, whom the witches arguably aspire to be mistaken for. As I understand the character of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, this potential for mistaking the witches for the ‘real weird sisters’ may even fuel his ambition in the sense that he wants them to be harbingers of fate and therefore does not recognize them for what they really are, namely mere dabblers in magic and illusion.

⁴⁰ It is thought by some that the two brief scenes featuring Hecate are later interpolations not authored by Shakespeare (Muir 1984: xxxii–xxxv). This, however, does not change the fact that Hecate is the appropriate figure from Classical tradition to associate with the witches in *Macbeth*.

⁴¹ See Braunmuller 2008: 255–6 and Muir 1984: 14.

⁴² See Braunmuller 2008: 256 and Urmson 1981: 245.

⁴³ This brings us to the metrical argument, regarding which there is no consensus. Some hold that a disyllabic word was required in order for the diction to come out right (Braunmuller 2008: 256), while others hold the exact opposite: that a disyllabic word is detrimental to the verse (Furness: 37–8).

In support of this, it is Macbeth who believes the witches, whereas Banquo initially seeks to explain them and their prophecies away by rational means, questioning whether he and Macbeth have even seen what they believe they have seen and referring to the witches as the “Instruments of Darknesse” (Furness 1963: 44–52; *cf.* Simpson 1995: 17). One might say that Macbeth has more reason to believe the witches’ prophecy since he is the one who is immediately touched by it, becoming Thane of Cawdor virtually the moment the witches vanish, but his willingness to be so taken by their utterances also reveals an important aspect of his psyche.

The ‘weird sisters’ were already firmly attached to the historical figure of Macbeth and the fact that they were regarded as beings of some dignity is reflected also in the illustration from the 1577 edition of *Holinshed’s Chronicles* of their meeting with Macbeth and Banquo, which I have found reproduced in Schoenbaum (1981: 12–13). Here, two gentlemen on horseback meet three equally gentle women in fine dress and with their hair elaborately arranged. These women carry no accoutrements at all and there is nothing about their appearance that can justifiably be associated with witches, although they might possibly pass as nymphs, which is one of the terms by which Holinshed describes them.

Shakespeare breaks with this tradition by conflating the ‘weird sisters’ from the early part of the historical accounts of Macbeth entirely with the ‘witch’ from the latter part of these accounts – and by pushing the witchiness so clearly to the foreground. I believe this is reflected in his choice of words, calling his witches the ‘weyward sisters’. As regards Theobald’s emendation to ‘weird’ from 1733, I believe it to be influenced by that self-same tradition, which Shakespeare breaks with, and I think it is essentially misunderstood. Had Shakespeare intended to portray the unyielding, supernatural forces of fate, then he missed every opportunity to do so in a manner even remotely convincing. Theobald may in one sense revert the picture back to the Scottish tradition of the ‘weird sisters’ by substituting ‘weyward’ with ‘weird’, but in doing so he bypasses Shakespeare altogether.

By depicting only witches, Shakespeare presents in his version of the Macbeth story a man who is not so much an unfortunate victim of superhuman fate as he is a zealous man blinded by fantastic illusions. Witches must have been extremely topical, since *Macbeth* was written during the period of the great witch hunts and witch trials. Shakespeare is thought to have been well acquainted with King James VI and I’s work on witchcraft, *Daemonologie* from 1597, allegedly inspired by the king’s personal involvement in the North Berwick witch trials of 1590 and by the Earl of Bothwell’s witchcraft-induced attempt at King James’ life earlier that same year (*cf.* Wentersdorf 1980: 434–5; Simpson 1995: 17–18) – a high-profile Scottish case that must have been well known around the time Shakespeare wrote his play.⁴⁴ Even so, witches were above all human beings, who were able by magical means to unveil the future (*cf.* Wentersdorf 1980: 433); they were not themselves supernatural beings.

Macbeth, as Shakespeare portrays him, is not a victim of the unyielding forces of fate, nor of his unfortunate descent from a supernatural woodsman of dubious nature, but is instead the victim of his own equally uncompromising, yet all too human, desire and ambition. The inspiration for the play’s warped and ‘wayward’ version of the ‘weird sisters’ known from Scottish tradition may in my opinion have come from a

⁴⁴ The North Berwick witch trials thus involved a Scottish nobleman, who was a successful soldier and had some measure of royal blood in his veins (which gave him hope of succeeding to the throne if James died), and who allied himself with witches in an attempt to get rid of his royal cousin. It is not unlikely that this case provided some inspiration for *Macbeth*.

variety of places or, indeed, from all of them: the witch traditionally associated with the seemingly impossible circumstances surrounding Macbeth’s death, Holinshed’s uncertain description of the ‘weird sisters’, a misunderstanding of a group of beings known within contemporary Scottish but not English folk tradition, or a wish to portray the anti-hero of the so-called ‘Scottish Play’ in solely human terms.

ABBREVIATIONS

- Asloan* *The Asloan Manuscript: A miscellany in prose and verse, written by John Asloan in the reign of James the Fifth.* Scottish Text Society, New Series 14, 16. 1923. W.A. Craigie, ed. Edinburgh and London.
- Bell. Boece* *The History and Chronicles of Scotland; written in Latin by Hector Boece and translated by John Bellenden, Archdean of Moray.* Vol. II. Bellenden, John and Boece, Hector. 1821. Edinburgh.
- Boece* Hector Boece. *Historia Gentis Scotorum.* 2010. Dana F. Sutton, ed. Online: <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/boece/>
- Brome* Ostovich, H., ed. *The Late Lancashire Witches by Thom. Heywood and Richard Broome.* 1634. London. Online: <https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/brome/viewTranscripts.jsp?play=LW&act=1&type=BOTH>
- Catholicum Anglicum* *Catholicum Anglicum. An English-Latin Wordbook dated 1483.* 1881. Early English Text Society. Sidney J.H. Herrtage, ed. London.
- Court of Venus* *Court of Venus: Ane treatise callit the court of Venus deuidit into four buikis newlie comylit be Iohne Rolland in Dalkeith.* John Rolland. 1575. Ann Arbor. 2007. Oxford. Text Creation Partnership. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A10989.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=toc>
- Dido and Aeneas* Dido and Aeneas. Online: <http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/dido.html>
- DNB* *Dictionary of National Biography.* Vol. 55. 1898. “Tate, Nahum” 379–80. ed. Sidney Lee. London.
- DOST* *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue.* Online: http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/weird_sisteris
- Eneados* *Eneados – The Aeneid of Virgil translated into Scottish verse by Gawin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld, 1513.* Vol. I. Edinburgh. 1839.
- Holinshed* Holinshed, Raphael. *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland,* vol. 5. London: J. Johnson, et al. 1808. Online: <http://www.shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/Holinshed/index.html>
- Maitland* *The Maitland Folio Manuscript. Containing poems by Richard Maitland, Dunbar, Douglas, Henryson and others.* The Scottish Text Society. 1919. W.A. Craigie, ed. Volume I. Edinburgh and London.

- OED* *Oxford English Dictionary*. Online: www.oed.com (Access via Aarhus University)
- RSH* *Rerum Scotticarum Historia, auctore Georgio Buchanano*. 1727. Edinburgh: Jo. Patoni.
- Scotichronicon II* *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower in Latin and English*. Vol. 2. Books III and IV. John and Winifred MacQueen, eds. 1989. Aberdeen.
- Scotichronicon III* *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower in Latin and English*. Vol. 3. Books V and VI. John and Winifred MacQueen and Der Watt, eds. 1995. Aberdeen.
- Theoi* Theoi Greek Mythology. Online: <http://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/HekateGoddess.html>

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