The Story of the Role and Fate of Hecate and the Three Witches in Macbeth

Abstract
The Three Witches, or “Wayward Sisters” are an essential and well-known part of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, though since its first performance, their role and impact within the play has changed depending on the thoughts, norms and needs of the day. This paper aims to give a glimpse into their origins and story through time, including that of Hecate, the fourth and yet most powerful of the witches and her “fate” within the play, her rise and decline, and some of the many transformations of the witches through adaptations and later rewrites, which include all-singing, all-dancing comedic turns, dominance, or partial absence within the play. Overall, although Hecate has often been cut from performances, the Three Witches have provided, for the most part, an important “mysterious mystical backdrop” in the story of Macbeth and the main character’s inner turmoil.

Keywords
Hecate, Macbeth, Shakespeare, weird sisters, three witches, Middleton

After reading Macbeth (Shakespeare, The Complete Works) and watching part of the then new BBC version of Macbeth back in the early 1980s (Gold) in my English literature lessons at secondary school, one thing which struck me was the importance of the Three Witches in framing the play by predicting Macbeth’s rise and fall. Looking back, I now remember in that particular BBC adaptation that one character did not appear, that of Hecate. At the time, I thought nothing of it, but now after watching more film adaptations and researching some of the major performances of Macbeth due to my curiosity, Hecate was missing. In this short essay, I would like to research the story of the witches, their role and the “fate” of both Hecate and the Three Witches since the play was first staged.

It is thought that Shakespeare wrote Macbeth around 1606 to celebrate King James VI of Scotland gaining the English throne and becoming King James I, and the witches were
included due to the king’s own interest and authorship on witchcraft with the book *Daemonologie* in 1597 (Albright: 226). Samuel Jonson gives strong evidence of this in his edition of *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), where he gathered notes written some twenty years earlier, concentrating on a moral reading of Macbeth and how the Witches would have been seen in Shakespeare’s time (Shakespeare and Johnson). In those notes, Johnson writes that “a poet who should now make the whole action of his tragedy depend upon enchantment […] would be censured as transgressing the bounds of probability [and] would be banished from the theatre to the nursery, condemned to write fairy tales instead of tragedies” but King James himself, who “was much celebrated for his knowledge, had, before his arrival in England, not only examined in person a woman accused of witchcraft, but had given a very formal account of the practices and illusions of evil spirits, the compacts of witches, the ceremonies used by them, the manner of detecting them, and the justice of punishing them, in his dialogues of *Daemonologie*, written in the Scottish dialect, and published at Edinburgh.” Johnson states that those who wished to gain the king’s favour would flatter him by using the system found in *Daemonologie*, and so it was immediately adopted by all who desired either to gain preferment or not to lose it. At the time, the doctrine of witchcraft was very powerfully instilled in the fashion of the day (Johnson).

By looking at Shakespeare’s text of *Macbeth*, it can be seen that Hecate is the goddess of witchcraft, and is viewed as the ruler of the Three Witches. After being mentioned by Macbeth twice, in Act Two Scene One and Act Three Scene Two, Hecate appears twice in Act Three Scene Five and Act Four Scene One. The first time she appears before the Witches, she demands to know why she has been excluded from their meetings with Macbeth. She tells them Macbeth will be back to know his destiny and says that he will see apparitions that will, "by the strength of their illusion" (*Macbeth*, 3.5.1478) lead him to think he is safe. She plays an important role in the play because of the lines she utters at the end of this scene, "And you all know, security/Is mortals' chiepest enemy" (*Macbeth*, 3.5.1482-1483), as these lines reveal that Macbeth's belief that he is untouchable will ultimately result in his downfall (Mabillard, “Hecate”). Hecate, as a popular goddess of witchcraft in Greek polytheistic religion, is a controversial supernatural figure of worship in Christianity, and so to calm the Jacobean church of the time, Hecate was depicted as a witch rather than a goddess. M. C. Bradbrook also argues that “Macbeth was the first play to introduce to the stage in a serious manner the rites and practices of contemporary witchcraft” (Montonari: 41).

The Three Witches were also known as the Weird Sisters, or in the stage directions, the Wayward Sisters. In the Folio Edition of 1623 the spelling is “wayward” (Shakespeare,
Tragedie 1.3.130). Our modern-day meaning of weird, which is odd or strange, is not accurate, as weird comes from the Anglo-Saxon “wyrd”, which means “fate” or “destiny”. Thus, with this understanding, the Weird Sisters are foretellers of Macbeth’s fate (Mabillard, “Weird Sisters”), and so have a resemblance to the three Fates of classical mythology. However, for Shakespeare many say their origin lies in Holinshed’s Chronicles of 1587 (Tomarken).

Holinshed’s three ‘sisters’ are “creatures of [the] elder world... nymphs or fairies” (Holinshed 268). The literature of the period shows that the words “fairy”, “elf”, “hag” and “witch” were interchangeable terms (Muir et al.). However, this image is far from that of Shakespeare’s witches as told by Banquo (Shakespeare, Macbeth 1.3.138-146), who states that Shakespeare transforms them into ugly, “androgyrous” hags who take on a more sinister role than was assigned to them in Holinshed's Chronicles. Both fascinating and frightening, Shakespeare's hags appeal to the audience’s interest in the demonic supernatural (Mabillard, “Shakespeare’s Sources”).

Muir and Edwards state that except for the name “Weird Sisters”, Shakespeare took nothing else from Holinshed, as his witches were based on the descriptions of witch-superstitions found in Reginald Scot’s The Discoverie of Witchcraft (Scot), which contains a description of witches, and it is possible Shakespeare used it as a basis for his witches (Muir et al.). For example, “bee witches” were mentioned, women which were “commonly old, lame... poor, sullen, superstitious... They are leane and deformed, shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them” (Scot: 5). One critic continues by saying that they are not “ordinary witches...[but]...are demons or devils in the form of witches” (Curry: 58). If we look at some early accounts of performances of Macbeth, in 1611 Simon Forman said that the Weird Sister’s appeared as “three women fairies or nymphs”, which does not correlate with the 1623 text which describes them as bearded hags (“First Edition”), showing that in the space of a decade, their role, appearance and impact within the play had already begun to change. However, saying this, another critic mentions that Forman’s recollection might have been corrupted by his knowledge of Shakespeare’s sources (Woods), bringing doubt to this account. Peter Heylyn’s 1625 account mentions fairies or witches, “Weirds the Scots call them” (Muir et al.).

As for Hecate, since the 19th century most scholars have argued that the Hecate material was added after 1616 by Thomas Middleton. One particular scholar, Brian Vickers, armed with statistical evidence, tried to suggest that Shakespeare himself was the reviser, adding the Hecate scenes in 1610-11, though the evidence is far from conclusive (Dawson).
Strengthening this argument that Middleton added to Macbeth, in Elizabethan drama it was common practise to write plays collaboratively, incorporating the work of many writers and actors. Plays were written by a group of people with a head writer. In Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works (Middleton), full texts of Shakespearean plays can be found, including Macbeth, Measure for Measure and Timon of Athens, showing that they are believed to be his work, or at least were edited by him (Lawson). It has been argued by Taylor and Lavagnino that up to eleven percent of the Folio text of Macbeth was added after Shakespeare’s death, with those added scenes being needed to help revive the play and keep audiences coming back (Woods). With the addition of Hecate, two songs, some dances and stage effects, the staging of the play was brought closer to a masque (Woods), a type of courtly entertainment, thus changing the role of the witches from dire predictors of destiny to mere pieces of frolic “colouring”. Inga-Stina Ewbank suggests that the dance performed in Act Four Scene One at that time was taken from Jonson’s The Masque of Queens (Ewbank: 1167), found in his 1616 Folio collection of works.

Although they are only now indicated by their first lines in the Folio Macbeth, the songs performed occurred both in both Middleton’s The Witch and Shakespeare’s Macbeth, those being “Come away, come away” (Shakespeare, Macbeth 3.5.1467) and “Black spirits” (4.1.1592), thought to have been added by Sir William Davenant for his 1664 adaptation (“Songs and Versions”). In the two scenes Act Three Scene Five and Act Four Scene One, Hecate is mentioned twice by Macbeth in the play before she appears, in Act Two Scene One and Scene Two. She is also mentioned by Shakespeare in other plays, mostly as the goddess of witchcraft (Tarnovecky). However, as stated, in those plays she is only mentioned and does not appear. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1596) she is mentioned by Puck as a goddess of the night (Shakespeare, Midsummer Night’s Dream 5.2.2233), while she is also referenced by Hippolyta as a goddess of the moon in Act One, in King Lear (1606) she is mentioned by Lear as being a mysterious deity of the night (King Lear 1.1.114), in Hamlet (1602) the player in the role of Lucianus in Hamlet’s “Mousetrap” play invokes Hecate as the goddess of witchcraft (Hamlet 3.2.2147), and in Henry VI Part 1 (1592) Lord Talbot criticizes Joan la Pucelle as a “railing Hecate” (Henry VI Part 1 3.2.1518). This, of course, gives more weight to the idea that Middleton added Hecate as a speaking character as Shakespeare never once used her as such in any other play.

Hecate’s parts can also be removed from Macbeth without anyone noticing, as the spirit and atmosphere these lines produce are already given by the Three Witches. There is also the idea of a sexual relation in Hecate’s first passage in Act Three Scene Five, which
suits Middleton’s *Witches* well, but not Shakespeare’s. Saying this, the Three Witches were thought to allow the devil to suckle from them in the form of an animal, such as “Graymalkin” and “Paddock”, the grey cat and toad mentioned by the Witches in Act One Scene One (Atherton). It is also difficult to believe that Shakespeare would introduce a character supreme over the Three Witches so unimpressively, although Hecate’s passages are iambic in rhythm and this could be one way Shakespeare would make her “special”, that is distinct from the others (Mabillard, “Macbeth Glossary”).

Once Hecate and the witches were in place, they were used to create a dark effect and make the play more entertaining and spectacular, while less intense with their singing and dancing (Dawson). It was probably meant to be funny, but with a dark, edgy element of fear running through it. In Shakespeare’s time, everyone believed that the macrocosmic states could be influenced by microcosmic acts, for example a child disobeying a parent could create political disobedience and even rebellion. By showing witches howling unmusically, the disorder in the state could be intensified and then dispelled for a moment (Purkiss).

Up to and including the 19th century, the witches’ presence was sometimes enlarged by an extra scene including more songs and dances, adapted by the actor David Garrick from Sir William Davenant, placed at the end of Act Two Scene Three, and staged at least as late as Charles Kean in 1853 (Clark). As for Davenant’s production back in 1664, Middleton’s increasing of the parts and roles of the Witches in *Macbeth* gave him a solid foundation to produce an operatic version of the play, showing the prevailing theatrical tastes of the day, with the Witches flying across the stage and performing a number of songs (Poltrack). It was this production that Samuel Pepys himself described in his diary in January 1667, where he “saw *Macbeth* which, though I saw it lately, yet appears a most excellent play in all respects, but especially in divertissement, though it be a deep tragedy; which is a strange perfection in a tragedy, it being most proper here, and suitable” (Pepys).

During the Restoration and 18th century, they were not presented as evil demons but “comical naughty milk curdlers” (Tomarken: 78). Samuel Phelps attempted to dispense with the singing witches in 1847, but pressure from critics and audience expectations at the time were too great and in 1858, five singing witches were credited and music reappeared in his performances (Clark), thus increasing their number and importance in entertainment value. Phelps’ fight for artistic integrity towards the original Shakespearean production was lost and Davenant’s Witches’ ballet, music and spectacle of “[a] hundred or more pretty singing witches” (Young) was restored. Additionally, when Henry Irving revived Macbeth in 1888 at the Lyceum Theatre he cut the Witches’ additional music and dancing but commissioned new
music and “the three Witches [were depicted] as female ballet dancers in short skirts”. However, the Hecate scene in Act 3 was cut (Young).

For Victorian audiences of the late 19th century, the Witches were usually far removed from the menacing figures of doom and gloom that we find in today’s productions. They were also very different from their counterparts in most modern theatre productions where generally attempts are made in numerous different ways to elicit among audiences a degree of fear, disgust, and horror. The Victorian audiences, for the most part, saw a version of Davenant’s re-working of the play with its various operatic interpolations, for example, a witches’ “corps de ballet”, a show-stopping spectacle involving large numbers of dancers, music, and choruses. The three Witches themselves also tended to be comic figures, with their potential power as harbingers of evil and symbolic representations of Macbeth’s hellish ambitions and deeds being muted. They had become mere “playful pretend fantasies of evil”, suited to the Victorians’ beloved world of melodrama and pantomime, and the world of burlesque (Young). Drama critic Henry Morley diagnosed this movement in Victorian contemporary drama as “an ailing limb of the great body of our Literature” and gave the cause for this illness as the public’s taste for plays that were “all legs and no brains” (Marcus 438).

Shakespeare’s works had also become increasingly available to a wider readership due to technological revolutions in printing and publishing, though the “earnestness of Victorian bardolatry and the high cultural position” given to Shakespeare moved towards the “contemporaneous love of burlesque” (Young), which was at the time popular and highly-developed. Shakespearean Victorian burlesques played with wordplay and puns, misapplication of meaning, changing punctuation or spelling to create new but inappropriate meanings, deliberate transformation of Shakespeare’s poetry into low, colloquial speech, the replacement of dramatic moments with the mundane, the introduction of inappropriate but well-known popular music, and allusions to topical matters either of national or local interest (Young).

Additionally, the typical Victorian productions of Macbeth, Punch, a British satirical and political magazine of the time, published two burlesques by St. John Hankin which made use of Macbeth, including the first, a half-page burlesque of the plot of Macbeth on 17 September 1989 entitled “The Belgian Shakespeare. The Weird Sisters.” where the three Weird Sisters discuss the key events of the play as they sit around their cauldron. This burlesque was said to have poked fun at the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, dubbed by his admirers as “The Belgian Shakespeare” (Young).
By the end of the 19th century, audience demand for Davenant’s “entertaining” witches, added to the growing belief that Hecate was an addition by Middleton (“First Edition”), the witches’ roles began to weaken, as did the original Shakespearean representation of the play itself.

However, there was a glimpse of hope of a return to a more traditional representation of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan masterpieces, in the shape of The Elizabethan Stage Society and William Poel (Poel 204). Though having its origins in 1881 when a successful two-hour long performance of the first quarto of Hamlet was given in St. George’s Hall, London, in Elizabethan costume and without scenery (Poel 204), the Society was founded in 1895. Its aim was to revive Elizabethan drama, including Shakespeare, for the stage and reproduce the same conditions existing at the time of first production, the Elizabethan period, which was “beyond correct costume and theatrical decorum” that was seen as foreign to the “legitimate purposes of the drama” (Poel 204). It was admitted by the audience present at this 1881 production of Hamlet that the absence of scenery did not lessen their interest, and that with their attention being given only to the play and to the acting, a greater appreciation and enjoyment of Shakespeare’s tragedy became possible (Pole 204). With Poel’s “fanatic concern” for Shakespeare’s original staging and text, it was mentioned at the time as a “historic” moment and that “the Elizabethan revival had begun” (Glick 15). Poel’s greatest condemnation of the popular productions of his time was that they did not adhere to the original text. His first rule was to return to that text (Glick 16). Poel also adhered to original Elizabethan drama with his sparse scenery, costume and props, and his “non-stop Shakespeare” (Glick 23). The Elizabethan Stage Society performed Macbeth in 1909 in Fulham Theatre, London (Poel 207), and both Hecate and the Three Witches were present, as can be seen from the text used in the production (Poel 69). Poel was therefore either not aware of the Middleton question or believed that text to be the true and original one. The witches were also dressed “not of common mould” (Poel 69).

Productions of Macbeth in the 20th century continued as they had before, with the Witches’ roles weakened in some way. In 1933, Komisarjevsky’s production cut the witches lines considerably, and they were not portrayed as hags but rather old women and fortune tellers picking up souvenirs, while in 1934, Tyrone Guthrie cut the witches’ opening scene completely (Clark), as did Justin Kurzel in his 2015 film Macbeth, with the adaptation replacing the scene with the funeral of the Macbeths’ child. Although the witches are portrayed in the film as powerful “beings” when they appear, they do not have the “cauldron chanting, in-your-face” magic, but rather their impact on the story is accompanied by
Macbeth’s own desires and actions. There is also no Hecate, unless the child with the Three Witches is meant to represent her presence (Reed).

There were a few productions which went contrary to these productions. In 1928, theatrical director H.K. Ayliff and producer Barry Jackson brought a production of Macbeth in contemporary dress to London, with characters and settings of World War I (Mullin 176). All male characters were soldiers of differing rank, while the women wore formal dress, with nightgowns and slippers. The Three Witches, omitting Hecate, were the only characters which kept close to Shakespeare’s original attire, that of “crones dressed in rags” who were of “no period and every period” (178). The Witches seemed to be the only part of the production which held to the original, in terms of both their appearance and dramatic role, and in fact a scene where Macbeth meets the witches on a bleak set suggesting the barren landscape of trench warfare, showed that it was evident that they had a strong effect on Macbeth’s derangement (183). In 1936 Hecate made a “unique” reappearance as a bullwhip-wielding Queen of the Witches in Orson Welles’ extraordinary Voodoo Macbeth (1936) with an all-African cast (Herman), though in Welles’ Macbeth film from 1948, Hecate was missing, and as per the norm was only mentioned by Macbeth (Welles).

Since then, Hecate has been cut from almost all productions. The latest productions of Macbeth in 2018 from the two most important drama companies of this day, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, have continuously cut Hecate from the play for many years (Zaffino).

Looking back through the last four or five decades, there have, however, been a few exceptions. Hecate made a strong appearance in Peter Hall’s production in 1978, her role giving a metaphorical presence to God, or rather Anti-God, which Hall thought was essential to the dramatic action of the play, while in 1995 Mark Rylance contrasted this by staging a production with Hecate as a drag lollipop lady (Clark).

Contrary to the norm and RSC turning their back on Hecate, both Hecate and the Three Witches have recently, and surprisingly, made strong appearances on stage. In 2014, Ethan Hawke staged a production of Macbeth at the Lincoln Centre Theatre in New York which centred around Hecate and the Three Witches. They were given a much bigger, expanded role than usual, appearing in nearly every scene, and were present in all pivotal moments in the story. They also swapped places with some characters, filling their roles and adding more supernatural force to the play. When Macbeth fights Macduff in the final battle, the witches give Macduff a physical advantage, setting Macbeth up as simply a pawn in the witches’ game (Brantley).
In Scotland, there also seems to be a revival of Hecate, as she appeared in 2017 at the Edinburgh Fringe in *Creepy Macbeth* (Wilcock) and a year later in 2018 with a play devoted to herself, including large parts from *Macbeth*, and illustrating the life of Lady Macbeth through the figure of Hecate, the Queen of the witches (Simpson). Other than this, Hecate does make the occasional appearance in selective amateur productions, such as the 2013 Globe Theatre performance in New Zealand (“Globe Theatre: Macbeth”) and other minor productions from colleges (“The Witches & Hecate.”), schools (“Hecate, A Heath - Macbeth.”) and individual actors and associations (“Hecate, Lines 2-35”).

In terms of film adaptations, there seem to be none in which Hecate appears, neither earlier adaptations such as the 1983 BBC film directed by Jack Gold (Gold), nor later, such as Kurzel’s 2015 film (Kurzel). Roman Polánski’s famed 1971 adaptation does not seem to include Hecate either though she may be among those in the naked crowd of “hags” in the witches’ den when Macbeth goes back to them in Act Two Scene Three (Polanski), this scene also refers back to the Davenant productions of old, with a group of unnamed witches, dancing and singing, though in this case, chanting.

As for the Three Witches without Hecate, they now usually exist in some form or another in most performances. The actors who played the Witches in the Globe Theatre’s 2010 production developed backstories for their characters which explained why they were isolated from society, leading to the vindictive behaviour they display in Act One Scene Three (Atherton).

In the disastrous yet sold-out performance of *Macbeth* in 1980 by the late Peter O’Toole which had “audiences rolling down the aisles”, the three witches appeared as young, sexy girls in frilly dresses, looking “as if they shop at Fortnum and Mason's” rather than being “wild and withered in their attire” (Downie).

In Rupert Goold’s 2010 film version of the play, starring Patrick Stewart as Macbeth, the Witches role is lessened, but they appear first as nurses in a nightmarish hospital, ripping out the heart of the wounded soldier, and later in the film in a number of other roles, including Lady Macbeth’s attendants and serving-women at the banquet (Atherton).

In conclusion, it can be seen that both Hecate and the Three Witches roles and their importance in the story of *Macbeth* has continuously changed, sometimes dramatically, since the play’s first performances, due to the demands and needs of the audience and artistic fashion of the time it was staged. Also, due to the belief that Middleton added Hecate into *Macbeth* posthumously, her fate has been cast and her scenes are in the most, habitually cut, save for a few recent performances. Nevertheless, the Three Witches are still alive and
present, in the most part, and occasionally even prominent, in the play in many forms and attire. Unfortunately, their singing and dancing days seem to be over, and the witches are now used for the most part as a mysterious mystical backdrop to Macbeth’s own dark, inner turmoil.

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