

Shakespeare's Use of Magic in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*



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Zürich, 16.12.18

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Preface

Since theatre and acting have always been a big part of my life, it was obvious for me that I would write a Matura paper that was related to the theatre. I have always been fascinated by Shakespeare, so when we went to London on our school trip and visited the Globe, my interest awoke again. When my aunt, who lives in Scotland, showed me around the Scottish Highlands and Loch Ness, we passed Inverness and she told me that Macbeth's castle was in Inverness. That is when my interest in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* sparked and I thought it would be a good idea to write my Matura paper about it. But then writing about Shakespeare is intimidating, since so much has been written about him. How should I find a topic that had not already been covered? At first, I wanted to do a comparison of ghosts in two different plays, since supernatural beings is a topic that fascinates me. However, Banquo's ghost does not have a very active role in the play for me to write a whole paper about it. But after sitting down and studying *Macbeth* I thought about how important the witches are in the play and I became curious to know how their magic works. The other obvious choice was *The Tempest*, with Prospero, the magician, who in opposition to the witches is a good magician and does not use his magic to create chaos. I decided to compare these two types of magic, the witches' black and Prospero's white magic and I wanted to find out how Shakespeare uses them in these two plays.

Introduction

In this paper I want to study the different aspects of magic in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. I would like to give a short plot review of both plays in view of their use of magic.

Macbeth is about a Scottish warrior and general in the Middle Ages who is just returning from a victorious battle when he and his general friend Banquo meet three witches. The Thane of Cawdor, a traitor to the crown, is stripped of his title and the King, Duncan pronounces Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor. By receiving the title Macbeth also assumes the role of the traitor. The witches who by their magic art foresee that Macbeth is now Thane of Cawdor and will become king, greet Macbeth accordingly. This, of course takes Macbeth by surprise and he already begins to plot the murder of the king. They also say that a line of kings will come from Banquo. However, the two warriors choose different paths, Macbeth decides to take matters into his own hands to become king, while Banquo, who is aware of the evil nature of the witches does not want to act under their influence. Macbeth involves his wife and together they plan to kill Duncan. Once the deed is done, he becomes king and pays murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, but the latter manages to escape so the witches' prophecy can still be fulfilled. Macbeth and even more so his wife, slowly become mad, driven by their guilt and insomnia. Macbeth seeks the witches once more to find out if he is secure and if he changed fate by murdering Banquo. The witches warn him of Macduff but also lull him into a false security by predicting that no man born of a woman can kill him. Lady Macbeth finally becomes completely mad and kills herself. Macbeth fights against Macduff and before Macduff kills him, he tells him how he was ripped out of his mother's womb, therefore was not born of a woman. This play is dominated by the dark influence, however subtle of the witches.

The Tempest is a very different type of play and tells the story of Prospero the magician. He is the rightful Duke of Milan, but because he spent his time studying the arcane arts, he is overthrown, and his own brother Antonio exiles him and his daughter Miranda to a deserted island. Thanks to his books that a

friend provided him with, Prospero continues to study the art of magic. With his enslaved companion Ariel, a spirit of nature, and his slave Caliban, an ugly offspring of an evil witch, he become the ruler of the island. When a ship with the royal court on board comes near the island, Prospero casts a spell, causing the ship to wreck and the royal court to maroon on his island. Miranda, his daughter, who has never seen a man beside her father immediately falls in love with the first man she sees, Ferdinand, the prince of Naples. Prospero performs many magic tricks and deceptions through Ariel on his brother and his friends without harming anyone. When he finally reveals himself, he can gain back his rightful place and return to Milan. Before he leaves the island, he destroys his magical implements and abjures the use of magic.

In the first play, *Macbeth*, the witches use spells, false prophecies and potions to spread chaos and evil. In *The Tempest*, Prospero, resorts to his knowledge of the magic arts to restore himself to his former worldly position i.e. to restore order, since he was in view of the Elizabethan World Picture the rightful ruler.

1. Elizabethan Views on Magic and Witches

In the Elizabethan era people strongly believed in magic and the supernatural. It was not unusual to believe that witches might cross your path or summon a storm, or that ghosts visited you in your sleep to haunt you. Seeing witches and magic in a play was nothing unusual to them. However, magic was considered as evil and inspired by the devil. If witches had magic powers, they had received them from the devil by selling their souls to him. Prospero using magic for a good purpose, on the other hand, not to create chaos and do evil was quite a new and daring concept for the time, especially since it was a time of excessive witch hunts and religious persecution.

James I, king at the time of Shakespeare, was also fascinated by witches. He claimed to have almost died in a shipwreck caused by witches and was so

fascinated by them that he wrote a book about them. In this book called *Daemonologie* he speaks about witches and how evil magic was:

“... they are at last enticed, that where lawful arts or sciences fail, to satisfy their restless minds, even to seek that black and unlawful science of magic”¹.

Shakespeare made Prospero leave behind his magic after he returns to Milan and regains his place. So, if magic was used in a good way it would only be used to fulfill one purpose and then never again. The witches in *Macbeth* on the other hand were familiar to the people of the Elizabethan time. There were numerous plays, songs and stories about witches like the three weird sisters. Magic was inevitably linked with evil and the devil, so people were scared of witches and magic, because they thought it could only be used for evil and will eventually lead you to hell and eternal damnation.

The Elizabethan era was also a fanatically religious era. Be it Protestant or Catholic the other party was often prosecuted or eradicated. Often people had to equivocate belonging to their faith to save their lives. Then there were the witch hunts in Europe. Poor and old women were accused of being witches and then put up on trials where they were either burnt, or hanged in England. Women who used home remedies, like herbs, to cure illnesses were directly seen as witches. Before that time people used to make a difference between white and black witches, but the Elizabethans seemed to have forgotten the difference.

2. James I's Work on "Demonology"

James I was the king of England during Shakespeare's time. Both, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* were written during James I reign. *The Tempest* is said to be Shakespeare's last play. James I's work contained studies of witches, magic,

¹ Donald Tyson, *Daemonologie of King James I*, Dover Publishing, 2011: The First Book, page 69

demons and other things. He devoted a lot of his time to study everything about witches, magic and demonology in general. His book “*Daemonologie*” was published in 1597. He says that witches serve the devil and that magicians made a pact with the devil in order to get magical power.

“... , these witches on the other part, being enticed either for desire of revenge, or of worldly riches, their whole practice is either to hurt men and their goods, or what they possess, for satisfying of their cruel minds in the former; or else by the wreck, in whatsoever sort, of any whom God will permit them to have power of to satisfy their greedy desire in the last point.”²

Shakespeare dares to contradict in his last play with a magician like Prospero, who is good and learnt his magic through books. By doing that he is opposing the king, his mentor and provider, who said that everyone who uses magic is evil.

“But you omitted to speak of the law of God wherein are all magicians, diviners, enchanters, sorcerers, witches and whatsoever of that kind that consult with the Devil, plainly prohibited and alike threatened against.”³

3. White and Black Magic

Generally, the difference between black and white magic, is that black magic is used for evil, while white magic is used for good. But if we analyse it more in detail, we will see it is more than just “good” and “bad”. If a human or animal sacrifice or blood is involved it is usually black magic. So, if there is a ritual, with spells and animals and blood being thrown in a pot, it is black magic. Casting evil upon others is black magic as well. Using your powers therefore to harm others in a bad way, using hatred or selfishness, is also black magic, that is why

² Tyson, *Demonology: The Second Book*, page 115

³ *Ibid*, page 106

black magic was always tied to the devil, because he also always creates chaos and misleads you to get you to join him in hell.

White magic on the other hand is purer and less chaotic. White magic does not contain any animal or human sacrifices. As opposed to black magic it is used to restore order, rather than destroy it. White magic makes sure everything is right in the world and the way it is supposed to be. White magic is tied to light, hope and love. It also does not get involved directly and only helps everything fall into place. It is often used to guide someone or help them go the right way, while black magic does the opposite and like in *Macbeth*, guides you to the wrong path and into the darkness. They are easy to differ but sometimes one might not know the difference.

While the three witches, or three weird sisters in *Macbeth* use black magic, Prospero uses white magic. The witches brew potions create chaos and mischief. They use their magic for evil and they create chaos in Macbeth's ordinary world, without the witches, Macbeth would not have killed the king, but they influenced him with their prophecies that drove Macbeth to killing Duncan. The witches in both plays use different creatures for their potions, like sow's blood or toads. Lady Macbeth also uses black magic. In one scene she lets evil spirits flow through her to take away her womanhood and replace it with evil. But black magic only exists to destroy and create chaos, so in the end, the evil spirits take her over and she kills herself, we do not know if she was influenced by the witches directly. Her husband exposes himself to black magic as well, through the witches. He says he has scorpions in his mind and he sees imaginary things like a dagger and Banquo's ghost. We can see that the black magic slowly drives him mad and makes him thirst for more killing. He cannot sleep anymore, has nightmares and he hears voices. Macbeth's mind is fogged, and everything is in chaos. In the Elizabethan times there was a strict way how life should be, a strict order. If the king was on top of the hierarchy, everything was good. But Macbeth killed the king, therefore he destroyed that order, while under the influence of black magic. Black magic wants to create chaos, and that is exactly what the witches did by driving Macbeth to kill the king and destroying nature's order.

Whether Prospero really uses white magic, is debatable, he uses his magic for selfish reasons, yet he never actually kills anyone or makes people kill someone else, as the witches do with Macbeth. Prospero has a very powerful kind of magic, but he does not use its whole power, he is supposed to be more powerful than Sebatos, Sycorax's god. Prospero does not harm anyone even if he could easily do so. He is guided by moral values. When Caliban tried to rape Miranda, instead of killing him, which was the punishment for rape, he made him his slave. While trying to claim back his birthright, he could have just killed his brother to get back on his throne, yet he does not do that. Another way to show that Prospero uses white magic, is that he wants to restore order and he uses the power of love. Through him, Ferdinand and Miranda fall in love. Similar like in *Macbeth* the natural order was destroyed when Antonio took away his brother's place as Duke of Milan. But Prospero uses his magic to restore that order and take back his place, without harming anyone. Whether his actions are selfish or not is another matter; he uses his powers to set everything right without doing any harm and that makes it white magic.

4. The Witches in *Tempest* and *Macbeth*

The witches in *Macbeth* play a major role; without them the whole story would not have started. With their prophecies, they trigger Macbeth's weakness, his ambition, to kill the king. Macbeth does not have the strongest will and mind to resist their influence, he is more of a physical fighter. His wife always influenced him, but when the witches come along and say, that Macbeth will be king, he and his wife decide to take matters into their own hands. They do not want to wait around for the king to die, but instead they decide to kill him right away. So, without the witches Macbeth might never have killed Duncan. The witches do not have unlimited power, however. In one scene Hecate, the Goddess of witchcraft, appears and talks to the weird sisters, about how they abused their magic and did things they should not have done. In another scene in the beginning, you can also see that their power is limited, when the first witch talks about how she wanted to avenge herself on a woman, by killing her husband,

but she could not use her magic to directly kill him, so she made his ship sink instead. So, like in Macbeth's case, they drive nature, as in human nature and mother nature, to kill, because they cannot do it themselves.

The witch, Sycorax, in *The Tempest* is different from the ones in Macbeth. In comparison to the witches in *Macbeth*, she does not play a significant role in the *Tempest* and she is only mentioned and never appears herself, because she died before that. Before her death she gave birth to Caliban, her son, who seems to be so ugly that he looks like a monster. Caliban tried to rape Miranda, that is why Prospero imprisons him and uses him as a slave to fetch wood. Sycorax was a very powerful witch, that could control the moon and its tides, yet Caliban says that Prospero is stronger than Sycorax' master, which makes Prospero even more powerful than her. She was supposed to be killed, but they did not kill her because she was pregnant with Caliban, so they put her on a deserted island where she gave birth to her son and then died.

5. Hecate and Sycorax

Hecate in Macbeth is the goddess of witchcraft from Greek mythology. She is stronger than the three witches, because she watches over them and makes sure that they use their power for evil. She appears when she thinks that the witches misuse their powers, e.g. when they predicted Macbeth's future, making them more of an oracle than evil witches. Hecate reminds the witches that they are supposed to create chaos and mischief and that they have to use Macbeth rather than being used by him.

*"How did you dare to trade and traffic with Macbeth, in riddles, and affairs of death; and I, the mistress of your charms, the close contrivers of all harms, was never called to bear my part, or show the glory of our art?"*⁴.

⁴ Shakespeare, Macbeth, page 133

In Greek mythology Hecate is described as “*the goddess of magic, witchcraft, the night, moon, ghosts and necromancy*”⁵. She was “*conventionally depicted with three heads. Representing the full moon, the crescent moon and the empty dead-black sky.*”⁶

Sycorax, the witch in *The Tempest*, the mother of Caliban, uses, just like the witches in *Macbeth*, animals for her charms: “*All the charms of Sycorax – toads, beetles, bats – lights on you!*”⁷. But Prospero using only his knowledge, books, a wand and magic robes, is more powerful than Sycorax, as said by her son, Caliban: “*I must obey; his art of such power, it could control my dam’s god Setebos, ...*”⁸

6. Caliban vs Ariel

Caliban, Sycorax’ son, is so hideous, that nobody is quite sure if he is human or a monster. He lives in a cave and is kept there by Ariel, another of Prospero’s servants and the sprites. He fetches wood and does all kind of chores for Prospero. One might think Prospero is cruel, for keeping a living creature as a slave, but Prospero spared his life under the condition that he works for him and does as he says. If Caliban disobeys, he gets punished by the sprites who are sent by Prospero.

Ariel can make Caliban, or anyone, fall asleep. He plays a bigger role in Prospero’s life than Caliban. Ariel can fly around the whole island as he pleases, he is a spirit that can sing and play songs to make people fall asleep. He was treated very crudely by Sycorax and since he refused to obey, she imprisoned him in a tree trunk. Prospero promises to set Ariel free, after helping him on his quest to regain his own freedom and restore order, and he keeps his promise.

⁵ <http://www.theoi.com/Khtonios/hekate.html>

⁶ Ellen Dupont, *The Mythology Book*, Dorling and Kindersley: 2018, page 49

⁷ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, page 29

⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, page 31

7. How the Witches Use Their Powers

There are different ways how the witches use their magic, but they also have restrictions. When the witches shapeshift into animals, they miss a tail, because no part of their body can become a tail. They can create chaos with existing things. They often take revenge on humans.

“A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap, and munched, and munched, and munched. “Give me,” quoth I: “Aroint thee, witch!” the rump-fed ronyon cries. Her husband’s to Aleppo gone, master o’ the Tiger: but in a sieve I’ll thither sail, and like a rat without a tail, I’ll do, I’ll do, I’ll do.”⁹

The witches purposely tell Macbeth about the prophecies, so he creates disorder for them. They want to do as many bad things as possible and their ultimate aim is to destroy the rightful ruler and religious king Duncan. But since they cannot directly harm him, they put Macbeth up to it. After they have influenced Macbeth’s mind, they also in a way influence Lady Macbeth, who lets evil spirits go through her, if that is the witches’ work is not said, but it was all part of their plan to create chaos. The witches are very intelligent. They knew Macbeth was weak enough to believe everything, but at the same time brave enough to kill the King. They had the whole plan figured out and only had to make sure everything happens accordingly.

8. Prospero’s Magic

Prospero is described as a big magician. He was the true heir of Milan, but his brother exiled him to claim the throne for himself, because during his reign Prospero was too busy reading books and studying magic instead of attending

⁹ Shakespeare, Macbeth, page 11

his duties. He was sent to a deserted island, with nothing but his daughter and his books, that were given to him secretly by his friend. Everything he knows about magic, he learnt through those books, which made him a great wizard, with unbelievable powers. In the span of a few years he created a life for his daughter and himself on this island. The other inhabitants of this island are Ariel and Caliban. They are both aware of his powers, so they do not dare to speak against him, especially Caliban. Prospero was not born with his powers. He gains his power through the books and without them he is powerless and cannot use his magic. Caliban knows that, because when he talks Sebastian into killing Prospero, he says that the first thing they have to do, is take away his books, for without his books he is powerless. When he leaves the island, he wants to leave this part of his life behind and so he does not take his books with him.

Prospero used his magic to restore order. He only uses it to survive and bring everything back to the way it is supposed to be. His brother took away his birth right and left him on an island, so he makes a plan to get his rightful place as Duke of Milan. His magic consists of his knowledge he got from his books. He uses his magic to enslave Ariel and Caliban and to make sure his daughter is safe. Prospero is, according to Caliban, more powerful than Sycorax's god, and that's why Caliban is so afraid of him. Prospero can conjure a storm and he can summon sprites. Apart from that we do not see Prospero use his powers much, rather him using Ariel to do all the things for him. And thus, leaves his magic behind.

9. Conclusion

Looking at the time span when those two books were written, we can see that *Macbeth* was one of the earlier plays and *The Tempest* possibly the last. We can see that Shakespeare became bolder with his own opinion and with *The Tempest*, opposing the king's opinion on magic, he has done a daring thing. Shakespeare wanted to show magic as everyone else saw it in *Macbeth*, and how he saw it in *The Tempest*. He wanted people to understand that magic could be used for good as well. But he knew people would not quite accept that, that is why he made Prospero cut all ties from magic before returning to his throne. Both plays have something to do with the king. Banquo whose line is said to be a line of kings, is a distant relative of James I. Shakespeare wanted to show the different uses of magic with his play, or the different uses of power. Magic is power, and you can use your power for chaos, like the three weird sisters or for order, like Prospero.

Shakespeare was a very clever playwright and knew what people wanted to see and that is what he put magic into his plays. With *Macbeth* he showed magic how everyone saw it, something familiar and the people could fear the witches and understood exactly how dangerous they are and why Banquo did not want to get involved with them. But in *The Tempest* he also showed the opposite of what people believed. He showed that magic is a tool and can be used for good. He wanted to show another opinion rather than the one they already knew all this time. Shakespeare also used magic to make the plays more interesting, fascinating and special. In this paper I have tried to analyse the different uses of magic in these two plays and I have come to the conclusion that even though Prospero's magic is guided by moral values and used for the purpose of good and for the aim to restore order, as it was seen in that Age, it still serves a personal gain and influences people against their will. This, however, is still a long way from the kind of magic the witches use and can therefore be considered as white magic.

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“Prospero, Ariel and sleeping Miranda”, a painting by William Hamilton

“The Three Witches from Macbeth”, a painting by Alexandre Marie Colin