



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



WHO ARE THE WEIRD SISTERS?

The three witches, who also refer to themselves as the Weird Sisters, have the first lines in *Macbeth*, establishing the play's gloomy, ominous tone. They also set the plot in motion, granting Macbeth the prophecy that will lead to his downfall. However, we do not know much about these supernatural beings. What do they want? Are they malevolent spirits who want to destroy Macbeth? Or do they embody karma or some moral principle?

Because they practice witchcraft, it can be tempting to assume the Weird Sisters are wicked beings, perhaps servants of the Devil. Believed to place evil spells on people and corrupt their souls, witches were feared in Shakespeare's time. This widespread paranoia led to the persecution of many women suspected to secretly be witches. Even King James I was fascinated by the subject of witchcraft, writing a treatise on dark magic

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called *Daemonologie* in 1597, which some scholars believe Shakespeare consulted when writing *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth is also sometimes connected to the Weird Sisters because she encourages Macbeth's crime. Some critics in the past have even accused her of being a kind of witch herself, a harmful influence on the tragic hero. But this ignores the fact that Lady Macbeth is also destroyed by the witches' prophecy, succumbing to the psychological burden of guilt faster than her husband.

While the Weird Sisters certainly reflect Christian beliefs about witches in Shakespeare's day, they also come across as more ancient beings rooted in paganism. The three witches call to mind the three Fates, or Moirai, in ancient Greek and Roman mythology. These goddesses determined how long each mortal would live—one spinning the thread of life, another measuring it, and the third cutting it. Norse mythology had similar beings called Norns who also controlled life: Urd, Verdandi, and Sculd. Interestingly, Urd, the goddess of the past, shares her etymology with the Old English word *wyrd* (pronounced with two syllables, sounding a little like *wayward*), which later became *weird*. In Shakespeare's time, *weird* meant fate; it was centuries later that the word took on today's meaning of being strange. Perhaps Shakespeare saw the Weird Sisters as divine beings who merely showed Macbeth who he really was, rather than witches who seduced him into damnation.

But there is one more wrinkle here. It is unclear to what extent the witches we see in the First Folio text (the only version that survives) are Shakespeare's creations.

Some scholars believe that some of the witches' lines were written by contemporary playwright Thomas Middleton, added later to spice up the supernatural scenes. The scenes with Hecate have received the most scrutiny, mostly because the Folio text references two songs without printing the lyrics. The same songs, lyrics included, appear in another Middleton play written around the same time as *Macbeth*—incidentally titled *The Witch*. Are the Weird Sisters an integral part of the drama, or are they outsiders who intrude upon Shakespeare's world?

It seems that nothing is certain about the Weird Sisters. Indeed, that may be the point. They speak in riddles, announcing that "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Even their genders are indecipherable, as Banquo notes: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so." Ultimately, these captivating figures keep the play from becoming an entirely human story about the corrupting force of ambition. They remind us that there are things in life that exceed our comprehension, so that all we can do is ascribe them to fate.