

The Non-human as a Character in *Macbeth* (1606)

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When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lighting or in rain?
(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I.i)

*He maketh his sun to rise on the
evil and on the good, and sendeth
rain on the just and on the unjust.*
Mat. 5:45

I

The intersection of literary and ecological thinking in approaching this play appears irresistible from the very first scene. Among the few and scattered stage directions Shakespeare allowed himself to insert in his writing, there is this “Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches” (I.i). Translated into acting, an instance of ambiguity can be discerned: three creatures are expected to come onto the stage in the (unequivocal) storm, but what they (should) look like, or what they are, or appear to be, is not that clear.

In Shakespeare’s times they would be in the conventional “witches” garment and demeanour, but after Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* we have lost the convention. With Feminism, the face of the witch has been defaced, its traditional significance challenged. A contemporary performance of *Macbeth* must deal with this. Three years ago¹ an English version of the

1. Royal Shakespeare Theatre, April 2011, directed by Michael Boyd, with Jonathan Slinger in the role of Macbeth.

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play gave the role to children. The critic Charles Spenser writes in *The Guardian* (April 26, 2011), “[the] most striking device is to have the weird sisters played by children, first revealed suspended in the air as if they had been hanged. It is a truly shocking moment that makes the skin crawl. Later these ghostly prophetic infants reappear as Macduff’s innocent children, harrowingly butchered by Macbeth’s thugs in a scene that is almost too harrowing to watch.” The implications are interesting and varied both for children *and* witches: both are creatures that appear to be closer to nature than to nurture. Children can be playful, irresponsible especially with words, afraid of adults or resentful of them, truth-tellers at times... This variant could also contradict the usual inscription of the witches as figures of evil, uniformly propagating “half-truths” to entangle the prospective victim. This is what we seek to argue in this paper, that the evil is not IN the witches as such, but in the environment wherein they find themselves, or, as we might say, in their *habitat*.

Shakespeare’s witches speak in the catchy rhythms commonly associated with spells but also with nursery rhymes. That both stage direction and spoken lines refer to (bad) weather adds to their traditional configuration as the notes in any playbook will tell us. Indeed in our postmodern times of belief/disbelief we might accept the convention that witches command/are seen in “bad” weather, but we might also explain it rationally: marginal people/targeted animals would *naturally* seek to minimise the risk by going out when everybody else is reluctant to do so. It seems to me that the point for an ecocritical approach to the issue of the witches (a part of the “supernatural” arsenal of Shakespeare’s plays) would be to fully explore the probabilities of their being a “natural” or *material* occurrence without stripping them of their symbolic or allegorical values altogether. Such an approach to the phenomenon could be as valid for Shakespeare’s times as for our own. After all, he had reduced the fairies of lore to the seeds, blooms and bugs of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* with success!

Akira Kurosawa’s film version of the “Scottish play” (*Throne of Blood* in translation) is actually named *In the Net of the Spider* in the original. The witches are transposed into a single female character, an *Oni Baba* or demon of an old woman who had been a (wet) nurse in life and having committed a crime (presumably against a child) was turned into a *kumo baba*, or the malign she-spirit of a spider, a “natural” creature. Worthwhile noticing is the fact that the word *kumo* also means “cloud” and Kurosawa said he wanted to

shoot the film mostly on the forest slopes of Mount Fuji on account of its *fog*.²

We should at this point wonder about what we mean by “natural”. Kate Soper says the concept of Nature, among many other things, is a register of the changing conceptions as to who qualifies and why for full membership of the human community (Soper, 1995). Among those groups whom Western culture has deemed inhuman, non-human or less than human are witches. Such groups have been variously associated with bestial behaviour, or lacking in reason, immersed in the body or reproductive activities, untameable, etc. Humanity has sought to define itself in opposition to these excluded “others”; however, they can prove rather difficult to stay confined in their supposedly “natural domain”.

II

When Banquo in I.iii.39-47 addresses the weird sisters in his half-mocking way, his discourse, like an internal direction, suggests they watch him fixedly, very much like an animal caught in mid-flight, too late to escape, to hide or to secure some safety of sorts, expectant for the next move of the predator. Yet we know from their own words in act I that they were there for Macbeth. The ambiguity sets in, as we have said, very early in the play. Shakespeare shows Banquo wondering about the nature/identity of the characters. His difficulty might stem from the fact that they are, perhaps, cross-dressing (“so wild in their attire”, “look not like (...) and yet...”; “your beards”, etc.), a not uncommon strategy of women in Shakespeare’s comedies to cross-dress, to mimic men for safety (and fun?). *Mimicry* in evolutionary biology refers to the similarity of one species to another which protects one or both from predators. This similarity can be in appearance, behaviour, sound, scent and location, with the mimics found in similar places to their models. Mimicry, or *camouflage*, a form of mimicry, occurs when a group of organisms (the mimics) evolve to share common perceived characteristics with another group, the models. The witches always appear as a group of three but, in their words, they do so on appointment (cf. our epigraph). They are individuals, or used to be. Furthermore, they seem to be blending with the (desolate) environment, a form practised, for example, in the African savannah by certain animals (zebras, cheetahs) to avoid detection by either the predator or the predated. Evolution is driven by the selective action of a signal receiver (common predator of both species) avoiding the noxious models. The signal

2. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/1999/mar/04/derekmalcolmscenturyoffilm.derekmalcolm>; <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/270§ion>, accessed February 2014.

always functions to deceive the receiver by preventing it from correctly identifying the mimic in evolutionary terms. Macbeth believes the witches. Is he deliberately deceived by them? In the absence of an oracle or religious dimension to this play, the soldier/warrior returning victorious from an internal strife is confronted by a strange form of a living thing that seems to know him as well as he knows himself. It disturbs him. What/who does he see when he sees the witches? What the audience notices, both the fictional and the real, is that he has been suddenly separated from the common lot, and that, as from now, he starts heading towards his own demise; that he has unknowingly entered the "fog", has fallen prey to the spider's web, like a fly! And his process of de-humanisation begins here and now. That much we see happening in front of our very eyes.

A relatively new branch of biology, *ethology*, is said to focus on the evolutionary and adaptive significance of human/animal behaviour. For the witches, we would like to slightly modify the definition to say that their behaviour is an in-volutionary move aimed at surviving in an unsympathetic environment which will eventually stop their "natural" growth. By contacting Macbeth in the fog, they have, so to speak, sought to spread their "illness" onto him. What differentiates them, perhaps, is that he appears to have a choice (cf. Banquo's).

In the hierarchical order of the play's fictional world, which mirrors extant values anyway, the category of adults, or, as in this case, that of (army) leaders, horsemen, men have the prerogative of speech. Banquo tries but fails to extol any information from them that would serve for identification or, a better word perhaps, *classification*; he expected the witches to respond to his inquisitiveness ("What are these...", "Live you? Or are you aught that man may question?"). Macbeth instead utters an imperative, like the soldier he is, "Speak if you can, what are you?" and the answers *then* come fluently. They do not correspond, however, to the questions asked (as to their nature/identity) but refer instead to the *changes* awaiting Macbeth, which are received as improvements rather than steps to his downfall. And they come in the form of praise, "all hail". Thus we see the witches participating in the dynamics of nature by adapting to it: the fog creates the mystery, then as today, in Scotland as in Buenos Aires. They can appear suddenly and vanish accordingly. They act mysteriously, emitting oracles that please the listeners; they flatter and obtain free way from these powerful figures. They manage to interest them, to seduce them eventually. It is possible that they know more than the greats themselves from the very people that seek their help. And that they believe in their own "powers". "Camouflage enables animals to survive by not becoming prey, or by being

good predators," says Bruce Grant, a biologist at the College of William and Mary, (Williamsburg, VA). And he adds, "While many species have displayed camouflage over millions of years, scientists are still puzzling to figure out this complex process of concealment."

Whether these creatures were expected to be born witches or became so in time we are not told. But it is not difficult to see in them original human beings degraded by a worsening of their life conditions. Evil, viewed from this perspective, could result from a continued exposure to harsh life where survival is continuously threatened. The exercise of witchcraft (if frowned upon), or shamanism (if accepted), could offer this group of people a means of survival, which would inspire both credibility and fear, and would, up to a point, keep danger at bay. In this context, the "foulness" of the air may not have been merely a metaphor as we have suggested. About the meteorological conditions of England/Scotland at the time, we have read that "possibly a severe winter in Scotland, lasting from November to the end of April and frequent heavy snowfall is recorded for 1601-1602 in winter and early spring"³ while drought in autumn and winter is recorded for the South (London) around that time. As for January 20 to 30, 1606, 2,000 died around the Severn Estuary from floods, "As well as the cost in human life much damage (loss of housing)" was effected; "(...) cattle sheep horses perished. There may be some confusion of dates, (...) with our reckoning..." adds the report; "There is also debate whether this event was a 'standard' wind-driven storm, or a tsunami-like occurrence. Contemporary accounts mention high tides and strong west winds. Before that date there is mention of severe gales in Scotland throughout the summer of 1596."

As with other plays, Shakespeare may have been making a poetically framed statement of fact regarding the weather (cf. Titania's speech, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i: "... the winds, (...) have suck'd up from the sea contagious fogs: which falling in the land, /have every pelting river made so proud, /That they have overborne their continents./The fold stands empty in the drowned field,/and crows are fatted with the murrion flock"). The picture is that of prospective hunger and misery. We can as from the first scene of *Macbeth* start reading this penury.

There is also a direct concern of the witches with meeting Macbeth specifically; this appears to be related to their semiotic function as, in framing

3. Quoted loosely from: http://booty.org.uk/booty.weather/climate/1500_1599.htm, accessed September 2013. Information corroborated by Brian Fagan in his *The Little Ice Age* (2000).

the story of the brave soldier who went berserk, they seem to be announcing the “evil” for which the play is famous. But the “nature” of that evil remains to be defined. The religious values, and the biblical familiarity that underlie all of Shakespeare’s plays (here Lord and Lady Macbeth could have been modelled on Ahab and Jezebel from the Book of Kings, for example) point to the Devil, whose followers the witches traditionally are, but the “evils” looming over men, animals and plants inventoried by Titania, goddess of nature, are correctly attributed to natural phenomena. They *are* evil, although we would never call them so because there is no moral dimension to nature. It simply IS. However charming Titania’s argument goes, her quarrel with her husband has nothing to do with the storm that, according to contemporary records, had devastated the Midlands around the time of the writing of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

As to the predictions themselves, we quote loosely from Keith Thomas: “Omens (...) relate to human intentions (...) the dreams we [tend to] remember are those which go in the direction of our real hopes and fears. The utterances of the weird sisters were treated with suspicion by Banquo. But they struck a chord in the heart of Macbeth” (Let’s also remember Edmund’s words in *King Lear*, I.ii).

The space of the sacred that the witches represent in Shakespeare’s fiction is not that of institutionalised church/religion, but that of the grove, of the oak and of the fountain of life. And this is the space that appears degraded, manipulated by perverted ambition. There is the murder of a father figure; the ritual killing of an imaginary baby by Lady Macbeth to propitiate her husband’s ambition; unmotivated murder of loyal friends like Banquo and so on. In earlier plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Richard III* or *As You Like It* there are priestly figures, in the great tragedies like this one (or *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*) there are not: man confronts the universe alone. God is dead. What remains is just nature, unpredictable, unmanageable, terrifying.

III

According to the logic of kinship developed by Shakespeare, when Richard II or King Lear abdicate their crown, their kingly condition, a question turns up that needs study: what do they become? So with Lady Macbeth, or with Lear’s elder daughters when they consciously or unconsciously de-womanize themselves (in the context of the plays): what do they become?

In the aforementioned Kurosawa rendering of this play, the woman, through the mediation of a bad action, turns into a demon, a non-human being: could these witches, in an analogous way, be thus considered *former* women, i.e. not women any more? In such a case, what are they now? And what had their crime been? (Consorting with the Devil would be the traditional explanation, but what are we to make of that answer from our chosen “natural” perspective?).

This loss of humanity, of identity, would legitimize Banquo’s question: “What are you,” etc. (cf. Caliban’s change through colonialism, what he was he is no more, what is he now? A degraded human being? A “fish”). Could they all be considered just by-products of some “natural” processes not engineered by themselves but, like other non-human creatures, animals and plants, made to bear the burden nonetheless? Either in earnest or in jest, Shakespeare leaves the question open.

The first words of the protagonist, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I.iii) show him in tune with the witches, so we might also ask: do they belong to the same *species*? As one of the witches told her sisters she had been killing swine, Macbeth too appears to have been killing “swine” (i.e. disloyal, rebellious subjects). Thus the day can be called foul indeed, but also fair in that loyalty has prevailed. Nonsensical (playful) words by the weird sisters appear in this manner invested with meaning but the question remains pertinent: are they the Fates, or just *wayward* creatures, i.e. creatures who have drifted from the “right” path, like Macbeth himself is soon going to do?

The neighbouring words “fear” and “fair” in Banquo’s lips (51-52) foreground still another angle of the non-human. The witches’ traditional “ugliness” argues against their human condition, invariably represented as “an image of God” and therefore rather in tune with Miranda’s ecstatic cry, “How beauteous mankind is!”, at the sight of her European counterparts in the last act of *The Tempest*. The connexion with the original sense of “awesome” (fear) and “sublime” (fair) in these words still resounds.

Their opposites, “evil”, “ugliness”, also define perceptions of natural occurrences, creatures and processes. We love “beautiful” animals and reject “ugly” ones. But what is the meaning of beautiful/ugly in this context? Some concretisations of *Macbeth* in film have shown invariably (young) good-looking protagonists in the roles, although there is no denying the moral ugliness of both. The witches instead are, as we have said, mostly “ugly” and are shown as wilfully spreading their “ugliness”. But it is possible to make a

contrary case: human beings, defacing the habitat through their wrongdoings, lack of concern for anything other than their own petty interests and desires, are the really “ugly” ones. And the witches would then belong with the wronged ones, not with the wrong-doers party, at least initially.

The word “fantastical” (line 54) as spoken by Banquo recalls the experience of the ghost in Hamlet in that he too was seen by more than one character simultaneously, although he would only talk to the Prince. Later on, Macbeth alone will “see” things, but in both plays, drama seems to begin with collective self-deception. Politically, it speaks volumes.

Finally, we can tackle the biological concept of *decay*. Defined as the process that digests food or waste matter through the action of microorganisms (bacteria and fungi), they work by releasing enzymes that break down compounds to be absorbed by their cells. They are more or less active depending on factors such as temperature, moisture and amount of oxygen available. In a stable community of living things, processes like decay, which return substances to the environment, are balanced by those that remove and use substances. In this way, substances are continuously *recycled*. Could this be an ecological way of describing the cycle of Cawdor? The structure of the play begins and ends with the punishment of a rebellious Cawdor in full circle. But as Malcolm notices in the first act, the original (?) Cawdor dies in humility and dignity, asking for forgiveness. Macbeth dies unrepentant. Or at least that is what he lets us see.

Shakespeare’s representation of the non-human, subhuman, inhuman in this play operate so that we are allowed to view the Weird Sisters in an entirely “earthly” way, devoid of supernatural connotations which can be left to idiosyncratic perceptions of time, place and culture. In this way, they may cease to operate merely as symbols of evil –which they can be–, or as “witches” as they are commonly referred to (a term they bitterly resent as expressed in I.iii) and recover their original nature as healers or “shamans” in a process of decay as the result of the “toxic” environment they and their masters inhabit, a situation the northern lands (Scotland) may or may not have been experiencing around the time Shakespeare speaks.

The ecocritical project for this play seeks to determine the role assigned to physical setting by examining the discourse on environment and its various non-human forms of life out of which I have taken the three creatures commonly referred to as “the witches”. But it can also be about Shakespeare’s dramatic discourse on what natural violence, in its several

forms (weather, hunger, fire, floods, etc.) can do to mankind and how man stands up to them.

It seems as well to confront Ralph Black's statement⁴ about the "moments of clarity" experienced outdoors in *King Lear*, for instance, with the moments of confusion on the "heath" in *Macbeth* and how determinant it can be for the final outcome of the play. For Macbeth had experienced confusion on the heath, but he had apparently recovered from it on his return home, overwhelmed by the king's honours.

Yet he had spread the "illness", his confusion, caught on the heath, onto his wife by means of his letter. It is possible that the original interpretation of the oracle by Macbeth himself were passive, a mere announcement that would somehow happen by the will of God. But his wife would not let go. Confusion overtakes the whole world of the protagonist and causes his fall. And it had all begun on the heath, through words heard from weird lips after a wearisome bloody fratricide battle. The Devil is said to be the master of confusion and so is post-traumatic stress.

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4. See www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/defining, accessed May 2012.

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