

THE WEIRD SISTERS AND THE CIRCEAN MYTH OF FEMININITY IN GEOFFREY WRIGHT'S *MACBETH*

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Abstract

One of the typical figures used to construct monstrosity in terms of gender is that of the witch and, probably, one of the best well-known portrayals of these women appears in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Written at the beginning of the seventeenth-century, soon after James I became king of England, this theatre play echoes contemporary beliefs on witchcraft and portrays the weird sisters as the characters that set in motion all the events in the play. The witch is understood as an abject figure and gender becomes a key element in this construction of monstrosity. Accordingly, Geoffrey Wright's adaptation to the screen, uses the mythological figure of Circe as a basis for this contemporary representation of femininity, stressing not only witches' threatening potential but also the danger their highly erotized nature poses.

Keywords: witchcraft, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, monstrosity, femininity, myth, Jacobean theatre, Circe.

Resumen

Tradicionalmente se ha utilizado la figura de la bruja para construir el concepto de monstruosidad en términos de género y probablemente una de las más conocidas representaciones de estas mujeres aparece en la obra de Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. Escrita a principios del siglo XVII poco después de que Jacobo I se convirtiera en rey de Inglaterra esta obra de teatro refleja las creencias de la época sobre brujería y presenta a las tres brujas como los personajes que desencadenan todos los acontecimientos de la obra. La bruja se entiende como una figura abyecta y su género se convierte en un elemento fundamental en la construcción de esta monstruosidad. La adaptación cinematográfica de Geoffrey Wright utiliza la figura mitológica de Circe como base para esta representación contemporánea de feminidad que pone énfasis no sólo en la amenaza que suponen las brujas sino también en el peligro que su naturaleza erótica representa.

Palabras clave: brujería, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, monstruosidad, feminidad, mito, teatro jacobino, Circe.

The witch is a figure that has become a myth in itself, “feared as a principle of disorder is also a woman who goes about and disturbs the established order” (Gaborit 1168). Portrayed in a dual representation, either the temptress or the old hag, the witch was articulated as part of a discourse in the Middle Ages that led to the witchcraze in Early Modern Europe. But the decline in the belief on witchcraft from the late 17th century did not mean that the figure of the witch disappeared from Western culture; on the contrary, it became a recurrent myth that is still present and, as many other archetypal figures, its appeal is undeniable since it draws upon “our deepest desires and fears” (Yarnall 6). This article aims at analysing how the presentation of the witch has evolved and adapted to the twenty-first-century audience while, at the same time, they still retain some of their archetypal elements, turning them into a powerful myth in western societies. Geoffrey Wright’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in 2008 presents the witches as the enigmatic figures that set in motion the events in the story but also, echoing the Graeco-Roman mythological figure of Circe, witches are portrayed as beautiful temptresses, as figures that disrupt the gender-based order through their display of powers that go beyond men’s control.

The myth of Circe first appears in Homer’s *Odyssey* and it has persisted in Western culture until our times. As Marta Paz Fernández (2009) explains, in its origins, this Greek myth stressed the duality between domesticity and sensuality, between human and beast, between life and death. Circe is a nymph, daughter of the god Helios, and as such, she is a magical creature but also a desirable one. Greek iconography presented her dual nature as both a positive and a negative force –she uses her powers to transform Odysseus’ travel companions into beasts but she also becomes the hero’s lover and helps him enter Hades. However, later reinterpretations of this mythological figure would completely transform her. When Christianity became the dominant religion of the empire, there started a process led by both ecclesiastical and secular authorities to reinforce their power identifying previous pagan religions with evil practices. From the 4th century onwards, scholars such as St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas began to give more relevance to the figure of the Devil and started to identify practitioners of magic with Devil’s agents. The ideas presented in intellectual writings joined many of the popular beliefs regarding magic that had originated in folklore and old pagan traditions and contributed to create what Brian Levack calls “a cumulative concept of witchcraft” (Levack 29). This discourse, which was already formed by mid-fifteenth century, incorporated many shared elements about witches such as the pact with the devil or their gathering in sabbaths but it also focused on witches as typically female figures that stand for the subversive elements that destroy order in society. The witch was opposed to the idea of the Virgin Mary, “the sexless woman-mother was contrasted with the body and pleasure of the sexed woman who both attracts and repels men” (Gaborit 1166). They became the threatening other as opposed to the traditional role attributed to the Christian woman: docile, obedient and dependent of men. Circe, as well as other mythological figures, were appropriated by authorities as exemplary of unacceptable behaviours and articulated in negative terms within this discourse of witchcraft. All types of writings, from learned literature to pamphlets or

ballads, as well as illustrations and visual images were crucial for spreading this discourse and transform the figure of the witch into something “universal and also stereotypical” (Zika 2). And it was the *Malleus Maleficarum*, written by two Dominican inquisitors, Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer in 1487, that probably became the most famous and influential witchcraft treatise. It not only helped spread the already existing ideas on witchcraft, becoming “a common reference in the subsequent demonological literature and a common source for judges at witchcraft trials” (Kors and Peters 15) throughout Europe but it also highlighted the link between witches and femininity; an idea that would prevail in the following centuries, contributing to reinforce the patriarchal discourse within western societies.

By the early modern period, the presentation of the witch had evolved around two main discourses: the witch as a threatening other, as a deviant outside the community –the image of the old hag– but also the witch as a deviant that meets in sabbats to perform their spells and incantations and practice cannibalism and orgies. The witch is, therefore, represented either as an old woman outside the community or a temptress, an Eve-like figure; and it is precisely this latter depiction, taken from the Graeco-Roman tradition, that transformed the mythological figure of Circe to adapt it to the official discourse and, as a consequence, it became one of the stereotypical representations of the dangerous potential of women’s sexuality. Therefore, from the Middle Ages until the early modern period, Circe and other mythological figures linked to magic underwent a transformation and “the positive figure with a balanced, sexual body gradually cracked and shattered, changing into negative values under the pressure of men and religion” (Gaborit 1164). Circe was gradually identified with a witch and the link between women and demonic power was reinforced. As Marta Paz Fernández (2009) explains, she became the passionate and the deceiver, the lover and the dangerous witch. Visual representations in the art of the 15th and 16th centuries were not based on Homer’s narrative but they owe much to “the writings of Boccaccio, Boethius, Virgil and Augustine” (Zika 133). As a consequence, her beauty is emphasized and presented as a negative feature since it is said that “she could beguile men and make them lose their human reason” (133). Ovid also emphasized Circe’s “cruelty rooted in lust” (138) and her unnatural sexual drives are frequently represented following “Boccaccio’s allegorical interpretation of the transformation of Ulysses’ companions as the consequences of uncontrolled lust” (139). Therefore, by Jacobean times, when *Macbeth* was written, Circe had already a well-established symbolic meaning, emphasizing “the problematic relationship between pleasure and virtue, and the male fear of loss of authority and reason” (Hults 190).

Macbeth should be understood in its historical context as an attempt to please the new sovereign James I (VI of Scotland) not only in terms of his lineage to Banquo but also in relation to the king’s interest on witchcraft. By the time James became king of England he had already written a demonological tract –*Daemonology*, 1597– and had been personally involved in a witchcraft case when some women were accused of using magic against the monarch and his

wife. The Berwick trials that followed this failed attempt on the king's life became a perfect means to reinforce James' position as Divine right ruler and his function as restorer of "the hierarchy and order threatened by the witches" (Purkiss 200). As a consequence, in the first years of his reign, there appeared many works in England where witches had a prominent role, including Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* (1609), Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1613-1616) or Dekker, Rowley and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621). When Shakespeare wrote his *Macbeth*, he knew about the king's interest on the topic and the effect it would have on its audience. Therefore, he included the three witches following contemporary ideas on witchcraft and mixing both continental and English traditions.

But what happens with the three witches in the 21st century? Is the same image that was valid in the beginning of the 17th century still valid nowadays? Is there still a space for this depiction of femininity? I will argue that it is precisely because witches "epitomized that liminal space [...] between the realm of human and the beastly" (Zika 137) that their status as a myth has survived until our days, still interpreted and reinterpreted after Shakespeare's times. The weird sisters were originally performed "as nymphs and fairies" (Shama 2) but "the tremendous variance in the trio's dramatic representations began around Shakespeare's death in 1616" (2). These variations are the perfect starting point for analysing how the myth of the witch has been presented and represented in different periods and the extent to which it is still valid in the 21st century. I will argue that the myth of the witch and, particularly, the witch as temptress in a Circean sense, is still universal and has prevailed in the 21st century when it is still used as a powerful image to reinforce particular values. This myth has not disintegrated but adapted to contemporary times, maintaining traditional views and perpetuating the myth of femininity

Geoffrey Wright's *Macbeth* was released in 2006 and offers an adaptation of Shakespeare's play. It changes the original Scottish location to contemporary Australia and sets the action in the context of a gangsters' fight for power. The portrayal of the three witches on screen has generally been in line with the traditional depiction of the witch as the old hag. Orson Welles (1948) presented them as "three crouching figures [who] lure an audience into a disturbing world where supernatural powers seem to be controlling events" (Mason 2000, 184) focusing on their ugliness and inscrutability. Roman Polanski (1971) also used this traditional representation. The weird sisters appear as three poor and filthy women whose otherness is stressed not only by their appearance but also by the space they occupy, separate from the rest of the world in isolate beaches or hidden caves. However, Geoffrey Wright draws on the stereotype of the Circean witch, focusing on woman's sexed bodies and the idea of "the vulnerability of men to female power" (Newman 1991, 62). From the opening of the film, the archetypal image of the witch as a Circean figure linked to bestiality and chaos that was established in the Middle Ages is present in Wright's approach. The first scenes show three young girls dressed in their school uniforms in the middle of the graveyard while Lady Macbeth mourns for her dead son. This apparently

innocent image of three beautiful girls is suddenly put to an end when they start to laugh and violently vandalise some graves. Their bestiality is emphasised by their animal-like movements and hissing sounds and this image helps reinforce their “metaphoric status as figures of and for confusion” (Purkiss 211). Only when they finally stop and gather together do we realize they are not common girls but three witches casting a spell. This particular depiction of femininity can be read in line with Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory or Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) where the witch is defined as an abject figure and “represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order” (Creed 76). Also, their vandalising of this holy place reflects a fear that frequently appears in societies: the witch’s ability to draw “on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community” (76). Therefore, this 2006 adaptation of *Macbeth* presents the witches as “a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil” (76) but it also draws on the stereotype of the Circean witch with its focus on beauty and temptation impersonated in three beautiful young girls as well as their link to beasts and bestiality because of their hissing sounds and animal-like movements.

The witches in *Macbeth* are referred to as the weird sisters and this particular use of the adjective weird, which in Shakespeare’s times had the meaning of having the power to control destiny, echoes the mythological figures of the Fates but also Circe, who helped Odysseus enter Hades and meet his destiny. However, although the classical myth presented a balanced representation of positive and negative characteristics, Shakespeare’s play in general and this adaptation in particular focuses on the witches’ negative aspects. They have the power to control men’s destinies and their mythical status is emphasized by contrasting them to the contemporary setting they are presented in, always appearing in dream-like scenes, separated from the rest of the characters, from the rest of the world. As Barbara Creed explains, the witch “sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary” (76). This separation between the human and the supernatural is also pointed out by Diane Purkiss, who highlights how the witches’ speech “is marked off from that of the other characters in a manner which insists on their iconic status and also on their difference from the human. They are not ordinary women who have sinned, but a special class of being, like monsters or mermaids” (210). This particular aspect in the witches’ presentation can be seen in the following scene they appear in, when *Macbeth* is at the Cawdor Club. He has been drinking and taking drugs with Banquo and it is during this drug trip that he sees them again. The dream-like atmosphere is highlighted through the use of smoke and flashing lights on the dance floor where *Macbeth* meets them. However, the initial confusion soon turns into desire when he starts to flirt with them. The focus lies on this idea of the sensual and dangerous feminine. As in the mythological story where Circe turns Odysseus’ men into beasts, *Macbeth* is seduced not only by their beauty but also by their words and promises of glory and he ends up crawling on the dance floor following them. As Judith Yarnall explains, in Western literature Circe is an archetypal character “associated with our bodily vulnerability and has power over that – a power that is often presented

as sexual allure” (2). Though not physically, as in the classical myth, Macbeth is lured by the witches’ powers and gives in to his inner desires for power and lust. He has been symbolically transformed into a beast; even his movements at the end of the scene suggest this transformation and reinforce the idea that uncontrolled desires turn men into beasts.

As the story unfolds, Wright focuses more on the witches’ sensuality and sexuality –from beautiful schoolgirls to alluring young women in a disco and, finally, the famous cauldron scene present them naked, preparing a potion. This scene is one of the most famous ones in the play and was originally written echoing contemporary beliefs on the witches’ sabbat and as “a reminder of women’s control over food production” (Purkiss 212). Once again, the witches’ appearance in this particular scene is linked to the transition between life and death and the idea of them playing with men’s destinies. It portrays Macbeth’s transformation and his giving into lust and desire with clear references to Circe’s story. The witches are presented as scheming, controlling Macbeth and subordinating him to their will and their potion echoes the one Circe gave to Odysseus’ men, which turned them into beasts. Wright’s presentation of the weird sisters establishes a clear link between women’s sexuality and the threat it poses to men. The obvious appeal of their beauty is presented through their naked bodies and the audience can perceive their lustful relation to Macbeth. Although it does not move too far away from the perversions that appear in early modern texts describing sabbats –which included orgies and even cannibalism– this adaptation seems to take all the stereotypical elements when representing women as witches. It follows the line of some similar contemporary productions that objectify women, trying to catch the attention of those who would not typically go to the cinema to watch a Shakespearean play by focusing on violence and sex. In fact, Wright’s adaptation adds a sex scene after they give the potion where the witches whisper their prophecies on Macbeth’s ear while they are having sexual intercourse with him. This change in the cauldron scene makes an explicit reference to female sexuality and their power over men and clearly shows what it had already been suggested in many writings and visual images in Shakespeare’s own time, the link between women and evil, how they can lead men to their doom using their sexual allure. Although never on stage, this very same idea was present in the Early Modern period when Circe and, by extension, the witch, was regarded as “driven by lust” (Zika 140) but also “subordinating male victims to her will, unmanning them and overturning the proper moral and gender order” (2009, 140). In Wright’s adaptation this image of dominance over men continues to be perceived: the lascivious woman who represents temptation, “the beautiful witch [who] tempts the hero, emasculating him by immersing him in sensual delights” (Hults 190). In a figurative sense, Circe’s transformation of men into beasts is reflected here as Macbeth’s fall into his base instincts, not only because he kills the king but also because he succumbs to temptation and lust. Also, it can be argued that this presentation adopts a moralising tone, warning men against the danger of temptress women that deceive men and drive them insane.

From Wells' portrayal of the three old women to Goold's nurses during wartime, the weird sisters have always portrayed different aspects of the myth but, as it can be gathered from the continuous representations of this story, the power of the myth is still valid. However, one might have thought that a contemporary representation of Shakespeare's work set in 21st-century Australia would offer a more up to date view on women. However, Wright falls into the stereotyping of witches following not the classical myth but the patriarchal discourse promoted by the Church and the state that emphasised a negative view on women; a discourse that has survived in Western societies for centuries. The myth of Circe is merely used as a cliché version of the witch/ temptress and his one-dimensional characters lack the symbolic nuances present in Shakespeare's works. The weird sisters' function in the play is still a question of harsh debate but Wright's adaptation presents them as one of the elements contributing to Macbeth's turning into a beast. This negative construction of the witch contributes to "perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other" (Creed 83). The witches are represented as a fearful form of sexuality, as monstrous figures whose actions lead to chaos and death and reinforce the traditional patriarchal order that links sexual appetites to evil. In fact, the three witches become a highly eroticised version of the dangerous and evil women whose only function is not, as it happened in the Early modern period, to symbolically represent the "threats to divinely ordained royal power" (Hults 190) but here, they are marketed for commercial purposes into a stereotypical portrayal of womanhood. By focusing on their status as temptress, as Circean figures, Wright represents the monstrous potential of femininity and gives relevance once again to traditional depictions of women, who are here objectified through their bodies but also characterized by their wickedness. The role of popular culture and the media is, therefore, understood as a key element in the transmission of this particular construction of femininity through visual images and the witch, which has become a prevailing myth in contemporary society, is used to construct a power discourse of containment within patriarchal structures precisely because she is depicted as the monstrous feminine and "constructed as an abject figure [who] threatens the symbolic order" (Creed 83).

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