

"WITCHY" WOMEN IN JACOBEAN ENGLAND:
SUBVERTING THE CHAIN OF BEING
IN SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*

by

Barbara A. Smith

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

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William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a play that explores the complex relationship between powerful women and witchcraft. In the early modern era, women who disrupted the natural order by displaying "unfeminine" characteristics of shrewishness, heightened sexual prowess, or an independence of mind outside of the home, were designated "other." Their purported unruly behavior led to these women being labeled as witches: a pejorative term that aligns potent females with the Devil and demonic spirits.

Shakespeare created *Macbeth* to reflect this social interest in women as witches. In the play, the Weird Sisters are constructed as stereotypical, literal witches, whereas Lady Macbeth figures as a metaphorical witch. She, like the historical "witches" in England and Scotland, is ultimately suppressed because she subverts the Great Chain of Being by rising above her station in an unnatural way.

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION: KING JAMES: IN
SEARCH OF THE DEMON WITCH

In the early 1600s, when William Shakespeare was penning his tragedy, *Macbeth*, England was in a state of flux. Elizabeth I was not long dead, and a new *male* monarch had acceded to the throne. The people of England were dealing with the loss of an English female monarch, who had lasted more than two generations, and were learning to adapt to James VI of Scotland, who, after Elizabeth I's death, was now James I of England and Scotland. This newly-crowned king brought several novel features to the throne, but the most unusual was his avid and obsessive interest in hunting witches. James I had good reason for his abhorrence, since he firmly believed that he and his fiancée, Princess Anne of Denmark, had been almost drowned at sea by a handful of witches. Before becoming the sovereign of England, James VI had traveled to Norway where his betrothed, Princess Anne, was waiting for his arrival. The pair had set out two separate times for Scotland, but they were turned back because of turbulent seas. Finally, on the third attempt, the couple made it to James VI's homeland, but only through a perilous journey. It was alleged that "witches" were causing this "storm" as part of an elaborate conspiracy against the Scottish throne. Soon many Scottish people were accused of witchcraft, and a full-blown trial ensued. Several

female and male subjects were accused, but one person in particular, Agnes Sampson, spoke confidentially with the king, and through her whispered testimony, he became convinced that witches had been behind the plot to drown him at sea. She and four others were indicted and executed for their assumed treachery (“Scotland’s History”).

James VI was so impassioned and fixated on witches that, in 1597, he devoted a whole book to the ideology of witches as real embodiments of the devil. Called *Daemonologie*, James VI wrote this small book expressly to alert and forewarn the people of Scotland of the danger and evil that witches, as well as other sorcerers, posed to the country and to the individuals who fell under their power. In the preface to the book, King James VI writes, "My intention in this labor, is only to prove two things, as I have already said: the one, that such devilish arts have been and are. The other, what exact trial and severe punishment they merit" (King James 3). However, learned men, such as the Elizabethan Sir Walter Scott and Johan Weyer, a German physician, publicly discounted James VI's belief in the supernatural art of witchcraft. Because of this denouncement, the king created *Daemonologie* in the form of a conversation between two men, Philomathes and Epistemon, in order to "resolve the doubting hearts of many" (King James 3). Philomathes, the doubter, and Epistemon, the believer, discuss many points of witchcraft in the late sixteenth century that James VI deems pertinent to the skeptics of his kingdom.

James VI relies heavily on scripture throughout his book to prove that witches and witchcraft are indeed a threat to mankind. He points specifically to one section of the Bible¹, I Samuel 28: 7-25, to substantiate his insistent claim of witchcraft. In these verses in the Geneva Bible, Saul, the king of Israel, has lost the good will of God and is frustrated by Israel's enemy, the Philistines. He wants to know how to defeat them, but God is not responding to him, so Saul consults with a "woman that hath a familiar spirit" (I Sam 28:7). This familiar spirit is often called the Medium or Witch of Endor in other versions of the Bible. James VI interprets this "spirit" as negative because she conjures God's prophet from the dead. James VI includes in *Daemonologie* other passages in the Bible that support either the existence of witches or the Devil's influence on women. Some of these scenes are the following: Eve being tempted by Satan in the Garden of Eden; the magicians mimicking Moses' miracles in front of Pharaoh; and the servant girl "possess[ing] a spirit of divination" following Paul. However, in all of these scriptural instances of witchcraft and wizardry, James VI says there is a divine purpose behind each diabolical act. He writes:

For where the devils intention in them is ever to perish, either the soul or the body, or both of them, that he is so permitted to deal with: God by the contraries, draws ever out of the evil glory to himself, either by the wrack of the wicked in his justice, or by the

¹ The version of the Bible referred to in this chapter is the Geneva Bible. The version of the Bible attributed to King James I of England would not be written until 1611.

trial of the patient and amendment of the faithful, being wakened up with that rod of correction. (4)

For James VI, then, the purpose of the persecution of witchcraft is to teach through punishment the folly of giving into the temptation of using magic and sorcery to solve one's problems.

However much the English subjects might have believed James VI's betrothal story (that witches caused a storm at sea to destroy the king and his future queen), they disagreed with the stricter laws against sorcery and enchantment that James I wanted to put into effect in England. First, I would argue that James I's problems at sea had occurred when he was king of Scotland, so the people of England did not see his present aversion to witches as relevant to their own English laws. Second, and probably most importantly, the English people did not have the same detestation of witches as other European people did, including Scotland. It was rare, before James I acceded to the English throne, for authorities in England to execute witches. As a matter of fact, until James I ruled England, that country had tolerated witches in their communities to a point.

Notwithstanding their seeming tolerance, the newly Jacobean people were also a very ordered people, and they embraced this order with fervor. The British in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed in a "universal world order," and

this order was symbolized by a "chain of being" (Tillyard 25). The people of England, and elsewhere in Europe, in the early modern era, used this known world order to set the foundation for their society and religions. Anything that deviated from this order was "other," fearsome, and strange. These anomalies to societal structure were not to be tolerated, and if they were found, wherever they were found, they had to be explained, changed, or destroyed. As long as witches remained within the boundaries of the "chain," these people (mostly women) were left alone and endured.

It is in this Jacobean atmosphere of intolerance for witches that William Shakespeare writes *Macbeth*, "the last of [his] four great tragedies" (Bevington 1255). Shakespeare, at the time James I acceded to the English throne, also experienced a change of benefactors. No longer was his troupe called The Lord Chamberlain's Men; instead, they became The King's Men and fell under the direct observation of James I. Shakespeare was suddenly composing plays for a very particular king, one who detested witches and one who was very traditional and would have understood the "chain of being" completely. Thus when Shakespeare creates *Macbeth*, it was no accident that he put three ugly witches in the beginning of the play or that the main conflict thread running through the play was that of the Macbeths attempting to rise above their station through very improper circumstances. What else would the play be but a tragedy--when the order in the play's depiction of society was so unbalanced that a woman ruled over her husband and a high-ranking thane ruled in place of a king?

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare creates three strange females, who are referred to as the Weird Sisters, and they can be considered as clichéd witches in his play, for the sisters are ugly, old, and otherworldly looking, gathered around a cauldron and chanting spells: “Double, double, toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble” (4.1.35-36). They have familiars, spirits in the form of animals, such as toads and cats, which follow them wherever they go as they “do” their deeds of malevolent mischief. “I come, Grimalkin!” says the First Witch at the beginning of the play, calling upon her gray cat (1.1.8). The Second Witch even summons Paddock, a creepy frog (1.1.9). Such supernatural scenes portray a conventional view of witches in England during this time period, a view that continues today. Yet the “real” historical witches, the ones that James VI hunted and persecuted, were actually quite different. These witches were human, not other-worldly beings. They were culturally “other.” Mostly, they were outspoken, sexually deviant, and independent women. It is Lady Macbeth who mirrors these real-life witches and acts as a metaphorical witch in Shakespeare’s play.

Lady Macbeth, although she is not ugly, old, or otherworldly in appearance, does possess the characteristics that defined witches of the early seventeenth century: she is sexual and sexually appealing; she is outspoken and aggressive; and she is independent and successful, at least up until the middle part of the tragedy. Lady Macbeth represents these “witch” qualities so completely that she believes that she could make Macbeth king--and therefore herself queen--with the help of demonic “spirits” (1.3.40). Lady Macbeth subverts, or attempts to

overthrow, Scotland's natural order, and because of her aggression she is destroyed, just as her counterparts in sixteenth- and seventeenth- century Europe were killed for their destabilizing ways. In Chapter Two, "Witches as Culturally Other: Subverting the Great Chain of Being," I examine how early modern women were labeled "witches" for three prevailing reasons: they showed a sexual rebelliousness that threatened an hierarchal order in the wedded sphere; they demonstrated what was often "shrewishness," or an independent sense of self; finally, they exhibited a sense of autonomy outside of the domestic confines of the household. In Chapter Three, "Lady Macbeth as Metaphorical Witch: Destabilizing the Natural Order," I argue that Lady Macbeth embodies what were considered witch-like characteristics as she tries to challenge the power structure in her society.

CHAPTER TWO
WITCHES AS CULTURALLY OTHER: SUBVERTING
THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

In the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, people believed in a "universal world order," and this order was symbolized by a "chain of being" (Tillyard 25). Arthur Lovejoy, author of *The Great Chain of Being*, writes that this order culminated in an interpretation of the universe that "most educated men" believed. This belief held from the time of Aristotle and Plato until the late seventeenth century (Lovejoy 59). According to Eustace Tillyard, a researcher of the Elizabethan era, this chain was comprised of God at the top, then angels, the elements, man, woman, and, then at a lower position, the beasts (37-82). This "golden" chain was very important because of the hierarchical and systematic order that it portrayed. Lovejoy writes that if even one of the links is missing or put out of order, then the result "would be a general dissolution of the cosmical order; ceasing to be 'full,' the world would cease to be in any sense 'coherent'" (60). The people of England, and elsewhere in Europe, used this known world order to set the foundation for their society and religions. Anything that deviated from this order was "other," fearsome, and strange. These anomalies stood outside of a prescribed system of authority, and they presented a source of anxiety for

those who sought to control this arranged and hierarchical order. Women who broke the links in the "chain of being" often earned the label "witch," and they fell prey to some of the worst oppression that Europe had seen up to that point in history. These "witchy" women were sexual and sexually appealing, outspoken and aggressive, independent and successful, and because of these conventional "male" qualities, they subverted the Great Chain of Being.

In Jacobean England, witches were overwhelmingly thought to be women not because they were the weaker sex, but because they were trying to rearrange this chain of being. Historical research bears out that these evil women were thought of as a danger to the power of men and therefore were being used by the Devil to tear apart the structure of the natural world. James VI was a proponent of the belief that women were the preferred tools of the Devil. He states in

Daemonologie:

The reason is easy, for as that sex is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil, as was over well proved to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of Eve at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sex. (King James 24)

James VI published his book widely with the result that every religious or political head of a town or village could read what the king's thoughts on witchcraft were. The result was that his belief that women were susceptible to the Devil's influence because they were the weaker sex trickled down to the people.

Gary Waite, author of *Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, states, "Women were generally believed to be weaker in mind and body, and with their cooler humors, more susceptible to diabolical temptation" (50). Waite goes on to say, in essence, that because women weren't allowed to achieve the same schooling, social status, and power that men enjoyed in the fifteenth century, the only choice they had was to succumb to the wiles and tricks of Satan. Because of this belief, that women were easily influenced by the Devil due to their gender inequality, men of higher education, especially priests and other men of the cloth, tended to be fearful of women since their bodies were associated with Satan and could succumb to diabolical or sexual temptation (Waite 51). Meltzer supports this statement in his book by stating, "Witches are accused of all manner of sexual crimes against men . . . the church associated women with sex, and pleasure in sex was condemned because it could only come from the Devil" (56).

Women were also seen in the eyes of the Catholic and Protestant churches as lustful tempters of men who were trying to climb past men on the chain of being. Christina Lerner, author of *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland*, writes:

The fact that they [women] are receptive, not-potent, and can receive indefinitely, whether pleurably or not, has generated the myth of [sexual] insatiability . . . it was thought that women through these insatiable lusts might either lead men astray or hold them to ridicule. (93)

Consequently the pattern being knit together by the patriarchal society was that women were "other" biologically because they were seen as the weaker sex, but even more diabolically, they were seen as sexual deviants and temptresses. Women's supposed sexual power took away masculine sexual potency. This female erotic ability was seen as dangerous and demoniac to patriarchal society. There are many examples in England, Scotland and Ireland of sexually strong women even confessing to having carnal relations with the Devil in order to become a powerful individual. One such example of apparent intercourse with the Devil is told by a sixteenth-century "witch" Isobel Gowdie. Nigel Suckling, author of *Witches*, reports that Gowdie "was sometimes called 'Queen of the Witches' because without apparent coercion, she gave one of the most vivid portraits of what everyone believed about witches at the time" (21). This belief regarded diabolical sex and intimate relations with supernatural beings. Gowdie told her accusers about having lascivious relations with Satan, "commenting on the extreme cold of his penis" (Suckling 21). Additionally, she had been to "faeryland" many times, eating their food and describing the landscape of "Elphame" in great detail (Suckling 21). Women's sexual prowess, including the knowledge of the supernatural, posed a threat to patriarchal society because men were unable to control the sexual and imaginary powers given to women by Satan.

Importantly, Satan could give females of all ages sexual and supernatural powers that would elevate them above the men subverting nature itself. Even children were listened to when they talked of strange encounters with the Devil. Historian Gary Waite tells of Margaretha, "a seven-year-old girl who confessed to riding to the witches' sabbath and to all manner of ungodly dealings with the Devil" (159). The phrase "all manner of ungodly dealings" suggests that the little girl engaged in carnal relations with Satan. In some cases with female children so young, the Church and secular leaders would try to reeducate these supposed little witches in correct doctrine, but, unfortunately, Margaretha proved unaffected by this attempt at indoctrination and was still proudly proclaiming her demonic talents when she was eleven. Waite says that records do not tell what happened to her after that (160). Although a stereotype exists that witches are old, wrinkled and poverty-stricken, young women were accused of deviance and being sexual bedfellows of Satan as much as older women. For example, Catherine Quicquat was a sexually independent young woman who romantically pursued a local miller with a love potion she purchased from a resident witch. Catherine and the miller actually conducted a sexual tryst by using this witch's brew. When a trial was brought forth against a doctor named Jaquet Durier, accused of witchcraft because a bureaucrat under his care died, Catherine and the miller were, in fact, named as witches. What made this witchcraft trial unique was the fact that, though the doctor himself was tried and convicted of "maleficia" (demonic behavior) and "cannibalistic infanticide, no mention of "sexual" behavior with the

Devil came into the trial until Catherine herself faced the jury. The young woman was inevitably convicted as a witch and being sexually complicit with the Devil, and she and Durier were burned at the stake. The miller, Munier, alone, escaped punishment, more than likely because, as the local miller, he was necessary and knew the right people (Waite 40-41).

Another female, an older woman, was suspected of witchcraft not only because of her sexual misconduct but also her outspoken personality. Christina Lerner tells of Elspeth Thomson, a woman accused by her husband's family as having liaisons with the Devil. Her crimes of witchcraft were twofold: firstly, she shared her bed with Satan while her husband was in it. Lerner states, "James Corkney in Barrhead reported that William McGhie [Elspeth's husband] had described to him that one morning in his bed he saw the Devil looking in his face. 'Being terribly affrighted his wife gripped him fast and said what needed him be so feared for she was not feared for all that'" (127-128, 129). The husband assumed that, since his wife was not afraid in bed, she was performing sexual acts with Satan. Secondly, Elspeth was accused of witchcraft because, in a bad temper, she was believed to have cursed her brother-in-law for not sharing roofing material. Expressions of wifely independence were often interpreted as rebellious and thus demonic.

Not only were women accused of witchcraft seen as defiant, but they were also regarded as an inexplicable conundrum to the men who were supposed to be in charge of them. What did men know of the workings of a female body--their

menses, childbearing, and the birth process? In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the mystery of women's bodies was tied to men's fear that a woman could actually be impregnated by the Devil, thereby mixing Satan's seed with the husband's progeny. This unholy coupling would destroy both society and home lineage. It was because of men's fear of what their womenfolk *could* get up to carnally that Christina Lerner states, "It is only by exhibiting total control over the lives and bodies of their women that men can know that their children are their own" (93). So men in the early modern period attempted to control their wives and daughters in order to make sure they behaved themselves sexually in the domestic sphere and in society. Even though men exhibited anxiety over their wives' sexuality, this fear of women's erotic power was not the only concern of the patriarchy. The major problem began when religious and secular leaders discovered that there were areas of women's lives beyond sexuality that men were unable to regulate: the areas of mind and spirit. These areas were just as incomprehensible to the male psyche as the biological/sexual area, and a woman's desire for personal autonomy was harder to control.

The patriarchs wanted to force such women to remain under the auspices of either the codes of the church, which promoted man's holy supremacy over his wife, or the codes of Jacobean society that believed in that golden chain of being, which said that a woman's place was to be obedient to her husband. Therefore, the reputation for being outspoken in a culture where women were supposed to be

submissive and subservient to men was another way that women as witches became labeled as culturally "other." Women who had the reputation of being outspoken or who refused to be silenced by societal mores were the women who were most likely to have suspicion cast on them when trouble came to the village. Larner posits that "The witch had the Scottish female quality of *smeddum*: spirit, a refusal to be put down, quarrelsomeness, no cursing; no malefice; no witch" (97). In fact, an important theory concerning accusations of witchcraft arises from this line of reasoning: witch trials, in some cases, became the way to take unruly wives, ones who possessed the spirit of "*smeddum*," or opinionated women to task when their husbands or male relatives were unable to do so. Larner states that before witch trials began in the Renaissance, outspoken and shrewish women were largely untouchable by the local authorities for two reasons. One cause was that they were simply not considered separate people in their own right. They belonged first to their fathers and then to their husbands. The second reason logically followed the first: any deviation of behavior was left to their guardians to handle. The local authorities, for example, the magistrate or the curate, had no power to step in and correct the shrewish behavior (Larner 51-52, 101). One might think that witch-hunts would be overkill for something as insignificant as bad womanly conduct, but in the Jacobean era and before, independent women were not just seen as detrimental to themselves; they were dangerous to the whole of humankind.

Women were considered socially "other" if they were outspoken, argumentative, or sought independence of mind or spirit because these orthodox male traits in a female would lead, according to religious and secular authorities, to a destabilization of the Great Chain of Being, a philosophical concept that society and the church believed in so fervently. Autonomous women might leave their husbands and children to serve themselves or worse, to assist the Devil. If a woman would not bow to society's role of submissiveness, then she was starting down a path that could lead to the destruction of her home and ultimately the surrounding community. Thus a cantankerous woman was not to be suffered forever. Take the case of Janet Macmurdoch, an older woman who lived in a Scottish village during Jacobean times. Although Macmurdoch was a poverty-stricken, aged woman who had become dependent on her community, it was mainly her argumentative temperament that led to her being accused as a witch. In the Macmurdoch case, the whole village raised a petition against her because, as Lerner states, "Janet had the fatal ingredient of an aggressive, forceful, and quarrelsome personality. She was deferential to no-one, and if anyone crossed her she swore at them" (125). In her irascibility, Janet cursed at her neighbors, and when their animals began to die and their children got sick, the community actually believed that Janet had bewitched them, causing the frightening events. Finally, they turned her over to the local authorities as a "witch." It wasn't the fact that she was merely a woman that caused suspicion to grow against Macmurdoch. It was Janet's defiance, her refusal to be knocked to

the ground, literally or metaphorically, and remain in the dirt. It was a matter of Janet showing independence and defiance in her poverty when societal norms said she should be grateful for what little she had. The inability of the village to control Janet's mind and spirit and to make her conform to their ideas of how she should see herself was what made Janet a candidate for the interrogations of the witch and executed.

Quarrelsomeness in an accused witch, like Janet Macmurdoch, did not mean that the witch trial itself was not a terrifying experience. Agnes Waterhouse, an old woman accused of witchcraft in Chelmsford, England in 1566, appears to have been tortured into confessing her crimes as a witch. According to the historian Meltzer, after having been starved, left alone in a small, cold cell, most likely afraid of what was going to happen to her, Agnes finally admitted to the accusations of witchcraft and enchantments. She said that she had, with the help of her cat, wreaked havoc in the town against those of the villagers who had been hateful towards her. Several of the villager's livestock had been killed, attacked, or sickened. Every time the cat did as it was asked, Agnes let the cat swallow her blood. Agnes also had the reputation of being argumentative, not only with the community members, but also with her husband. When Agnes couldn't take the discord anymore, she said that the Devil had assisted her in killing her spouse. Desolate and starving, Agnes had asked for charity, and it had been denied. Agnes promised that they would see ruin. In a few days, these people were dead. Many other horrible things had happened in the village, and everyone knew it was

Agnes and her cat that had committed these crimes against them with her hexes and spells. Agnes died by the hangman's noose for her crimes, and, according to Meltzer, "She may have been the first woman in England to be executed for witchcraft" (13-15).

It wasn't just older, poor women who were accused of witchcraft, but independent and economically successful women were also indicted as cohorts of the Devil. These women were so threatening to their male counterparts that myths developed around them. Meltzer tells of a legend in his book about a medieval young "aristocratic" woman named Lady Alice Kyteler. She was lovely, well to do, and intelligent. Her father was so amazed at her intelligence that he let her participate in his banking business, where she reveled in the authority and influence that money gave her. Because of her stunning beauty, Lady Alice married young. Unfortunately, the young squire, her partner, cared more for her money than he did for her. Meltzer describes this old fable: "He [the young squire] died within six months. Three more husbands followed, one soon after another, and each man died an untimely death. One child resulted from those marriages, a son named William, an arrogant, wild fellow who frequently avoided legal charges only by using his mother's influence and money" (Meltzer 24). Distrust began to be leveled against Lady Alice because she only hired one servant, Petronilla, to do all the work in her big house. Many others in the town retained many more servants in far smaller houses. Before long, gossip began to

turn against her, saying that the Devil had fathered her child and was helping her to attain her wealth. No one lifted a finger against her, however, because she had great wealth and was too powerful in the town. Everything changed one night, though, when a neighbor saw Lady Alice outside "sweeping" her front walk. She was "sweeping" the dust and silt of the road *into* her house and saying, "To the house of William, my son, come all the wealth of Kilkenny town. To the house of William, my son come all the health of Kilkenny town" (Meltzer 26). After this odd happening, it seemed that all the wealth of Kilkenny town did indeed arrive at Lady Alice's door, and the health of the people of Kilkenny town began to suffer. Not long after the town's adversity, the mayor talked to the Bishop. Lady Alice's household was cut off from the church. Soon after, the three were seized. Lady Alice and Petronilla were held, but William was let go after he denounced his mother publicly and promised to pay restitution to everyone who had claims against his mother. When the judge examined Lady Alice, she refused to answer any of his charges and remained silent until he pronounced the following judgment: "one week from this day, Lady Alice would be taken from jail to the place of public execution" (Meltzer 29). Lady Alice remained unconcerned and retorted to the crowd in the courtroom, "Do not think that you will see my death a week hence, you who have come here to see this sport" (Meltzer 29).

Petronilla was also judged a witch and on the day of execution was burned at the stake, but when the guards went to get Lady Alice, they found the cell hot and the rooms were thick with fumes. They were unable to open the cell door.

When they finally gained entrance to the cell, Lady Alice was not there. She had simply vanished. It was as she had promised a week before; the townspeople were cheated of seeing her burn. According to Meltzer, Lady Alice's independence, her possible lesbianism, her success without the benefit of a husband, and her wealth and power, which was substantially more than that of the local bishop, were all elements that could have led to the charges of witchcraft that were lodged against her (Meltzer 24-29). In 1324, when this legend occurred and for about a half a millennium after, women who were successful in society without a man at their side, were gazed upon with suspicion.

This distrust of female independence of spirit held not just within the family and society, but also within religious communities as well where the chain of being became a divine will, not just a societal code. These religious communities, both within England and Scotland, as well as Europe, showed the absolute horror the religious community had for women who had the audacity of thinking for themselves in spiritual matters. The historian Waite tells of religious pockets of women--though not labeled as witches--who lived separately and independently from society throughout Europe from Dunkirk to Germany to the Netherlands. Even though these women were pious and single, they were deeply mistrusted by their male peers because of the following assumption: if they were not aligning themselves with God, then they must be aligning themselves with the Devil. These devoted women were called "Begaine," and they were not nuns, so did not take the vows of the Catholic Church. They followed their own spiritual

opinions and claimed to converse with God in their own way. Moreover, they called themselves "friends of God," and because of their nonconformity, they refused to be subject to the male dominance of the religious order of the day. From the twelfth century throughout the seventeenth century, the male religious leaders, who refused to see these women's spiritual connection to God, victimized the Beguines. Many were persecuted as witches and later executed, not just for practicing heterodoxy, but also because they were thought to be practicing a "diabolical heresy" by claiming to have sacred freedom from the cultural norms (Waite 26-27). This independence of religious spirit was not just blasphemous to the religious community; it was perilous to the male leaders of the time because they saw it as an affront to their leadership, an attack on their beliefs. Because of their autonomy, the Beguines' spiritual independence was not to be tolerated in the religious community.

The legendary Joan of Arc was another unfortunate victim of English intolerance of independent female religious thought and behavior. Repeatedly called a "witch" by the English in Shakespeare's *Henry Six, Part One* (1.5.580; 1.5.603; 2.1.681; 3.2.1484), the historical Joan commanded the French troops that conquered the English at Orleans, which brought Charles VII to power. After this battle, the Burgundian authorities imprisoned Joan, and sold her to the English, her enemies. Joan led the French troops into battle and *won* under the firm belief that she was being "inspired by the voices of saints and the archangel Michael" (Meltzer 31). However, when the English brought the captive Joan to London to

undergo trial, they twisted her saints' voices into demonic ones and finding proof of her diabolical intent in her insistence on wearing male clothing, in 1431, she was burned at the stake" (Meltzer 31). Convicted as a witch, the "otherness" of Joan of Arc, as well as the Beguine women, came not only from their independence of mind and spirit. The religious and secular society did not appreciate their individuality and unconventionality as well. These women's conduct, often associated with witchcraft, was "other," and as such, it had to be stamped out. It subverted societal mores of the time, and it subverted nature.

Women accused of witchcraft in the early modern period subverted the natural order of creation by reason of their sexual deviance and nonconformity. This unorthodoxy was often rooted in women's independence of mind and spirit. Furthermore, women accused of witchcraft were also blamed for subverting phenomenon in nature itself. Women's alleged ability to take nature and make it do unnatural things verified a supernatural and thus diabolical connection with the Devil. According to historians, witches were accused and believed to be able to do many unusual things to distort or disrupt nature. For example, these so-called witches were seemingly able to change people into beasts of burden (just like the mythical witch Circe's transformation of men into beasts). Suckling writes that in late seventeenth-century England:

A woman named Anne Armstrong, living near Stocksfield on Tyne, claimed she had been enchanted to carry several local witches to a gathering. She said that a witch called Anne Forster

had put a bridle on her that changed her into the likeness of a horse. Then she had 'rid upon her cross-legged till they came to the rest of her companions at Riding mill bridge end, where they usually met.' There the bridle was removed and she resumed her normal shape. (30)

Meltzer also points out that witches have the power to subvert and control nature. Writing about this long-held belief in Western culture, the critic states: "Witches even exercised magic power over the forces of nature, according to Greek and Roman writers. They could make the sea boil on a windless day, halt a waterfall, or even throw the earth off center. Through such fantastic deeds they reversed the natural order, turning the whole world upside down" (Meltzer 20-21). Even after the Age of Enlightenment, a writer such as Sir Walter Scott was said to have bought a "wind" from a local witch, Bessie Miller of Stromness, when he was headed out to sea (Suckling 83).

The fact that the people of the early modern period believed that witches could subvert nature by skipping a link in the chain of being--along with possessing such diabolical power over nature--is proven by the extremely serious trial and eventual executions of several witches of North Berwick. As discussed previously, these accused witches were charged with regicide and heresy when storms came up on the North Sea, almost capsizing the boats, which carried King James VI of Scotland and his bride to be, Princess Anne of Denmark. The account is told in *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*. It states that in 1590, a girl

named Gillis Duncan was charged by her employer with using magic. Duncan was brutalized with "pilliwinks (thumbscrews) and thraving (twisting and jerking the head using a rope)" until she admitted to everything they accused her of. At that time, she was searched for the Devil's mark, which was a deformity of the skin where familiars might suck ("North Berwick Witches"). Under torture, Duncan had also named many other women and men in the surrounding countryside who, along with her, had been complicit in dealing in witchcraft. Four of these accused were interrogated: Agnes Sampson, an old woman; John Fian, a teacher; and Euphemia Maclean and Barbara Napier, two "gentlewomen." Under duress from lack of sleep and agony from the interrogations, one of these accused witches, Agnes Sampson, admitted that she and the others had worked their magic in order to overturn the ships that were carrying the royals from Norway to Scotland. In order to do this, she claimed that they had "sailed on a sieve" over the sea "to kill the king" (North Berwick Witches). James VI was extremely dubious of Sampson's account of the proceedings, over which he was apparently presiding, until Sampson herself begged leave to speak to him in a murmur (North Berwick Witches). Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, editors of *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, relate that the old woman took James VI aside and murmured in his ear, "telling James what passed between him and Anne on their wedding night in Norway that convinced him of the witches' genuineness" (Normand 33). By doing this act, Agnes sealed not only her fate, but also the fate of the others on trial with her because once James VI heard what she had to say, he was satisfied

that what she had admitted to was indeed fact, and the witches were convicted at once. They were immediately burned at the stake for their crimes, with the exception of Barbara Napier who was found to be with child and so could not be killed. The records show that she was later exonerated (North Berwick Witches). By sheer coincidence, fear, and some well-chosen words, an intelligent and well-ordered mind can be diverted to the same panic that enveloped his inferiors.

The mind that has been schooled to believe that there is a divine hierarchy whose tampering can fell an entire universe is a mind that is uniquely positioned to believe that a group of people, or even one person, can set the entire world out of kilter with a magic potion or a few well-spoken words. Historian Meltzer states, "Belief in witches, then or now, owes much to people's fears of what they don't understand" (18). This statement perfectly encompasses the reasons behind the persecution of the women of Europe during the early modern period. The people who believed in the "Great Chain of Being"--in other words, every thinking and schooled person in that world--thought that those women who endangered it by their sexual independence, outspoken behavior, and independence of mind and spirit were subverting, were destroying the universe. As explained earlier, the chain's progression placed God at the pinnacle, then angels, then Nature, then elements, then man, then woman, and on down the chain to the most infinitesimal creature. This firm order was not up for debate by the few people who did not like their place on the spectrum. Thus the women who

refused to capitulate to the norms of society and remain in their place on the chain were thought of as "other." This "otherness" was not tolerated--not by society and not by religious leaders. It was against society, against nature, and against God; thus they were labeled witches and exterminated in order to protect nature from the evil of their unnatural subversion.

CHAPTER THREE
LADY MACBETH AS METAPHORICAL WITCH: DESTABILIZING
THE SOCIAL CHAIN OF BEING

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*² warns his audience of the dangers of a woman's ambition for political power. Lady Macbeth's desire for her husband, Macbeth, to become the king of Scotland reveals a social anxiety about woman's aspiration for control. Thus, Lady Macbeth represents a character who is culturally "other," precisely because she overreaches her position in the Great Chain of Being. Lady Macbeth not only emasculates Macbeth, but she also encourages him to murder their sovereign, King Duncan, in order to rise as the new monarch. Since Lady Macbeth is constructed as the "other" due to her murderous ambition and gender reversal, I would argue that she could be considered a metaphorical "witch" in this play. Significantly, Lady Macbeth mirrors the three characters in *Macbeth* who are actually labeled as "witches" or "Weird Sisters." The term "Weird Sisters" is used to emphasize the idea that the so-called witches in *Macbeth*

² There is some inconsistency about the first actual performance of *Macbeth*. According to Alchin, the first actual performance of *Macbeth* took place in either 1605 or 1606. The "first recorded performance" took place in 1611.

resemble the marginal women identified as culturally “other” during the Jacobean era. These Weird Sisters reflect the idea of cultural otherness in this period because they destabilize the Great Chain of Being in the following manner: they subvert nature, they exert sexual prowess, and they evince an independence of mind and spirit. In a similar manner, Lady Macbeth embodies these witch-like characteristics, ones that must be suppressed in order to protect the socio/cultural framework of the culture.

From the first lines of the play, the Weird Sisters appear to subvert the natural order of nature by using weather to their advantage. The First Witch says, "When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" (1.1.1-2). The Weird Sisters not only utilize bad weather as baneful ambience for meetings, but they also use inclement weather to transport themselves. They famously chant, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11-12). The Weird Sisters prefer to travel or “hover” in murky and grim conditions. Their prodigious control over nature, as well as their ability to turn the climate and their immediate surroundings to their favor, contributes to their victims’ harm. For example, when one of the sisters wants revenge on a sailor’s wife, she says, "But in a sieve I'll thither sail" (1.3.8). This Weird Sister imagines that she can sail in a “sieve,” or a colander, to avenge a sailor whose wife has apparently insulted her. This image demonstrates how easily the sisters can manipulate nature, in this case sailing rather effortlessly over the ocean, and it also recalls the North Berwick “witches” who were indicted for attempt to

shipwreck James VI's boat. The other sisters will also give her "wind" to blow her toward this sailor's ship. About this control over the physical world, one of the Weird Sisters says, "I myself have all the other, / And the very ports they blow, / All the quarters that they know / I'th' shipman's card" (1.3.14-17). It is implied in this statement that the Weird Sisters have power over the elements. Perhaps, they have even caused storms and shipwreck at sea: "Here I have a pilot's thumb, / wrecked as homeward he did come" (1.3.28-29).

The Weird Sisters' supernatural influence over nature, as well as their capacity to manipulate meteorological and natural circumstances, adds to their harmful effect on humans. Placing themselves in the exact path that Macbeth and Banquo take to meet with Duncan, the sisters specifically choose a remote place of desolation in the midst of a storm to isolate Macbeth, causing him to reflect intently upon the greeting and curious words of the Weird Sisters, namely that Macbeth will become the Thane of Cawdor as well as the King. After the bloody battle that has occurred near Forres, Scotland, the "secret, black, and midnight hags" (4.1.48) plan to encounter Macbeth on a dismal heath at sunset:

When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

When the hurly burly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

That will be ere the set of sun.

Where the place?

Upon the heath. (1.1.1-6)

The Weird Sisters manipulate the weather and select the dismal surroundings in order to create a ruminative mood in Macbeth. This sinister heath acts as a reflection of Macbeth's dark mind as he contemplates murdering Duncan to become king: "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shake so my single state of man" (1.3.140-41). Once the pronouncement is made by the sisters--"All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (1.3.48-50), one that encourages Macbeth to ponder "murder"--Macbeth will have the opportunity to calculate assassinating Duncan. Thus, the Weird Sisters' plant the seed for Macbeth's rebellion and heinous slaying of his kinsman and king. This manipulation of atmospheric conditions and geographic location ultimately causes a rift in the Great Chain of Being.

Although the Weird Sisters don't focus their diabolical sexual powers on Macbeth, the fact remains that they do possess this so-called male prowess that makes them socially "other." There are several examples of their unnatural erotic power. One instance centers on a description of the women's startling and unfeminine physiognomy, starting with their facial characteristics. "You should be women," says Banquo, "And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.45-47). The "witches" are such ugly and odd looking women that Macbeth and Banquo, who have just come from a bloody, gore-filled battlefield, can hardly bear to look at them. The "beards" that the sisters' possess indicate a

masculine quality that aligns them with virile power. When the two Scottish soldiers see the sisters, Banquo rhetorically asks, "So withered and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth / And yet are on't?--Live you" (1.3.40-42). Notwithstanding their queer looks, the Weird Sisters are quite capable of seduction when it suits them. As noted earlier in the play, when a sailor's wife refuses to share chestnuts with her, one of the Weird Sisters vows, "And like a rat without a tail / I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do" (1.3.10). As David Bevington explains in the note to this passage, the repeated phrase "I'll do" refers to a sexual performance, while the entire image points to the notion of a witch's sexual insatiability (1262).

The sexual prowess that the Weird Sisters demonstrate becomes more diabolical as the scene with the sailor progresses. The offended sister continues to promise revenge:

I'll drain him dry as hay
 Sleep shall neither night nor day
 Hang upon his penthouse lid.
 He shall live a man forbid.
 Weary sev'nnights nine times nine
 Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.
 Though his bark cannot be lost,
 Yet it shall be tempest-tossed. (1.3.18-23)

The Weird Sister's malevolent intent becomes clear; she intends to harass the sailor into impotence in retaliation for his wife's greed. Her voracious sexual appetite will make it impossible for the sailor to sleep, eventually weakening and emasculating him. Even in the eyes of the Queen of the witches, Hecate, the Weird Sisters are seen as forward in their sexual prowess, for she accuses them of being "saucy and overbold" (3.5.3). Although the character of Hecate was most likely added later by the Elizabethan playwright Thomas Middleton, she still forms a significant part of the tradition of reading the witches in *Macbeth*. The "saucy" words in the above passage have negative sexual connotations; the Weird Sisters are wanton and brazen in their actions with humans. Because of their exaggerated sexual drive, a perceived male trait, the Weird Sisters steal potency from men, which destabilizes the natural order.

The Weird Sisters, like their historical "witch" counterparts, demonstrate an independence of mind and spirit. Their fortitude and determination threatens the very foundations of the kingdom. Although the sisters show autonomy, their "saucy and overbold" behavior incurs the wrath of Hecate. As touched upon previously, the scene begins with an irate Hecate. The "beldams" ask their leader why she is enraged, and Hecate responds:

Have I not reason, beldams as you are?

Saucy and overbold, 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 contriver of all harms,
 Was never called to bear my part
 Or show the glory of our art? (3.5.2-9)

Hecate is furious because, not only was she excluded from mischievously playing with Macbeth, but she also believes that the beldams' trouble and magic were wasted on him. Hecate opines that Macbeth is not worthy of their time and witchcraft. Yet instead of punishing them for their misuse of their powers, Hecate gives the Weird Sisters a chance to make reparations; additionally, the Weird Sisters' disobedience--that being circumventing Hecate's rule--functions as a mirror to Macbeth's own insurgence, an action that leads to Duncan's death.

Just as the Weird Sisters violate the natural order in the Great Chain of Being, Lady Macbeth also disrupts the system of power in the play. I propose her sorceress-like behavior makes Lady Macbeth a metaphorical witch in this play unlike her supernatural counterparts, the Weird Sisters. It is Lady Macbeth who stirs Macbeth's meditation of murder into action by her manipulation of his masculine identity, even though Macbeth is already contemplating the slaughter of Duncan. Immediately upon receiving Macbeth's letter informing her of the sisters' pronouncements, Lady Macbeth seeks to subvert nature--Macbeth's nature--by emasculating her husband, so that she will rule over his desires. Fearing Macbeth's kind heart, she realizes that she must bolster his latent immoral thoughts and evil ambitions. She ruminates:

Yet do I fear thy nature;
 It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness
 To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
 Art not without ambition, but without
 The illness should attend it. (1.5.16-20)

Lady Macbeth sets about immediately to scheme how best to harangue Macbeth. Not only does she want to bring out Macbeth's wicked intentions, but she also desires to weaken his virtuous and patient character by imbuing him with her own wickedness so he will assassinate Duncan for the "golden round." She says:

Hie thee hither,
 That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
 And chastise with the valor of my tongue
 All that impedes thee from the golden round. (1.5.25-28)

The image of Lady Macbeth "pour[ing] spirits" in her husband's ear recalls the action of a sorcerer concocting spells for devious purposes. Additionally, Lady Macbeth's "chastis[ing] with the valor of [her] tongue" ties back to stories of Scottish witches infamous for the use of "smeddum." Her plans do not rest only with the emboldening of her husband, however. By the time Macbeth enters his castle at Dunsinane, Lady Macbeth has already envisaged the evil plot against the throne and even takes the masculine position of control by orchestrating how the bloody murder will occur.

Like an accused witch, Lady Macbeth uses her tongue, or rhetorical skill, to buttress Macbeth's waning "manly" nature. Before the murder, when Duncan is at dinner in Macbeth's castle, and Macbeth reveals his "milk of human kindness" by disapproving of their murderous scheme, Lady Macbeth works her magic to encourage her husband's zeal for the crown. She derides him:

Was the hope drunk

Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?

And wakes it now, to look so green and pale

At what it did so freely?

.....

Art thou afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valor

As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that

Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,

And live a coward in thine own esteem,

Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would." (1.7.37-45)

In this passage, Lady Macbeth tears down Macbeth's ego by shrewishly sniping at him: he is accused of being "cowardly," sick, and fearful. She obviously wants to enrage him so that he will muster the courage necessary to commit the gruesome deed of killing Duncan. Lady Macbeth's ability to manipulate her husband's nature and to control his passions causes the natural order of the kingdom to be overturned. The wife controls the husband, and a murderer rules the kingdom,

even though Lady Macbeth's eventual suicide shows that such subversion must be righted.

Lady Macbeth uses the Machiavellian skill of rhetorical manipulation to undermine Macbeth's valiant nature. In the same way, she also negates her own feminine sexuality in order to fortify herself and her husband for regicide, which deed must be committed for them to realize their common ambition--the crown of Scotland. Lady Macbeth repudiates the qualities commonly associated with the softer sex the minute she receives word that Duncan is going to be her guest for the night. In her soliloquy, she invokes malicious "spirits" for, it seems, demonic possession. She says, " Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty"

(1.5.40-43). She continues, "Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall" (1.5.47-48). According to Joanna Levin, author of "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," the mere fact that Lady Macbeth makes the request [of calling upon spirits] is enough to have her damned as a witch under the laws of James I" (39). Lady Macbeth is relinquishing not only her feminine sexuality in these lines; she is renouncing her humanity for the empowerment of evil.

Like a witch, Lady Macbeth conjures night and the "murd'ring ministers" for aid in the plot of assassination:

. . . you murd'ring ministers,
 Wherever in your sightless substances
 You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
 To cry "Hold, hold!" (1.5.48-53)

Not only does Lady Macbeth summon dark forces, but she imagines herself as the unsexed woman, or “man,” who will kill Duncan. She even goes as far as to tell Macbeth to “Leave all the rest to [her].” (1.5.73). Two scenes later, Lady Macbeth uses her reverse sexual influence on Macbeth to bolster his courage, thereby encouraging his ferocity to butcher Duncan. She says:

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
 And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
 Have done to this. (1.7.55-59)

She likens Macbeth’s timidity to a murdered infant. Lady Macbeth fantasizes about killing an infant in cold blood even while nursing. This image shows her imagined cruelty, as well as reveals her verbal harassment of her husband. At this point and throughout the next two acts of the play, Lady Macbeth takes on the role of virago to simultaneously emasculate and embolden Macbeth in order to wreak havoc on the government and political organization of Scotland.

The final traits that characterize Lady Macbeth as a witch are independence of mind and spirit. Once again--though Macbeth has thoughts of regicide as he walks along the heath with Banquo--Lady Macbeth is the person who plots the strategies of the murder. Earlier, when Lady Macbeth receives the news of the prophecy of the Weird Sisters, as well as Duncan's impending visit, Lady Macbeth orchestrates the evening's events:

He that's coming
 Must be provided for; and you shall put
 This night's great business into my dispatch,
 Which shall to all our nights and days to come
 Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom. (1.5.66-70)

Lady Macbeth not only plans “the great business,” which will bring the pair “sovereign sway and masterdom,” but she has such extreme confidence in her mental acuity that failure does not even occur to her. At first, this self-assurance convinces Macbeth to enter into the conspiracy as the cowed follower of his wife instead of the traditional leader of his helpmate, as a husband of that era would have been.

The attributes that define Lady Macbeth as a witch, such as independence of mind and spirit, recur in the very same scene. Once again, Lady Macbeth not only emasculates her husband for his cowardice, but she exhibits supreme imperiousness in her confidence to carry out the perfect crime. In order to quell Macbeth's fears, she tells him, “We fail? / But screw your courage to the sticking

place / And we'll not fail" (1.7.60-63). Her "plot" entails tiring Duncan, drugging the king's two servants, and setting them up as the assassins (1.7.64-71). Macbeth himself is startled by her vicious plan but is ultimately convinced that the scheme can be carried out without bringing culpability on his name. Lady Macbeth must use all her verbal acuity on Macbeth after he murders Duncan in cold blood, as Lady Macbeth has planned. Macbeth is so traumatized by the horrific crime that he has committed, that he leaves the room, bloody knives and all, convinced that he has lost all possibility of divine benediction, and worse, that he has not only slaughtered Duncan, but he has also "murdered sleep" (2.2.47). Lady Macbeth, frustrated at his lack of forethought, tells him that he has to take the knives back in to the room and wipe the gore from his hands and the knives onto Duncan's drugged servants. Macbeth recoils in horror at the thought, which triggers another venomous tirade from the mannish Lady Macbeth:

Infirm of purpose!
 Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead
 Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood
 That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
 I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
 For it must seem their guilt. (2.2.56-61)

She leaves the still gibbering Macbeth in the hallway and goes into the outer chamber to complete her plan. Lady Macbeth's malicious scheme and unnatural aptitude for grisly deeds are what signify her as socially "other"; these

characteristics would have had the potential to classify her as witch in seventeenth century England. She continues this subversive behavior throughout Act Three when she becomes host, instead of hostess, at the banquet where Macbeth famously sees the ghost of slaughtered Banquo.

Lady Macbeth has become so successful at manipulating Macbeth that she begins to exert her power over other men. At the banquet, Lady Macbeth prevents the guests from leaving--men who are aghast at Macbeth's odd behavior upon seeing the bloody shade of Banquo--without asking her lord's permission, saying, "Sit, worthy friends. My lord is often thus, / And hath been from his youth. Pray you, keep seat" (3.4.53-54). Once she has settled the guests back into their seats, Lady Macbeth uses bold rhetoric to subdue him into more manly and normal conduct, comportment appropriate for a king of Scotland. Despite her endeavor to calm Macbeth's seething guilty conscious, she is still unable to control Macbeth's strange outbursts of horror. Finally, in desperation, and again, against the decorum of courtly behavior, Lady Macbeth, not the king, says to the guests, "At once, good night. / Stand not upon the order of your going, / But go at once" (3.4.119-121). Lady Macbeth's aggressivity and Macbeth's ranting about the ghost have emasculated and denigrated Macbeth in the eyes of his subjects, reducing him from royal leader to one who must be led. Thus Lady Macbeth, by using the "witchy" qualities of independence, sexuality, and outspokenness, has effectively turned the concept of the Great Chain of Being upside down: a woman

holding power in the domestic sphere and a usurping thane ruling over his friends and equals.

The Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth all have their function in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in undermining the Great Chain of Being; however, the Weird Sisters' control over Macbeth appears to be strongest in the power of suggestion, not of demonic action. It may be noted here that the Weird Sisters, or Sisters of Fate, weren't actually "evil" at all; they were supernatural females who could see into the future. Albert H. Tolman, author of "Notes on Macbeth," writes, "the common opinion [among sixteenth-century chroniclers] was, that these women were either *the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie*, or else some nymphs or feiries" (202). If the sisters are truly goddesses of destiny or even pixies, they are merely predicting Macbeth's future rather than attempting to corrupt him to the darkness of regicide. Perceived in this way, the Weird Sisters may be having their fun with Macbeth. Certainly, they are making sport of him but they are not enticing him to crime. Yet, although the sisters do not force Macbeth to commit malefaction, they plant the seeds of conspiracy in both Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's minds, which ultimately leads to the overthrow of the kingdom's natural order.

Lady Macbeth--manipulator, emasculator, and conniver extraordinaire--proves to be a metaphorical witch and the true master of subversion in Shakespeare's play. She, like the "actual" accused witches in the Jacobean era, (women who were imprisoned, tried and then hanged or burned at the stake

because of their threat to society), is too independent, sexual, and outspoken to survive in the world of *Macbeth*. Because of his status as the playwright for James I, Shakespeare could not afford to "suffer a witch to live" (Church Exodus 22:18), even in a fictional tragedy, so Lady Macbeth's fate was sealed. What is interesting is how Shakespeare chooses to accomplish Lady Macbeth's death. Lady Macbeth leaves the banquet scene a strong, waspish woman, but when she reappears later in the play, she is reduced to a feeble woman who walks in her sleep nightly, forever reliving the terrible, bloody scene of Duncan's murder. Her famous soliloquy demonstrates her psychological torture:

Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One--
two--why then, 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky.--
Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? What need we
fear who knows it, when none can call our power to
account? Yet who would have thought the old man to
have had so much blood in him? (5.1.35-40)

The passage shows that Lady Macbeth has been brought to remorse for the ghastly crime that she bedeviled Macbeth into committing. Unfortunately, her mental torment does not bring about the penance necessary to save Lady Macbeth's life, and she reportedly commits suicide by hurling herself off the castle battlements as Macbeth watches Birnam Wood advance against Dunsinane. Thus comes to an end the rule of the wife over her lord. In the final scene, the

murderer, Macbeth, will cease to rule and the rightful heir, Malcolm, is restored to the throne. The Great Chain of Being is righted once again.

CHAPTER FOUR
CONCLUSION: RESTORING THE
NATURAL ORDER

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is only a tragedy through the perspective of the Macbeth's. From the perspective of the society where the Macbeth's dwelt, the play actually ends on a positive note. The Great Chain of Being is in its proper order, the metaphorical witch, Lady Macbeth, is dead and unable to wreak havoc on her household any longer and the Weird Sisters have vanished, taking their oddities and premonitions with them so that they can no longer make mischief in Scottish society. Malcolm has reclaimed the throne of Scotland. From a purely social standpoint, the natural world is back in order once more.

This play would have appealed to James I in several ways. First, it would have secured the monarch's place in the Great Chain of Being. The king was at the top of the chain, inferior to only the heavenly inhabitants and the stars; everyone else on earth was underneath the king. The fact that Macbeth wasn't finally successful in his attempt of ruling Scotland and overthrowing his enemies would have suggested to Shakespeare's public, and therefore to James's subjects, that deposing a king unnaturally was counterproductive to the strength of the country. Secondly, the play would have strengthened his fanatical position on the evils of witchcraft. For it was, after all, the Weird Sisters and the metaphorical witch, Lady Macbeth, who played the role of social "otherness," proving that no

good could come from a woman who was outspoken, sexually appealing, and independent of mind and spirit. These witch-like and unnatural women had male attributes that subverted the natural order of the cultural community and caused chaos. It was incumbent on every responsible person in English society to single out such women and stop them from colluding with the Devil. Finally, the death of Lady Macbeth, supposedly at her own hand, exhibited that James I was correct in his assessment that women were too weak in their very natures to be able to fight Satan and win. The fact that Lady Macbeth had summoned unholy entities to "fill [her] from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!" (1.5.42-43) proves she wasn't fearful of invoking such demonic spirits to achieve her goal of murder. Even though she appeared frightful in her sheer audacity, Lady Macbeth could not battle against the remorse that was welling up within her, torturing her mind. As James VI writes in *Daemonologie*:

There are three kinds of folks whom God will permit so to be tempted or troubled; the wicked for their horrible sins, to punish them in the like measure; The godly that are sleeping in any great sins or infirmities and weakness in faith, to waken them up the faster by such an uncouth form: and even some of the best, that their patience may bee tried before the world, as Jobs was. (King James 25)

Since Lady Macbeth had been "tempted" and had fallen dreadfully far from the mark of a good Christian wife, God himself perhaps was chastening her

through her nightly visitations and inability to sleep. In the end, the "witch" could not live with her distress and anguish, and she apparently threw herself off the walls of Dunsinane. In a final act of defiance, Lady Macbeth steps outside of the natural order by committing suicide, and, as known from *Hamlet*, the "Everlasting" has "fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.131-32). Furthermore, the accession of Malcolm attests to the idea that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, who himself sought the advice of witches, were unable to realize their ambitions through diabolic circumstances.

For James I, it would be another ten years after *Macbeth* was first performed before he began to recant his belief in witches, but the actual witch hunting, or persecution, in Europe would continue well into the seventeenth and even early eighteenth centuries, which maintained the social chain of being for many years. Nonetheless, Shakespeare's portrayal of Jacobean witches still continues to impact how we see women's relationship to authority in society.

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