

The Reception of the Weird Sisters in Welle's Macbeth and Kurosawa's Throne of Blood

Buket Akgün, Istanbul University, Turkey

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Abstract

This paper discusses the reception of the Weird Sisters of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) in Orson Welles's *Macbeth* (1948) and Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) as supernatural beings with complete control over the destiny of mankind and over nature through a feminist, psychoanalytic, and semiotic reading of the play and the films. Unlike Shakespeare's witches, Welles's witches and Kurosawa's forest spirit do not acquire their knowledge and powers from Hecate or any masters. Since the word "weird" is derived from the Old English "wyrð" meaning "fate," it associates Shakespeare's and Welles's witches, who are referred to as the Weird Sisters, with the Fates in classical mythology and signifies their control over the fates of other characters. Welles's witches shape Macbeth's destiny by making his effigy, a clay doll, which they fashion out of the ingredients they put into their boiling cauldron at the opening scene of the film. In Kurosawa's film the forest spirit's singing and spinning a thread of life in the midst of the forest not only draws on the etymology of the word "weird," but also reminds us of mythological witches Kybele and Circe. Welles's witches and Kurosawa's forest spirit dominate both film adaptations through the agency of their extensions and substitutes as well—specific natural elements, such as the thunder, lightning, rain, fog, forest, and birds. Among other cinematic techniques, Welles's high-angle shots and Kurosawa's jump-cuts portray the dominion of the witches and the forest spirit over Macbeth and Washizu and over time and space.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood*, witches, the forest spirit, reception studies, feminist theory

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This paper focuses on the reception of the three witches of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) in Orson Welles's *Macbeth* (1948) and in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957). While maintaining the fluidity of the witches, Welles and Kurosawa render them as all-knowing and all-powerful beings without any mistress Hecate, masters, or familiars. Welles's three witches and Kurosawa's forest spirit have complete control not only over the destiny of Macbeth and Washizu, but also over the destiny of the entire kingdom, over life and death, and over nature in general.

The fluidity of Shakespeare's and Welles's witches and Kurosawa's forest spirit echo the feminist theorists' definition of the female body as "[i]ndefinite, unfinished/infinite," (Irigaray, 1991, p. 55), as "a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow . . . a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order" (Grosz, 1994, p. 203). This very incompleteness, this "infinite and mobile complexity" (Cixous, 1976, p. 885) of their form allows them constantly to defy any given definition and to change into something else. The witches are commonly described as old, pale, deformed, wrinkled women with crooked fingers, a crooked nose, a hunchback, and with an expression of melancholy (James I, 2002, Chapter 3). Banquo in Shakespeare's play mentions the choppy fingers, skinny lips, and beards of the witches along with the rags they wear. He cannot make quite sure whether they are mortal women or supernatural beings or whether they are female or male. Once again, pointing out to their fluidity, the vanishing of the witches is described by comparing them to the earth's bubbles, air, wind, and breath. Accordingly, Welles's witches are three old women with disheveled, long, white hair, wrinkled hands, crooked fingers and fingernails, wearing wide-sleeved, long, and ragged dresses. Their faces are barely, if ever, seen because they disappear and reappear in the constantly thickening and dispersing fog, which gives the impression that they hover through the fog and filthy air like Shakespeare's witches do at the end of the opening scene of the play. After they meet with Macbeth for the first time, they disappear altogether by running into a thick cloud of mist. They carry wooden forked staffs to represent their doublespeak and duality. They screech out their hails to Macbeth and hiss at the Celtic crosses. These animal noises are reminiscent of and actually replace the familiars (Graymalkin the cat and Harpier, possibly an owl) and the magic ingredients (the snake's fillet and the adder's fork) of Shakespeare's witches which are absent in Welles's film.

In Kurosawa's film an androgynous forest spirit—recalling the androgynous seers in Japanese legends as well as the old women and demons in Noh plays (Savas, 2012, p. 23; Somers-Hall, 2013, p. 79)—replaces the bearded witches of Shakespeare. Similar to Shakespeare's and Welles's witches, the forest spirit is old and wrinkled with disheveled, long, and white hair. When first seen, she is singing a sad song about the mortal fate and greed of mankind while spinning a thread at her spinning wheel. Her light-coloured hair, skin, and clothing, and the light-framed makeshift cage inside which she sits, surrounded by a fog, are juxtaposed with the dark forest and the two dark-clad, darker-skinned samurai captains, Washizu (Macbeth) and Miki (Banquo), riding dark horses. The framing of the forest spirit hints that she does not belong to this world. Correspondingly, Miki questions whether she is mortal or an evil spirit. Like her gender, her facial expression and mood are fluid as well. Like Shakespeare's and Welles's vanishing witches, after delivering her prophecies, she is spirited away. She slowly stands up with her back turned towards the audience. A strong wind takes

away first her coat and then the spirit herself, leaving behind a trail of fog hovering in the air. Shortly after, her cage vanishes, too. It is noteworthy that the kanji (氣) for the words "spirit," "mind," and "air" is the same, which instantly enables the Japanese-speaking audience to associate the forest spirit with the air and the wind and to assume that she can penetrate the minds of Washizu and Miki. Before Washizu rides to the forest to see the forest spirit again, strong winds and lightning fill inside his castle like a summons from her. This time she transforms into three samurai warriors as she delivers her premonitions among the skeleton mounds, in the thickening and dispersing fog, simultaneous with the temporarily blinding lightning flashes. Her white hair, light-coloured attire and the white framing are yet again juxtaposed with the dark forest and the dark clad Washizu to underline their antagonism.

The ambiguity, fluidity, and deviancy seen in the physical descriptions of the witch figures in the play and in both film adaptations seep into their language, their cauldron and the ingredients they use for their charms. In Shakespeare's play and Welles's film *Macbeth* mimics the reversed language and doublespeak of the witches. The very first line of *Macbeth* in the play ("So foul and fair a day I have not seen.") has echoes of one of the parting lines of the witches at the end of Act I Scene I ("Fair is foul, and foul is fair") (1.3.38, 1.1.11). Moreover, *Macbeth* and Lady *Macbeth* use an invisible language when they talk about the murder of Duncan. Regardless, both *Macbeth* and Washizu fail at interpreting the language of the witches and the forest spirit and at seeing the warnings cloaked under false assurances. Irigaray asserts that since the language of women "sets off in all directions," men cannot perceive its meaning (Irigaray, 1985, p. 29). Accordingly, the word "witch" is etymologically derived from the Old English word "*wican*," which is in turn derived from the Indo-European root "*weik*." "*Wican*" and "*weik*" mean respectively "to bend" and "bending." Among the derivatives of the word "*weik*" are "guile" and "prediction." The etymological origin and the derivatives of the word "witch" point out to the bent form and the beguiling character of the witch figures. Additionally, Heinrich Kramer and Jacobus Sprenger claim that women are deviant, twisted, and cunning by nature because, in the Bible, Eve was created out of the twisted rib bone of Adam and because the word "*femina*," meaning woman in Latin, is made up of "*fe*" (*fidem*), meaning "faith" in Latin, and "*minus*," meaning "less" (Mackay, 2009, p. 165).

The three witches are also referred to as the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's play and in Welles's film. The word "weird" is derived from the Anglo Saxon word "*wyrd*" meaning "fate" and thus connects the witches to the Fates in classical mythology. It hints at the power of the witches over the fate, over the lives and deaths of both mortals and immortals. The three witches in the play, however, are not all-powerful or all-knowing. Neither is *Macbeth* governed by their words or charms. He calls them "imperfect speakers" (1.3.70) and "juggling fiends" (5.8.19), but he affirms that their "supernatural soliciting" can be neither good nor bad (1.3.130-131) and never blames them for the crimes he has committed. Moreover, in the play, the witches are deliberately not to be seen again after the cauldron scene, Act 4 Scene 1, which means that *Macbeth* acts on his own.

Shakespeare's witches gain their wisdom and powers of prophesying, shapeshifting into animals, hovering through air, controlling the weather, and depriving their victims of sleep from Hecate and from the spirits whom they refer to as their masters. Most importantly, their powers are limited, in that they can steal the sailor's semen,

make him sterile, and make him suffer tempests, but they cannot make his ship disappear. It could even be suggested that the witches in the tragedy merely play the role of messengers to Macbeth. Hecate, however, is quite angry at them for choosing the "wayward son,/[s]piteful, and wrathful" Macbeth "who . . . [l]oves for his own ends" to deliver their prophecies (3.5.11-13). In Shakespeare's play and Welles's film Macbeth links Hecate to the moon, the night, and witchcraft because, in classical mythology, Hecate is the queen of the three realms, night, spirits and witchcraft. She has control over life, death, rebirth, and magic. Being an intermediary between the world of the spirits and the world of the living, she guards the boundary between life and death. She can summon spirits. (Illes, 2005, pp. 386-88). Hecate is a tripartite goddess portrayed in art with three bodies—as the maiden, the mother and the witch—each facing different directions. Similarly, in Shakespeare's play and in Welles's and Kurosawa's films, the witches and the forest spirit hail Macbeth thrice, using his past (the Thane of Glamis), present (the Thane of Cawdor), and future (the King) titles. In the play the three apparitions show and tell him about the past (the birth of Macduff), the present or near future (the immediate threat posed by Macduff and Malcom's war tactics), and the (distant) future (Banquo's children becoming kings). Furthermore, the witches' enchantments are repeated three times or multiples of three in both the play and Welles's film. Hecate's symbols of fertility, medicine, and wisdom, such as the toad, the snake and the cauldron, can also be traced in the play among the familiars, ingredients, and possessions of Shakespeare's and Welles's witches. In Kurosawa's film, the crescent moons attached to the helmets of Lord Tsuzuki (King Duncan) and Captain Washizu, the crescent moon seen in the sky the night Washizu murders his lord, and the three cries of the ominous black bird before the murder represent Hecate, the tripartite moon goddess.

The cauldron is a vessel used to turn something natural into something cultural. A housewife uses the cauldron to cook for her family. A wise woman, a herbalist-healer, a midwife, or a witch uses it to make potions and medicine. Due to its shape, which looks like a pregnant woman's belly, and due to its functions such as feeding and healing, the cauldron is resembled to the womb. It is a symbol of transformation, associated with death and the tomb as well as life, birth, rebirth, nourishment, and the womb (Barstow 1995; Neumann, 1991, p. 39-54; Grimassi, 2008, pp. 25-26; Purkiss, 2003, p. 212-213, Walker, 1985, p. 122). In Shakespeare's play the witches put inside their cauldron, among other ingredients, a venomous toad, poisoned entrails, a snake's fillet, an adder's fork, a blind worm's sting, limbs of animal and human corpses, such as the finger of a baby strangled at birth, and a witches' mummy, that is death itself. Next, the apparitions, the masters of the witches, assuming the guise of a head and two babies, emerge out of the same cauldron and then descend back into it after delivering their premonitions. Besides, the cauldron sinks down and is buried at the end of this scene, right before the witches vanish once again, but, as mentioned above, this time not to reappear. As for the apparitions, the head with a helmet symbolizes the series of murders committed, directly or indirectly, by Macbeth as well as the violence of the warrior society in which he lives. The baby covered in blood symbolizes Macduff's unnatural birth. The baby wearing a crown and holding a twig shows the truth of the prophecy regarding Banquo's children becoming kings and Birnam Wood's marching to Dunsinane Hill (Akgün, 2014, p. 318). In Welles's film, the cauldron scene is moved to the opening of the film and the ingredients are reduced to animal blood and human grease and limbs. As mentioned above, the wooden forked staffs of Welles's witches seem to have replaced the adder's fork and the

worm's sting to punctuate their duality. Eventually, Welles's witches plunge their hands into the boiling cauldron and bring out a clay doll of Macbeth. In a manner of speaking, the witches' cauldron devours death and gives birth. The potion that the witches concoct in their cauldron substitutes the umbilical water of the womb.

In Kurosawa's film the spinning wheel of the forest spirit and the mounds of human bones in the forest replace the cauldron of the witches while the Spider's Web Forest replaces the blasted heath, where Shakespeare's and Welles's witches dwell, as well as the Birnam Wood. The mounds of human bones, right behind the cage of the forest spirit, reflect the period of civil wars in Japan, known as *Sengoku jidai*, the warring states period, which started in 1467 and lasted until the late sixteenth or the early seventeenth century. Replacing the wilderness where nothing grows with a forest, the heart of nature, draws a sharp contrast with Shakespeare's play. However, making the forest as the abode of the spirit, who substitutes the three witches of the play, is actually reminiscent of the witch lore. Portraying the forest spirit, singing and spinning a thread in the depths of a forest, the screenwriters Oguni, Hashimoto, Kikushima, and Kurosawa interconnect her with mythological witches Kybele and Circe. Kybele has founded witchcraft in the woods. Circe, a necromancer, lives in a stone mansion in the midst of an island covered with a thick forest. Like Hecate, she knows about the world of the spirits; she instructs Odysseus on how to get to and what to do in the Underworld. Like the forest spirit, she is singing and weaving at her shuttle when she is first introduced in Homer's *The Odyssey*.

Forests are dangerous and uncanny places that are not under the control of mankind, not bound by laws, but places where the powerful ones survive and where the spirits reign (Illes, 2005, pp. 657-59). The original title of the film 「蜘蛛巣城」 (*Kumonosu-jō*) translates as the Spider's Web Castle. Lord Tsuzuki's castle is made out of the trees of the Spider's Web Forest. Hence the name the Spider's Web Castle. Also, the castle is surrounded by the forest as a means of protection against the enemies who would get lost in the maze-like forest. The forest would catch them up like flies entangled in a spider's web. One could also argue that the castle, hence the kingdom, is entrapped within the forest and, thus, governed by the forest spirit. Furthermore, trees served to build the strongest castles and shrines in Japan. They are considered to be divine and respected as gods giving life and energy. For this reason, the Spider's Web Forest also brings to mind the growth and fertility pattern in Shakespeare's play (Rosenberg, 1978, p. 385). All the grain and seed analogies in the play, such as Duncan's planting Banquo to make him grow to the fullest and Banquo's being "the root and father of many kings" (3.1.5-6), are juxtaposed with Macbeth's "fruitless crown" and "barren sceptre" (3.1.60-61). Similarly, the forest spirit tells Miki that his fortune turns slower, but will last longer than Washizu's and that his son will eventually reign in the Spider Web's Castle. In the meantime, she starts to turn her spinning wheel slower, which discloses that she has indeed been spinning the two captains' threads of life.

To return to Welles, his film opens and closes with the witches; he changes the order of the witches' scenes and lines. The title of the film is seen as soon as the three witches finish their opening lines by saying the name of Macbeth. Welles gives the final words to the witches, too: "Peace!—the charm's wound up." The charm they wind to avenge the sailor for his wife's misdoing in the first act of the play turns into a charm they have wound to bring the downfall of Macbeth in Welles's film. Furthermore, Welles gives the witches ultimate control over Macbeth by having them

make a clay doll of Macbeth, which they use as an effigy. They put a necklace and a crown on the effigy as they hail Macbeth with his three titles, heralding that he will be the Thane of Cawdor and the King of Scotland. Just as Atropos, one of the three Fates, cuts the thread of life when she decides when and how one must die, so do the witches cut off the doll's head when Macduff beheads Macbeth at the end of the film. The witches seem to have control over the deeds of Macbeth as well as his destiny. The thick fog, the owl, the barren tree, the forked tree alongside Macbeth's V-shaped throne, banner, and his army's V-shaped shields can be interpreted as the extensions of and substitutes for the witches, interwoven as a leitmotif in the film. They can be traced in the background when Macbeth contemplates or commits a series of murders or when his crimes are mentioned. Therefore, the audience wonders if it is indeed the witches who make Macbeth commit regicide—kill King Duncan and his guards—and have Banquo and Macduff's family killed.

By plunging their hands into the boiling cauldron in the opening scene, Welles's witches metaphorically penetrate Macbeth's unconscious. Moreover, Welles cuts out the lines of the witches and replaces them to make the witches responsible for Macbeth's sleep deprivation. It should be noted that the witches also haunt Banquo's dreams both in the play and in Welles's film. In the play the first witch plans to avenge herself on a woman who refused to give her chestnuts by sending her sailor husband a tempest and by depriving him of sleep. In Welles's film that part is cut out except for some of the lines of the first witch which suggest that the sailor will not be able to sleep. Welles uses these lines as a voice-over in the scene where Macbeth, after murdering Duncan, claims that he hears voices which say that he has murdered sleep and therefore shall sleep no more. Again, in both Shakespeare's play and Welles's film Macbeth asserts that his mind is full of scorpions. In other words, his mind is full of the contents the cauldron, what the witches put in it and what came out of it, that is poison, death, and the premonitions.

In Welles's film the witches literally penetrate Macbeth's physical world, his castle and his kingdom, too. Macbeth does not seek the witches out in the heath. He conjures them at his castle and they deliver their warnings as a voice-over. That the witches are not shown in this scene renders Macbeth as the gazer. Being the object of the gaze, he is subordinated and threatened by the witches whom he cannot see. He acknowledges their powers by listing their most terrible deeds such as causing tempests and destroying nature, faith, kingdoms, and civilizations. The high-angle shots further emphasize that Macbeth is merely a puppet at the hands of the witches: a tiny figure in the dark night, barely standing still against the strong wind and thunder, which replace the witches, holding his hands in front of him like a helpless little child who has been naughty, and looking up while addressing the witches who are not corporeally there. Macbeth can also be seen mimicking the hand gestures of the witches. What's more, when Macbeth and Banquo see the witches for the first time, the witches are standing at the top of a rock, with the clay doll of Macbeth resting at their feet. The witches look down at Macbeth and Banquo whereas the two captains, in return, have to look up at the witches. This scene denotes the supremacy of the witches over mankind. Furthermore, there are no visual warnings to accompany and to underline the ambiguity of what the apparitions tell Macbeth in Welles's film. However, the first witch repeats her double warning against Macduff as soon as Macbeth assures himself that, according to these prophecies, he does not need to fear Macduff. Welles inserts the first witch's second double warning within Macbeth's

lines and, thereby, has her make Macbeth change his mind about letting Macduff live. Towards the finale of the film, as if to mock Macbeth and to rejoice over the unraveling of their charm, the witches are heard once again as a voice-over, echoing Macduff's words "untimely ripp'd" as he reveals the truth about his birth before he beheads Macbeth. The shot of Macbeth behind a barred window as the English army marches towards Dunsinane points to his being confined and entrapped by the witches as well.

Likewise, in *Throne of Blood*, the jump-cut close-ups and framings of Washizu and the slow motion march of the forest give the impression that the forest spirit governs time and space. Washizu and Miki are entrapped by the forest spirit the moment they enter the Spider's Web Forest at the beginning of the film. They get lost and draw circles in the forest, claiming that an evil spirit is blocking their way. This theme of entrapment is further emphasized with the framing and caging of the two samurai captains by the vertical and horizontal tree branches when they listen to the song of the forest spirit and the encircling of Washizu by the forest spirit when he goes to see her for a second time. Instead of going around a cauldron like Shakespeare's witches do, the forest spirit draws an invisible circle around Washizu by vanishing and reappearing in the guise of three different spirits. The three spirits, clad in warrior attire, deliver three premonitions similar to the ones told by the apparitions in the play. The forest spirit, reminiscent of a spider, spins a web around and entraps Washizu, the mere prey of the spider, as suggested by his clans symbol, the millipede (Somers-Hall, 2013, p. 80) by drawing a circle around him with the spirits she invokes or rather transforms into. As opposed to Shakespeare's and Welles's witches, Kurosawa's spirit openly mocks Washizu with her eerie laughter (Jin, 2004).

In the stage directions of Shakespeare's play the entrance of the witches is accompanied with thunder. Along with the thunder, lightning, rain, foggy air, tempest, blood or references to blood, haunting dreams, sleep deprivations, and ominous birds, such as the raven and the owl, can also be traced as the extensions of the witches in the play. Similarly, the fog, strong wind, thunder, lightning, rain, ominous birds, and even the arrows—made out of trees and bird feathers—shot at Washizu by his own army, are the extensions of the forest spirit, in that they either accompany her or substitute for her in Kurosawa's film. A black bird cries three times the night Washizu murders his lord, heralding the murder. First, as Washizu's men prepare the room of the former master of the castle, a traitor who killed himself in that room. Second, after Washizu's wife Asaji tells him about her plan to murder the lord. Third, after Asaji hands Washizu a spear with which to kill the lord. She suggests that the birds are telling Washizu to commit regicide as well. A flock of black birds infests Washizu's castle towards the end of the film. Once again, Washizu fails at seeing the warning; he claims that it is a good omen which means the enemy is trapped. The birds are probably left homeless, for Inui's (King of England) armies led by Noriyasu (Macduff) have been cutting down the trees of the Spider Web's Forest to use them as camouflage in order not to be seen from the castle. So, the ominous birds are actually harbingers of Washizu's imminent death, like the raven, in Shakespeare's play, heard upon Duncan's entering Macbeth's castle, the owl screeching when Macbeth murders Duncan, and Harpier, the third witch's familiar, which is possibly an owl. In other words, the forest spirit's premonitions penetrates the castle of Washizu in the form of lightning, strong winds, birds, and arrows.

Finally, Welles's high-angle shots of the surface of the witches' bubbling cauldron, which fills up the entire screen, and Kurosawa's shots of the forest spirit's spinning wheel bring the image of movie reels to the minds of the audience in a rather meta-textual manner (Forsyth, 2007, p. 294). Just as the lines and the presence of the three witches dominate the entire play, including the scenes in which they are not present, so the three witches and the forest spirit overshadow both films in their entirety.



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Contact email: akgun@istanbul.edu.tr



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