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# Cracking the Coven: Shakespeare, the Supernatural, and the Female Power Base

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CRACKING THE COVEN:  
SHAKESPEARE, THE SUPERNATURAL, AND THE FEMALE POWER BASE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Doll (Heather) E. Piccotto

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CRACKING THE COVEN:  
SHAKESPEARE, THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE FEMALE POWER BASE

by

Doll (Heather) E. Piccotto

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE  
LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

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## ABSTRACT

### CRACKING THE COVEN:

### SHAKESPEARE, THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE FEMALE POWER BASE

By Doll (Heather) E. Piccotto

There has been extensive writing and research into the fairy magic and witchcraft practices of the Early Modern Period in the 400-plus years between when Shakespeare's plays were performed and now—even including a tome on demonology by King James I himself. However, as witchcraft and fairy magic are distinctively female realms, with women making up 90% of accused witches and fairy magic being mainly related to domestic duties, one cannot accurately discuss these phenomena in the plays without addressing how they affect the female characters. This project examines the role of the supernatural in three of Shakespeare's plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter's Tale*, and how powerful groups of women are affected. By examining how Shakespeare uses these female-based supernatural powers in his plays, one can gain a greater understanding of how the women fit into the drama and, to a larger extent, how they were expected to fit into society. From the examination of the supernatural in these three plays, it can be concluded that Shakespeare uses fairy magic as a means to support patriarchy and keep women in their proper place within the realm of society. Witchcraft, by contrast, is a female-based power which undermines established

patriarchal norms and must be destroyed to keep women from becoming too powerful.

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## INTRODUCTION

“And know you this by the way, that heretofore Robin Goodfellow, and Hobgoblin were as terrible, and also as credible to the people, as hags and witches be now.”

--Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft*

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

--Exodus 22:18

“Yeah, I know, I know...but aren't they all witches on the inside?”

--Bugs Bunny, *Hare-um Scare-um*

Any patriarchal-based system is reliant upon the production of male children to perpetuate the system. This depends upon the subjugation of women and their willing acceptance of their pre-ordained social roles as wives and mothers. What happens, then, when a group of governing men are suddenly presented with a group of women who are unwilling to be subjugated? The situation must have proved daunting and frightening for many Elizabethan husbands and fathers, who, already dealing with the reality of being subordinate to a female monarch, certainly expected to be the rulers in their own homes and communities. *An Homily on the State of Matrimony* clearly states the God-ordained necessity for female subordination, and was recited to every couple on their marriage day:

Now as concerning the wife's duty. What shall become her? Shall she abuse the gentleness and humanity of her husband and at her pleasure turn all things upside down? No surely, for that is far repugnant against God's commandment. For thus doth St. Peter preach to them: "You wives, be you in subjection to obey your own husband." To obey is another thing than to control or command, which yet they may do their children and to their family. But as for their husbands, them must they obey and cease from commanding and perform subjection. (qtd. In McDonald 286)

If the woman's duty, as stated in the *Homily*, is ordained by God in the Bible, any woman refusing to conform to these expectations was going against the will of God.

Early modern men and women had already begun to realize the threat of thinking women in large groups. Works like *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* written by Ben Jonson in 1609, condemned the idea of educating women in the satirical presentation of the collegiate ladies—useless by male standards and leading to gossiping, licentious old women. On a different note, *Bell in Campo* by Margaret Cavendish, written in 1662, stages a story in which Lady Victoria and her army of female "Heroicesses" outmaneuvers and outperforms their male military counterparts, wins the war for their people and along with it, gains rewards from the king, admiration from the country, and for a moment, superiority for women.<sup>1</sup>

Ruling men began to find it necessary to eliminate the threat of these emergent female power bases in order to retain their own power. For the purpose of this paper, 'female power base' is defined as any group of women whose strong bonds with each other provide support for behavior that undermines patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that while Ben Jonson successfully produced *Epicoene* for public consumption in England, in the classical misogynist style of Ancient Greece, at the time *Bell In Campo* was written, the public theaters had been closed. As a result, Cavendish's female characters who reject their roles as patriarchal economies to become members of a kind of feminine utopia would only have been witnessed by close friends who would have heard it performed as a closet drama.

structures. These groups were considered truly threatening, for if men were not able to control their women through natural means, then the explainable alternative must be that the women were gaining power by supernatural means. This belief brought about the onset of the early modern witch trials. It is interesting to note that, etymologically, the word “witch” can be traced to the word “wise”. In Jonson’s *Epicoene*, the “wise” collegiate women use their knowledge solely for breaking gender norms and gossiping. They become licentious women, as Madame Haughty proudly exclaims “Why should women deny favours to men” (*Epicoene* 4.2.21)? They are older women, past their reproductive years, flaunting their sexuality and actively recruiting new wives to join their college. They are proud to deviate from the behavior that is expected of them by their society, and as such, in Jonson’s eyes, are worthy of ridicule.

Witches, by the same token, refused to play the roles expected of them by their societies. They were, just like the collegiate women in *Epicoene*, older women, usually past their reproductive years, who no longer had any use in a patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup> These wise women were known for helping younger women with birth control or potions to induce abortion. They were often midwives, helping young mothers in the birthing room, the mysteries of which men were not allowed to see. As Kirby Farrell observes, “Most of the magic that passed from mother to daughter or was sought from wise women...concerned fertility” (161). The fear was that these

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say, however that the Early Modern state of patriarchy was a fixed idea. Anthony Fletcher in his work *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800*, argues that rather than being fixed and immovable, Early modern patriarchy was a system in which the structures of domination were adaptable. Women were often supporters of patriarchy, rather than constantly oppressed resistors.

older women, no longer able to produce children, would destroy patriarchal lines out of spite: “Trapped in an aging, doomed body, envious of fertility and the substantiation of self that sexual love and childbearing promises, a would-be witch supposedly turned to demonic powers to counter despair and act out her spite” (Farrell 161). They were women who deviated from the behavior expected of women, and their assistance to younger, fertile women was feared to be a threat to the male-dominated order. As a result, in literature and in reality, wise women had to be overcome—robbed of their power. However, with the beginning of the witch trials, the end result for the women involved was often fatal. Knowledge is power, and not to be squandered on those whom society has ordained to be unworthy.

Most early modern tragedies ended with death and more significantly, with the death of family lines and no hope of offspring to continue the male dynasty. Early modern comedies, by contrast, had happy endings occurring as a result of one or more marriages/marriage nights where properly submissive (and usually silent) brides accept the mantle of wife and mother.<sup>3</sup> In order to achieve the expected happy ending of a comedy, the bride-to-be had to have no remaining ties with her family or friends—she had to be entirely her husband’s possession. Strong ties to other women would be especially discouraged, so to be ‘ready’ for marriage, any female to female bonds had to be broken. If not, the ending was not truly ‘happy’. Take, for instance, William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where after a full night of

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<sup>3</sup> This was generally the case, but exceptions can be found in plays such as Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, which is generally considered a comedy, but the final marriages are delayed for a year by the death of the King of France. Berowne bemoans this delay with his lines “Our wooing doth not end like an old play. /Jack hath not Jill. These ladies’ courtesy/Might well have made our sport a comedy” (*LLL* 5.2. 884-6)

running through the forest chasing each other, the four lovers, hopelessly confused by the fairies and drugged with “love-in-idleness,” collapse in an exhausted heap and fall into a deep sleep. Puck/Robin Goodfellow appears and with the antidote puts everything right, saying “Jacke shall have Jill, nought shall goe ill, /the man shall have his Mare againe, and all shall bee well” (3.1.723-5). Upon waking, the women discover that they are indeed coupled with the men they desire, but their gain is at the loss of their voices—they are completely silent for the rest of the play. These two vociferous women, who were best friends in the beginning of the play, now have nothing to say to each other. They are ready to be properly silent wives.

In many cases, the end result of Shakespeare’s plays, happy or not, had to be brought about by supernatural means, with fairy magic or witchcraft bringing about the desired results. Shakespeare employs both of these methods in his plays, often adapting early modern popular beliefs to suit his own purposes. This can be observed in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Macbeth* and the tragic-comedy of *The Winter’s Tale*. In addition to bringing the storylines to an end, Shakespeare’s supernatural also plays a significant role in the outcome of the female power bases. In a comedy, in order to be ready for marriage, women must be separated from any influence that will detract from their duty to their husbands. They must be ready to become properly silent and obedient wives as patriarchal fathers and husbands would expect them to be. This requires that any strong female to female relationships be broken up to keep the women from having a support group for any possible aberrant behavior. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare adjusts popular fairy lore and introduces his

creation of Puck—a spirit which he uses to support patriarchal norms by separating the women through a series of ‘mistakes’. The outcome of these errors turns the women against each other, breaks up their lifelong attachment and leaves them voiceless and unreconciled with each other at the end of Act V. They are however, happily and silently married to the man they desire. The tragedy of *Macbeth* occurs because unlike *Dream*, where the women are separated from each other, Macbeth allows the Weird Sisters to keep their coven together and gives them power by giving credence to their prophecies. Instead of producing children naturally with his wife to produce heirs and continue his dynasty, Macbeth embraces the witches, who are sterile women of no reproductive value to society and unable to help Macbeth naturally perpetuate his family. As a result, he acts unnaturally, killing anyone who challenges his power, but unable to keep it and achieve posterity through the production of heirs. The play ends in tragedy, with witchcraft undermining the patriarchal structures and leaving Macbeth with no hope of a future family line.

*The Winter's Tale* is unusual in that it is the men themselves who destroy the patriarchal structures of society, and the women, all of whom are accused of being witches, use their supernatural means to re-establish the very structures that the men destroy. Perdita, Hermione and especially Paulina are all accused of witchcraft, but instead of using their power to destroy prevailing patriarchal norms, they use it to reconstruct them. However, even though they use their power to benefit men, as a group they are still too powerful to exist in a patriarchy and must be subsumed into their socially determined roles as deferent wives and mothers. This paper will

examine the role of the supernatural in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter's Tale*, specifically emphasizing how fairy magic and witchcraft support or undermine the play's patriarchal structures through the destruction or maintenance of female power bases.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Women and Early Modern Fairy Lore: Allies or Just Lies?

Although early modern drama as a whole tended to support patriarchy, fairy lore, which was a popular topic in drama and literature, was almost exclusively based in the female world. Regina Buccola, in her book *Fairies, Fractious Women and the Old Faith*, examines the relationship between aberrant female behavior and fairy lore, concluding that women created fairy figures as a way to escape the roles expected of them by patriarchal society. She examines this phenomenon both in early modern drama, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in witch trial depositions as well, where women frequently used the fairy world as an alternative explanation for behavior that may have otherwise been attributed to witchcraft. She argues that “Transgressive conduct—particularly with respect to women—is repeatedly sanctioned when fairies are either directly staged or invoked” (Buccola 29).

In the female realm of the household, fairies were considered domestic creatures that could either help or hinder women depending on their mood and the women’s behavior. When lower-class servants were clean, kind and giving, perhaps leaving a bowl of cream and white bread out for their resident brownie before bed, they might discover upon waking that extra needed help with chores had been performed or a coin left in their shoe as reward for good work done. Marjorie Swann observed in “The Politics of Fairylore,” that “[i]n Foucauldian terms, this body of folklore served to regulate personal behavior in an era prior to systematic surveillance: the fairies punished delinquent householders, rewarded cleanliness and



ensured attentive care for new infants” (452)—the early modern nanny-cam. Fairy help of this sort was not only remarkable because of the mystical alliance with the lowest social class possible—female domestic servants-- but because of the gender inversion of the fairies which would have been unheard of in the outside world. “Male fairies just might, in fact, do what mortal *women* do ... it is not difficult to imagine why domestic drudgery is assigned more co-equally across genders in fairyland than in the mortal realm” (Buccola 41). Women needed male help in the household, so they created their own. On a humorous side note, just as modern women tend to jokingly imagine their homes being cleaned by a gorgeous, virile, shirtless hunk, this “porn for housewives” had its own place in early modern households, as Robin Goodfellow, who will be discussed in more detail later, was often depicted as a helpful household spirits with a broom and a huge phallus, obviously ready to help a housewife with whatever she needed. By creating the stories surrounding these creatures, women were able, not only to give themselves an escape from endless drudgery and an excuse for a lapse in work quality (the fairies could be blamed for messing a room that had previously been clean), but also give themselves power in a world that granted them none:

What better way for a country servant, especially an old woman servant, to gain psychological power over her master’s children than to impress them with the powers of magical forces within the household, known to her in a way unavailable to the more educated members of the household?” (Swann 282)

On a darker note fairies also provided lower-class women with an escape from persecution if they behaved in a way that society found aberrant. These are the tales

that were often told at witch-trials or to religious and community leaders. The sexual nature and unpredictability of the members of the fairy kingdom often provided a believable alibi for wives, mothers and daughters who weren't following their pre-ordained roles. A woman with an illicit lover could disappear for a weekend or even a fortnight, and when asked where she had been, claim that she had been taken by the fairies. In fact, the term "going with the fairies" (Lamb 295) later became a euphemism for such a forbidden rendezvous. Being taken by the fairies could also explain away a more serious and hurtful event. For a woman like Mary Charles, the fairies were a way to avoid the cruelty and persecution that society would normally have afforded her:

One Mary Charles, for example, who strayed while picking berries, was found the next day 'only in her bloomers', her ribs broken, and terrified, claiming "the fairies had beckoned to her" (Navarez 346). In a period where women were liable to be blamed for their own rapes while rapists were punished lightly if at all, Mary Charles' invocation of fairies shielded her from further violence by her attacker and protected her reputation by denying that the act had ever occurred. (Lamb 288)

Although preserving her reputation, Mary Charles' invocation of the fairies also highlights the origins of a darker, more unpredictable side of the fairy world—creatures who have no qualms about kidnapping and forcing sex upon hapless mortals. It was commonly believed that fairies would kidnap men or women as midwives, wives, husbands, and lovers in order to perpetuate their race, and if they could not do it by stealing away adults, they would commonly resort to infant-napping, leaving a changeling—a fairy brat, in its place. Just as rape was generally the fault of the victim rather than the attacker during this period, infant deaths, deformities or just plain unruliness in children was blamed on the mother, usually in

the form of God punishing them for involvement in the dark arts (Buccola 51). In response to a witchcraft accusation, which more than likely would mean torture or death, a woman could claim that the child was ‘elf-marked’ or perhaps not even hers: “Rather than blame the mother of an infant who died prematurely or who suffered from some congenital ailment or deformity, changeling belief cast the mother as the victim of either her supernaturally abhorrent infant or the malicious spirits who had cursed or switched it” (Buccola 51). Persecution is almost magically transformed into pity and sympathy in these fairy stories.

Diane Purkiss examines the dark history of fairy stories as they are created out of necessity by women. For women like Mary Charles, accusing an attacker of rape would mean that she was no longer a virgin and worthless as far as a good marriage match was concerned. Her invocation of the fairies allowed her the possibility of a future. In essence, it erased the rape completely—she became the victim of a supernatural event over which she had no control rather than bearing the disgrace and blame of a rape by a human man. Diane Purkiss claims that for women in the early modern era, “A fairy story is a story about reaching rock bottom—in that sense, a story about dying—but it is also a story about finding a way out, if only in a story” (85). These stories became so prevalent in early modern witch trial transcripts that in the later trials, magistrates began to associate fairy stories with witchcraft, likening fairies to witches’ familiars. The sheer number of fairy stories arising in the early modern era indicates not only that the incidents of crime against women must have been startling high, but also that these fairy stories must have been accepted by the

general public. They offered women a way out of an otherwise damning situation. With any aberrant action called into question and the possible threat of a witchcraft accusation resulting from it, it seems like lower class women clung to their fairy lore like the last life preserver on a sinking ship. Purkiss tells us, "Very often in fairy stories, fairies are the only allies a woman has" (101).

It was not without cause, however, that fairy stories were often considered skeptically; the early modern era had a problem coming to a definite decision on whether fairies were good or evil, no doubt exacerbated by the varying accounts given in fairy stories. Regina Buccola describes the dilemma:

In their status as something other than divine or demonic, fairies occupied an ambiguous spiritual zone that gave no clear sense of their moral stature or the effect that interaction with them might be likely to have on a human's spiritual account. Demons occupied a position opposed in a clearly polar way to the Christian God and his angels. It was therefore, doctrinally easy to rationalize the condemnation and execution of the devil's earthly emissary, the witch, and godly work. Fairies, however, posed a problem. Since they were not apparently demonic and had an equally unclear relationship to the Christian paradise and its gatekeepers, good Christians had no hard or fast rule to apply to those who chanced to interact with them or to engage in healing or prophetic work with their alleged assistance. (11)

As witchcraft necessarily includes a woman's pact with the devil, the evil and sin involved is clear. Fairies, however, were too unpredictable in their behavior to warrant the same claim. Emma Wilby writes, "The early modern fairy, [...] was clearly considered capable of malevolence. Fairy nature was believed to span the moral spectrum; some being completely malicious, to be avoided at all costs, and others (a tiny minority) being totally benign" (298). It is clear that although some fairies would occasionally reward or assist a mortal, overall, the early modern fairy

was no Tinkerbelle, despite our modern conceptions of them. Puck himself declares that he and the fairies “run by the triple-Hecate’s team” (*MND* 5.1.375). Hecate, being the triple aspect<sup>4</sup> goddess of witchcraft and being additionally associated with the underworld, does little to boost the fairies’ good reputation. These were nightmare creatures for early modern England, superstitiously referred to as “the Good People” or “the Good Neighbors” in the hopes that the creatures would then behave neighborly. In general, one would hope to avoid rather than encounter fairies for their malicious pranks seemed to outnumber any sudden windfalls.

For this reason, fairies and fairyland in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras became associated with liminality. They were in-between creatures—not dark nor light, not good nor evil, not holy nor demonic. They were most present at in-between times like dusk and dawn and hid in shadows—darkness made by light. They governed in-between places like the thresholds of homes—the area in-between the outside world and the domestic arena:

Fairies earned a reputation as liminal figures by virtue of their association in the popular consciousness with life transitions. People were considered particularly vulnerable to the ambiguous influence of the fairies at transitional points in their life alteration, such as marriage. Thus, not only did fairies supposedly exist on the border between the human realm and that of the supernatural, but they were also alternately figured as protecting or attacking those who entered liminal zones. (Buccola 42)

During the Jacobean era a stricter Protestant Church deemed fairies completely evil and completely rejected the popular lore associated with them. For our purposes with

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<sup>4</sup> Triple aspect in religion refers to any being who is composed of or represents three different ideas or disciplines. Much like the Christian Trinity is composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Hecate is often seen with three heads: a dog, a horse, and a lion, as well as presiding over birth, life and death.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we will concentrate on the liminal power of their popular lore more in line with the Elizabethan mindset, around 1590-1600, when *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* was first being performed and belief in fairies was not overtly condemned by the Church.

## CHAPTER TWO

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Puck—Playful Pixie or Patriarchal Pawn?

Even with all their suspicious behavior and apparent disregard for human emotions or will when they conflict with their own sexual needs, as evidenced by Oberon and Titania's many alleged dalliances with mortals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fairies in popular lore were still considered to be guardians of true love matches. Minor White Latham writes:

If they were true lovers, he (Robin Goodfellow) took a tremendous interest in their affairs, in which he meddled until he brought about a happy consummation. So well known were his match-making instincts and his devotion to the cause of true love that his endeavors in this regard were recognized as one of his functions. (249)

This would seem to serve our purposes well in the examination of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where two sets of lovers spend the night in the Athenian forest with the fairy kingdom assisting every "Jack" to find the correct "Jill." Our two "Jills," in addition to trying to marry the men they desire, are trying to do it in a manner completely antithetical to the patriarchal standards of womanhood. Hermia, who has been ordered by her father and Theseus, Duke of Athens, to marry her father's choice, Demetrius, has instead chosen to elope with the man of her choice, Lysander. Helena, our second "Jill," was previously promised to the same Demetrius that now pursues her best friend. Rather than demurely accepting the choice of the men and pining in silence, Helena has decided to take matters into her own hands by telling her ex-fiancé of Hermia's elopement, hoping that when he pursues Hermia, she will follow and have opportunity in the woods to somehow win him back. She is well

aware of her improper behavior and chides Demetrius for making her act in such a manner: “Fie Demetrius, /Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex:/We cannot fight for love as men may do; /We should be woo’d, and were not made to wooe” (*MND* 2.21.250-253). Her lamentations are overheard by Oberon, King of the Fairies, who takes a break from his plot to avenge himself upon Titania and calls after her: “Fare thee well Nymph, ere he do leave this grove, /Thou shalt flie him, and he shall seeke thy love” (*MND* 2.1.256-257). Regina Buccola observes, “It is indicative of the liberating spirit of fairyland that Oberon’s initial impulse when confronted with Helena’s lamentation about a promised fight against social structures that limit her ability to pursue the man she wants, is to help her get what she wants on her terms” (71). She goes on to comment about the effect this might have had on audiences:

Many early modern theatergoers considered it possible to interact with an otherworldly fairy realm even as the characters that they watched on stage were supposed to do. Just as those characters found new ways of conducting key aspects of their daily lives—particularly their marital and domestic arrangements—under fairy influence, the audience members watching these plays might well have found in them new ideas about how to order theirs. Such an identification would have had particular resonance for the female members of the audience, since many of the most proactive heroines in these plays have it their way when they have it the fairy way. (40)

But is this actually the case? It would seem in this play then that Oberon is falling in line with the gender inversion ideas concerning popular fairy lore and supporting the women rather than the patriarchy. Theseus mysteriously changes his mind regarding the will of Hermia’s father. Oberon fills the role of true love guardian, and with a few setbacks from Puck/Robin Goodfellow, Oberon’s less-than-reliable servant, the women achieve their desired men on their terms. So is this a triumph of



the female spirit assisted supernaturally? Do the women triumph over the patriarchy? I argue here that the answer is clearly and unfortunately no.

Although Oberon truly does seem to serve the women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this is still a Shakespearean comedy, and as such, must move toward marriage and the promise of reproduction. These institutions greatly supported patriarchy since they require women to fulfill their God and socially determined roles as wives and mothers. Buccola truly believes that Oberon is serving the needs of the mortal women, arguing, "Although Titania is drugged for the duration of the play, as soon as he has dispensed with this utterly ungovernable wife, after all, Oberon places himself at the disposal of the desperately lovelorn Helena, chasing the object of her desire through the fairy wood with no mortal guardian in sight" (61). She argues that Helena's quest to win Demetrius back is a powerful act, especially as she has the King of the Fairies assisting her in winning her man on her terms. Although Oberon does intervene on the part of Helena, he is by no means doing "woman's work" or even truly assisting her. The actions of Oberon, through Puck as his emissary, have the end result of eliminating that female power by ultimately severing the women's bonds with each other.

Shakespeare begins his play with a foreshadowing of the destruction of the female power bases to come.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to imagine a more effective example of

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<sup>5</sup> As Annaliese Connolly writes:

Critics such as Shirley Nelson Garner and Louis Montrose have argued that the marriages which mark the culmination of the play's action can only take place once the women of the play have submitted to patriarchal control and the bonds

destroying a female power base than removing a warrior queen from a tribe of all-female warrior sisters. This is the image with which Shakespeare opens his play. In the very same scene, then, Hippolyta must watch as Hermia is dragged in by her father Egeus, and threatened with death if she does not marry the man of his choosing. She also must watch as her husband-to-be agrees:

He utterly supports Egeus as a patriarch, telling Hermia:  
To you your Father should be as a God;  
One who composed your beauties; yea and one  
To whom you are but as a forme in waxe  
By him imprinted; and within his power  
To leave the figure, or disfigure it: (*MND* 1.1.51-53)

As a ruler, he will enforce the law, which gives Egeus control over Hermia's sexuality and embodies patriarchal order. (Garner 132)

Even Theseus' overbearing the father's will at the end of the play is not all it seems. It appears that Theseus has had a change of heart and has decided to grant Hermia her choice in defiance of her father's will and perhaps even to please his new Amazon bride, but from a patriarchal standpoint, Theseus is making the best choice for the perpetuation of his kingdom. There can be no children, no increase from a motherless family with a daughter who must die if she does not submit to her father's choice. Her second option of becoming a 'barren sister' leads to the same fate: no continuation of the male family line and no increase to Athens. Theseus' choice is clearly the best choice for him to perpetuate his kingdom.

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between them have been broken. This pattern is established in the opening scene of the play, with the preparations for Theseus' marriage to the Amazonian Queen Hippolyta. Hippolyta's identity as an Amazon immediately raises the vision of an alternative social order, a world where the tenets of patriarchy are inverted. (Connolly 143-144)

Hermia and Helena begin the play as best friends since childhood. Just as Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*, their bonds with each other are stronger than the natural bonds of sisterhood. Helena has a long and lyrical speech in the middle of the chaos of the forest to describe just how strong this bond is:

We, Hermia, like two Artificiall gods,  
Have with our needles, created both one flower,  
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,  
Both warbling of one song, both in one key;  
As if our hands, our sides, voices and mindes  
Had been incorporate. So we grew together,  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet a'union in partition  
Two lovely berries molded on one stem,  
So with two seeming bodies, but one heart,  
Two of the first life coats in Heraldry,  
Due but to one and crowned with one crest. (*MND* 3.3.434-448)

This is a beautiful speech, set apart in the midst of the fighting in Act 3, where both men, under the influence of the love drug “love-in-idleness” are desperately doting upon Helena. Helena, thinking she is the butt of some cruel joke, uses this speech to remind Hermia of their sisterhood, fearing that Hermia too, has joined in the cruel jest against her. The speech emphasizes their closeness. Helena uses the word ‘one’ nine times in the twelve lines she speaks, clearly relating the fact that she and Hermia are not just close, they are as one. They are practically the same person. Hermia, having no idea of what is going on, cannot understand why her best friend has suddenly turned on her. She also has no idea why Lysander, the man she has risked everything for, including her life, suddenly hates her. Only seventy-eight lines after this beautiful, nostalgic portrait of two women who are as one, Helena and Hermia completely turn on each other, calling each other “juggler,” “puppet,” “thief of love”

and “painted maypole,” where before they were “double cherries” and “Artificial gods.” They become so angry that Hermia attempts to physically attack Helena. As we unfortunately still find in our modern sensibilities, the women seem more willing to blame each other for a relationship betrayal than their partner or themselves. The difference here is that after the nightmare of the woods is over, and everyone is coupled with their correct partner, the audience never has the satisfaction of seeing this lifelong friendship renewed. The men, on the other hand, who were willing to kill each other earlier, are now like brothers. Louis Montrose writes:

The maidens remain constant to their men at the cost of their inconsistency to each other. If Lysander and Demetrius are flagrantly inconstant to Hermia and Helena, the pattern of their inconsistencies nevertheless keeps them constant to each other....At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as at the end of *As You Like It*, the marital couplings dissolve the bonds of sisterhood at the same time they forge the bonds of brotherhood. (72)

Rather than helping the women achieve what they want on their terms, Oberon's assistance gets them what they want, but on patriarchal terms, with no female to female bonds to keep them from becoming ideal wives. Although the men speak to each other after they awaken and seem magically to have become life-long friends, the two women, who actually are/were life-long friends get no opportunity to reconcile. After they leave the forest, we never hear either of them speak again. The men are given jolly jibes to make at the play-within-the-play, but Helena and Hermia sit and are silent.

Helena, interestingly, gets her Demetrius, but he is the only lover who is not released from the effects of the love juice. As the fairies were guardians of true love matches, are we to conclude that this outcome is true love? Regina Buccola states

that “The supernatural sympathies in this case are aligned with the pursuer, rather than her victim. Helena’s speech thus presents a vision of a woman successfully pursuing and capturing a man” (70). The speech she refers to is Helena’s act 2, Scene 1 speech where she tells Demetrius:

Run when you will, the story shall be chang’d:  
Apollo flies and Daphne holds the chase;  
The Dove pursues the Griffin, the mild Hind  
Makes speed to catch the Tyger. (*MND* 2.1.239-242)

The speech does indeed present the gender inversion of a woman successfully pursuing a man, but what is Helena’s reality? She must be, and by her silence at the end of the play, we must assume she is, satisfied by a marriage in which her lover/husband is in a constant state of intoxication. Demetrius must live his life under the constant influences of this fairy provided ‘date-rape’ drug, and we, as an audience, never question the validity of the outcome. He states that his love for Hermia “melted as the snow” (*MND* 4.1. 170) and that he now truly loves and wants Helena, but as he is still under the influence of “love-in-idleness,” how much of his claim can be believed? He himself tells us that he is doesn’t know how his love changed: “my good lord, I wot not by what power--/But by some power it is” (*MND* 4.1.168-9), so how can we as an audience trust that what he is saying is what he truly feels? “Jack shall have Jill”—the ends justify the means as long as the ‘right’ couples end up together.

The final “Jack” and “Jill” who end up together are obviously Oberon and Titania. Titania, the queen of the fairies, is an interesting case in this play. Unlike the Athenian women, who have a clearly defined place in the Athenian patriarchal

state, the structure of fairyland in early modern fairy lore always had a queen at the topmost seat. As Buccola notes:

...to an early modern audience, Titania would be the parallel ruler to Theseus. Oberon is merely appropriating her power—temporarily. Read through the lens of popular lore about fairies and the eminence of their queen, the act of defiance in the fairy realm of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not Titania's refusal to relinquish the Indian boy to Oberon, but Oberon's seizure of the boy from a furtively drugged Titania. (72)

Although correct about popular fairy lore and the concept of the fairy queen, Shakespeare added an additional factor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which Buccola overlooks. In pagan/wiccan religions, the male counterpoint of the goddess aspect is known as the god-consort, much as the husband of the Queen of England is known as the king-consort or prince-consort. This clearly acknowledges the greater power of the female figure. However, Shakespeare's depiction of the fairy royalty in this play is unlike any other early modern depiction such as Edmund Spenser's Gloriana. Shakespeare gives Titania a husband—a husband who is clearly titled the King of the Fairies—not surprising in an era which was eager to see their single female monarch married off so that she could produce an heir and perpetuate the monarchy. Titania herself acknowledges his superior rule over hers when Oberon demands the changeling child and she replies “Not for *thy* fairy kingdom” (*MND*2.1.149). By clearly creating Oberon as the supreme ruler of fairyland, Shakespeare not only turns early modern fairy lore on its head, but he also makes Titania the transgressor—by not giving up the boy, she is disobeying her husband, and more importantly, her *king*. As Diane Purkiss states, “It is not, then, just about the taming of a queen. It is about the taming of a fairy queen and hence about

subduing the very dark anxieties generated for masculinity by a female ruler” (180). The relief from anxiety can be observed in Ben Jonson’s pageant *Oberon, the Fairy Prince*, first performed for King James I in 1611. Although still only a prince, as accorded in early modern fairy lore, Jonson writes of him:

Song to Oberon:

The solemn rites are well begun,  
And though but lighted by the moon,  
They show as rich as if the sun  
Had made this night his noon.  
But may none wonder that they are so bright,  
The moon now borrows from a greater light.  
Then, princely Oberon,  
Go on,  
This is not every night. (Jonson 87)

As Queen Elizabeth I was often symbolized by the moon in her early modern iconography, it is clear to see the relief present by men like Jonson at the ascension of a “greater light.”

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the first time Oberon is given the title of King and a wife to go along with it. In prior appearances, such as his first appearance, the pageant *Huon de Burdeaux*, he is referred to merely as a prince and has no marital attachments. Annaliese Connolly notes in “Shakespeare and the Fairy King” that “Shakespeare is unique in providing Oberon with a wife” (131). By giving Oberon rule over the fairy kingdom, it is literally that—a ‘king-dom’, and by extension, it is transformed into a patriarchy echoing that of Athens.

This means that the argument between Titania and Oberon at the center of the play is not Oberon challenging Titania’s authority as queen, but rather Titania challenging Oberon’s authority, not only as her king, but as her husband as well.

Oberon makes it personal in his question “Why should Titania cross her Oberon?” (*MND* 2.1.122), making, as Michael Taylor opines, “Oberon and Titania seem more typical of a husband and wife in the real than in the fairy world” (263). Their argument is a rather petty one on the surface—Oberon wants a changeling child that Titania claims she has adopted from a dead votress of her order. There seems to be no logical reason for Oberon to want this boy, already having a large train of his own, and Titania’s beautiful speech about the memory of her votress clearly depicts the importance of the boy to her:

His mother was a Votresse of my Order  
And in the spiced Indian aire, by night  
Full often hath she gossipt by my side,  
And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands,  
Marking th’embarked traders on the flood,  
When we have laught to see the sailes conceive  
And grow big bellied with the wanton winde:  
Which she with pretty and with swimming gate  
Following (her wombe then rich with my yong squire)  
Would imitate and saile upon the land,  
To fetch me trifles, and returne againe,  
As from a voyage, rich with merchandize.  
But she being mortall, of that boy did die,  
And for her sake I doe reare up her boy,  
And for her sake I will not part with him. (*MND* 2.1.127-141)

The reason that Titania refuses to let him have the changeling child is because of her sense of love and loyalty to the boy’s dead mother. According to early modern patriarchal sensibilities, Titania’s love and loyalty should be to Oberon first, but she has chosen her loyalty to another woman over her duty to him. As Buccola writes:

Titania’s conduct poses a direct challenge to the early modern rubric for the good wife, “chaste, silent and obedient” (*Rewriting the Renaissance*). She neither obeys nor prioritizes her spouse—her friendship with the votaress and



the associated devotion that she has to the votaress' child, the changeling boy, are higher priorities for Titania. (70)

Oberon has to separate Titania from the boy and by extension the memory of the boy's mother in order to re-establish his superior positioning their relationship. Annaliese Connolly explains, "By separating Titania from the changeling boy, Oberon is able to re-establish his control over his wife and distance her from the female community of which she had been a part" (146). Here, just like in the mortal realm, the women must be divided and conquered in order for them to be proper wives for their husbands. Also significant is that in this relationship, just like with Helena and Hermia in act 5, the reconciliation includes a properly silent wife. When Titania is released from the spell Oberon has put her under and asks what has happened, Oberon replies "Silence a while" (*MND* 4.1.92) and then instructs her to call music, which she does. He then asks for a reconciliation dance, to which she complies. For the rest of the play, Oberon speaks at length, and Titania is nearly silent, an enormous change from her earlier disobedient volubility. Michael Taylor wryly comments, "The King and Queen are only reconciled through Oberon's subduing Titania to his wishes, and it seems that masculine hegemony is as traditional in fairy-land as it is in the human world" (263). This comment is even more significant when applied to the play as a whole. The argument between Titania and Oberon which frames the play creates a disharmony in nature, which Titania beautifully describes in act 2, scene 1:

The Spring, the Summer,  
The chiding Autumn, angry Winter change  
Their wonted Liveries, and the mazed world,

By their increase, now knows not which is which;  
And this same progeny of evils,  
Comes from our debate, from our dissention,  
We are their parents and original. (*MND* 2.1.114-120)

The patriarchal harmony restored at the end of the play is not simply between the human and fairy males and females, but more significantly, it extends to the entire world. As Garner concludes, “More than any of Shakespeare’s comedies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* resembles a fertility rite, for the sterile world that Titania depicts at the beginning of Act II is transformed and the play concluded with high celebration, ritual blessing, and the promise of regeneration (127). As it was their fighting which threw Nature into disorder in the first place, Titania’s submission to her lord and husband not only restores patriarchal order to their marriage, but to the entire world, and at last the comedic necessity of regeneration is not only fulfilled by the marriage of the lovers, but Nature herself is fertile again as well.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare gets to have his cake and eat it too. He gets to use the magic of the fairies, but instead of using their magic in the cause of women, he ultimately uses it to support the patriarchy. The fairies are still being true to their folkloric roots, governing over nature, the domestic realm and true love matches, but these matches are brokered at great cost for female to female relationships which undermine the patriarchy. He is able to take the powerful image of the fairy Queen and turn her into a laughable character, relieved to return to her husband after a drugged encounter with a lower-class workman/amateur actor sporting an ass’ head. How is he able to get away with all this? Through the creation of one of his most memorable characters: Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck.

Not that Robin Goodfellow was unknown to early modern audiences. On the contrary, Robin Goodfellow was probably England's best known member of the spirit world, but the Robin Goodfellow that Shakespeare presented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was not the Robin Goodfellow with which early modern audiences were familiar. It was, however, the creation that would remain in the public consciousness until today. Shakespeare's spirit was a new creation, building on his audience's popular lore of the Robin Goodfellow they knew, and adding characteristics of other well-known spirits. As Matthew Woodcock states, "Puck's shifting nature is [...] suggested by the multiple names by which he is known—'Hobgoblin' and 'Sweet Puck' (*Dream* 2.1.140), one carrying malign connotation, the other sounding more benign" (114). One reason behind the multiple names is that originally, they represented three separate spirits. As Harris argues, "Although Shakespeare conflates them, Puck, Robin Goodfellow, and Hobgoblin were separate entities in medieval and early modern English folklore" (351). The other reason for the multiple names is for Shakespeare to demonstrate the duality of the nature of his new fairy—this amalgamation of Robin Goodfellow and Puck. Hobgoblin, the third spirit has alternately been described as "...simply 'the goblin named Hob', which title was a diminutive of 'Robin' and is therefore practically the same as Robin Goodfellow" (Spence 19), and "a non-human creature of the fairy sort, but with more negative connotations" (Johnston 11). For our purposes in examining the dual nature of Shakespeare's creation, however, we will concentrate on the origins of Robin

Goodfellow and Puck since Hobgoblin embodies characteristics of both these other forms. Minor White Latham relates:

When *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was put on stage, there appeared among the fairies Robin Goodfellow, who was given, in the play, two other names also—Hobgoblin and Puck. The “merry wanderer of the night” as he called himself, might well have uttered a protest, had he been able to speak in his real and accepted capacity, both against the company in which he was put, and against the names, especially that of Puck which were bestowed upon him. He was no fairy, if the record of his history before 1594 be true, this was his first inclusion in fairyland. And the term *Puck* or *pouke* was a generic term applied to a class of demons or devils and to the devil himself, with who, before *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he had never been classified. (219)

Robin Goodfellow's non-fairy status is addressed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the anonymous first fairy is not sure who he is at first. Early modern audiences, however, would have undoubtedly recognized him, although perhaps not in the guise Shakespeare presents him. He was undoubtedly the best known and best loved spirit in England, gaining a reputation for helping the poor and underprivileged and delighting in harmless pranks. John Matthews states, “Generally, the victims of his pranks are indeed unworthy people, and despite the anger he causes by his at times outrageous deeds, there is little or no real spite or cruelty in them. Indeed, like Robin Hood, he more often helps the poor at the expense of the rich” (2). He eventually gained the reputation as England's national practical joker. He was included in *Tell-Trothes New Year's Gift* of 1593 as a “merry mate” “who never did worse harm than correct manners, and made diligent maides” (Latham 225), and according to Latham, “Of all the spirits and terrors of the night, he was never known to possess or to make use of any supernatural powers fatal to mankind” (222). On the contrary, Robin Goodfellow's powers seemed to be specifically limited to helping servant women

with particularly onerous and annoying household tasks such as grinding malt and mustard. He also particularly loved to spin hemp, a tedious task which was especially painful. From this task his famous call of “hempen hampen” is derived, which Shakespeare makes use of when his Robin first stumbles upon the rehearsing craftsmen, “What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here/So near the Cradle of the Fairy Queen” (*MND* 3.1.83.-84)? At any rate, Robin Goodfellow received national recognition in England as a good, fun-loving spirit with none of the nightmarish traits expected from many other spirits in the early modern fairy tradition:

Though the presentation of Robin Goodfellow as a member of the fairy race may have gone counter to the accepted canons of folk belief, Shakespeare’s introduction of him among his fairies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* gave evidence both of his knowledge of folklore and of his genius. Of all the spirits who were believed to haunt England, there was not one whom he could have better chose to give a sense of reality to his fairy plot, or to furnish, to an audience, the immediate assurance of boisterous gaiety and of harmless fun. (Latham 221)

Puck, on the other hand, was a completely different matter. As Jonathan Gil Harris relates, “The more malevolent dimension of Puck can be discerned in the origins of his name. ‘Puck’ is related to the Old English word *paecan*, to deceive, and the Gaelic *puca*, a malicious spirit which later became a common term for the devil” (352). A ‘puck’ is the English variant of the Irish ‘pooka’ or ‘phooka’ and the Welsh ‘pwca’, malicious night spirits which share a talent for shape-shifting with Shakespeare’s Puck. Latham writes:

He possessed...the power of transformation and could change his shape to that of any animal or mortal which the exigencies of the occasion demanded, as, for instance, the *The Pranks of Puck*:  
Sometimes I meet them like a man,

Sometimes an ox, sometimes a hound;  
And to a horse I turn me can  
To trip and trot about them round...  
...O'er hedge, o'er lands  
Through pools, through ponds,  
I hurry laughing, ho! ho! ho! (Latham 242)

If one compares this ballad with Puck's speech in act 3, scene 1, the similarities are evident:

I'll follow you, I'll lead you about a Round  
Through bog, through bush, through brake, through briar  
Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound,  
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire  
And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn  
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn. (*MND* 3.1.119-124)

In addition to shape-shifting abilities the pooka of popular lore also shared a love for misleading nighttime travelers. The anonymous first fairy makes reference to Puck misleading people and "laughing at their harm" (*MND* 2.1.36). This was not the playful prank of a Robin Goodfellow. When a pooka led someone astray, it was at peril of one's life. Lewis Spence relates the danger in *The Fairy Tradition of*

*England:*

In the treating of the fairy species in his *Anatomy of Melancholie*, Burton alludes to night-walking spirits who "draw men out of the way, and lead them all night a by way, or quite barre them of the way. These have several names in several places; we commonly call them pucks." This statement at once identifies Puck with 'Jack-o-lantern,' "Will-o-the-wisp" or "Friar Rush," the misleading spirit of ignis fatuus, or wildfire, who, by his shifting light, beguiled travelers into bogs and quagmires. (17)

Bogs and quagmires in England were generally akin to quicksand in other parts of the world and if an unsuspecting man or woman happened into one while wandering off course, chances are that without help, he or she could sink and be lost forever. So

unlike the current reputation of Shakespeare's Puck, that of a harmless "merry wanderer of the night" (*Dream* 2.1.42), the popular lore behind the character is much, much darker and far more dangerous. As Peaseblossom the fairy opines in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* #19: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "I am that merry wanderer of the night? I am that giggling-dangerous-totally-bloody-psychotic-menace-to-life-and-limb, more like it" (p.10:4) (McCullough 23).

So what are we to make of this new creation? Why did Shakespeare piece together this new member of the fairy world when Robin Goodfellow was already so well known and the reputation of the pooka was known to be distinctly opposed to him? Why destroy the spirit of rollicking fun inspired by Robin Goodfellow with the dire threat of bodily harm inspired by the pooka? More significantly, why did Shakespeare use both names for his creature, both in the text, and in the stage directions and speech headings? In both the First Quarto and First Folio editions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, sometimes Robin will enter a scene, but Puck will leave it. Sometimes Oberon will begin a scene speaking to Puck, but Robin Goodfellow will reply. Why this split personality? Although editorial error is always a possibility, a far more interesting consideration is that it done on purpose. Tom Clayton posits:

Is there anything to be made of the separate names and designations? Is the Puck a sinister species given to recalcitrance at best, and Robin an exceptional member with a better nature made evident as such by the use of his name? Or to put that differently, is anything to be made of the uses of "his" multiple names in the play—in the text, the stage directions, and the speech headings? Brooks notes that the "most striking variations [in speech prefixes] are between 'Puck' and some version of 'Robin Goodfellow'." These can readily

be understood as corresponding each to the aspect of the character then uppermost in Shakespeare's mind. (82)

If this is the case, by examining when these shifts take place, we should be able to glean more about the significance behind them. Although Shakespeare shifts between 'Puck' and 'Robin' for the sake of the meter in the text proper, the speech headings and stage directions are telling. Whenever a woman is engaging in aberrant behavior that is not supported by the patriarchy, the speech headings in both the First Folio and First Quarto editions are written for 'Puck'—*not* for Robin. This includes all of the so-called 'errors' that Puck makes in the play—all of which have the end result of destroying powerful female relationships. For example, when we first meet our spirit in act 2, scene 1 during his encounter with the anonymous fairy, he is called Robin in the speech headings, and appropriately so for this light-hearted introduction scene. This is interrupted by Titania and Oberon, destroying nature in their fight over the changeling child, who due to her strong relationship with the boy's mother, Titania refuses to yield to her husband—clearly unacceptable behavior for an obedient wife. After her refusal, she exits with her train, Oberon ominously calling behind her, "Well, go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove/Till I torment thee for this injury" (*MND* 2.1.151-152). His next line is "My gentle Puck come hither" (*Dream* 2.1.153), and suddenly it is not Robin any longer, but Puck that answers. Oberon's entire plan to subdue and torment his wife is to be carried out by Puck. This is not going to be a light-hearted prank. One difference in speech headings occurs in act 3, scene 1, when the mechanicals first meet in the woods to rehearse. In the Folio it is Robin who enters in the stage directions and speaks. However, when Nick Bottom makes the



exit where he is transformed into an ass, it is Puck that makes the exit, causes the transformation and frightens them out of their wits, chasing them about the forest as a hog and a headless bear. In the First Quarto edition, Robin carries out the transformation. However, whether the transformation of Bottom into Titania's monster-paramour is a light-hearted prank played by Robin or a frightening episode produced by Puck, the end result is the same. It is not the transformation of Bottom that destroys Titania's female power base, but rather the love-juice itself, which causes her to transfer her loyalty from her votaress to a monster. Puck, as the character who introduces the love-juice to the play, is responsible for this destruction of female power. As Evans argues, "By helping to make a fool of Titania in much the same way that he earlier deceived lower-class gossips and aunts, Puck briefly undermines Titania's power even as he thereby reinforces the power of Oberon" (114). After Oberon has gained the upper hand and the changeling child through the workings of Puck, it is Robin he calls upon to restore Bottom to his former self and in the end, "Even within the forest, patriarchy is restored as Oberon overcomes Titania's brief rebellion against his wishes and she complies with his request to 'rock the ground' with him in a dance" (Lamb 309).

Hermia and Helena, who go to the forest to gain their men on their own terms, are instead robbed of their power and their friendship with each other by the patriarchal machinations of Puck. In act 2, scene 1—Hermia and Lysander's first scene after their flight from Athens. Lysander, like the male stereotype, has not asked

for directions and they are now hopelessly lost in the woods. They decide to rest for the night, and Lysander takes the opportunity to try a bit of seduction on his intended:

LYSANDER. One turf shall serve as pillow for us both,  
One heart, one bed, two bosomes, and one troth. (*MND* 2.1.320-4)

Hermia is having none of it:

HERMIA. Nay good Lysander, for my sake my dear,  
Lie further off yet, do not lie so near. (*MND* 2.1.324-5)

He tries again:

LYSANDER. O take the sense sweet, of my innocence,  
Love takes the meaning in love's conference  
I mean that my heart unto yours is knit,  
So that but one heart can you make of it.  
Two bosoms interchanged with an oath,  
So then two bosoms and a single troth.  
Then by your side, no bed-room me deny  
For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie. (*MND* 2.1.324-334)

She puts her foot down:

HERMIA. Such separation as may well be said  
Becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid,  
So far be distant, and good night sweet friend;  
Thy love ne'er alter, till thy sweet life end. (*MND* 2.1.339-42)

He finally must give up:

LYSANDER. Here is my bed, sleep give thee all his rest. (*MND*

2.1.345)

From a patriarchal standpoint, Hermia has taken the reins of the relationship.

Lysander is obeying *her*. The gender inversion of the scene is glaringly clear, but this situation is quickly remedied by the entrance of Puck, who 'mistakenly' places the love-juice into Lysander's eyes rather than into the eyes of the intended target,

Demetrius. But is this truly a mistake by patriarchal standards? Let us look at the result of the ‘mistake’. Helena, in pursuit of Demetrius, stumbles into the scene, stumbles upon Lysander and wakes him. Lysander, opening his eyes and seeing Helena, falls madly in love with her, and follows her into the forest, leaving Hermia alone after a speech in which he expresses his sudden hate for her. Hermia, awakening after a nightmare, speaks:

Helpe me Lysander, helpe me; do thy best  
To plucke this crawling serpent from my brest.  
Aye me, for pity; what a dreame was here?  
Lysander looke, how I do quake with feare:  
Me-thought a serpent eate my heart away,  
And yet sat smiling at his cruel prey.  
Lysander, what remoov’d? Lysander, Lord,  
What, out of hearing, gone? No sound, no word?  
Alack where are you? Speake and if you heare:  
Speake of all loves; I sound almost with feare.  
No, then I well perceive you are not nye,  
Either death or you Ile finde immediatly. (*MND* 2.1.431-444)

At this point, due to Puck’s ‘mistake’, Hermia is in her proper patriarchal place—dependent on her man. The two options in her last line—death or Lysander—strongly emphasize this point. There are no other options in her mind. Regina Buccola argues that “Lysander’s ‘transformation’ does not count as such since it was a mistake—he is turned away from Hermia by accident, only to be turned right back again” (71). However, that this is *not* a mistake. The result seems too significant. Upon losing the man she has risked everything for, including her life, Hermia not only becomes completely dependent on him after having control of the relationship only moments before, but later, when Lysander turns on her in hate, Hermia turns on her best friend Helena, blaming another woman for the whole disaster, rather than

addressing the issue with the man who is spewing hate at her. Complete destruction of all the bonds of sisterhood in the play seems like too significant an outcome to be mere mistakes by a playful pixie. Shakespeare uses the dark side of his creation—the Puck aspect—to do the dirty work, divide and conquer the women, and restore patriarchy throughout Athens and Fairyland alike. Shriely Nelson Garner writes, “The cost of this harmony, however, is the restoration of patriarchal hierarchy, so threatened at the beginning of the play. This return to the old order depends on the breaking of women’s bonds with each other and the submission of women, which the play relentlessly exacts” (Garner 139).

Although it is ‘Pucke’ in the speech headings who gleefully watches the women turn on each other in the forest, and ‘Pucke’ as well who wickedly relates the story of his illustrious queen coupling with an ass, completely forgetting the devotion of her votaress, it is ‘Robin’ who Shakespeare calls upon to put everything right after the chaos created by his dark side. In his putting everything right, however, perhaps he shares his alter-egos predilection for livestock as he cements our patriarchal harmony:

Jack shall have Jill  
Nought shall go ill  
The man shall have his mare again,  
And all shall be well (*MND* 3.2.461-2).

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Macbeth*: Witchcraft and Choosing Sterility

With the ascension of James I to the English throne, stricter Protestant edicts, especially those concerning witchcraft, began to sweep across England. Where Queen Elizabeth I had allowed some leniency in religious choice as long as one *looked* Protestant (she was famously described by Francis Bacon as “not liking to make windows into men’s hearts” [Haigh 42]), the Puritans and other Protestant sects saw things in more strictly black and white terms. Fairies, with their grey, liminal, in-between status, had no place in this arena. As Keith Thomas writes, “Fairies could only be good or evil spirits, and of the two possibilities, the latter was much more likely” (Thomas 71). Fairy lore, with its multitude of spirits closely associated with the agricultural and domestic realms, was a little too much like pagan polytheism for Protestant reformers, while Fairyland, not being heaven or hell but somewhere in between, was a little too much like the Purgatory of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus fairies, the old faith and Catholicism were all bundled together as either silly superstitions, or dangerous beliefs. As Maslen relates:

in the fourteenth book of [William] Warner’s digressive epic *Albion’s England* (published in 1606), Robin [Goodfellow] sits naked on the face of a dormant shepherd and laments the good old days of Mary’s reign, when English Catholics everywhere believed in him. “Was then a merrie world with us when Mary wore the crowne/And holy-water-sprinkle was beleeved to put us down.” (Maslen 130)

This is a humorous tale, clearly written to demonstrate to readers the ridiculousness of believing in such silly things as fairies or Catholicism. It was no laughing matter during the reign of King James I however, as numerous Catholic plots (real and

imagined) on the life of the King were ascribed to witchcraft. For example, one of the real ones, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was an attempt to assassinate the King and Parliament by blowing up the building where they all met. This plot, foiled by King James I, was discovered to have been instigated by a group of Jesuits—Catholic zealots. As Gary Wills writes in *Witches and Jesuits*, “Charges of magic, idolatry and witchcraft had long been leveled at the Jesuits in England because of their use of healing relics, icons and exorcisms” (36). These Catholic trappings, scorned as gaudy and sacrilegious by staunch Protestants, were quickly transformed in popular opinion from religious items to vehicles of witchcraft. Icons became false idols, healing relics became totems or poppets (voodoo dolls), used to inflict harm on keepers of the true faith, and the Gunpowder Plot, a political uprising by Catholic zealots, became in the popular imagination something far more insidious: “The Plot’s hatching took place at a Black mass, where hell’s aid was secured by sacrilegious oaths and rites” (Wills 37). Fairy lore, now more and more inexorably entwined with Catholicism, was firmly placed under the umbrella heading of witchcraft. In fact, Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters seem to share the liminality of their fairy kin, “In their early appearances, they are described as ambiguously male or female, on the earth, but not of it” (Neely 57). King James I himself in his book *Daemonologie*, describes fairies in Book three as “the sortes of illusions that was rifest in the time of Papistrie...the devil illuded the sense of sundry simple creatures in making them believe that they saw and harde such thinges as were nothing so indeed” (James I 74). So fairies were now considered not

real, but still visible and evil—illusions created by the devil to deceive the simple folk, like women.

Just as fairy lore was relegated to the feminine, domestic realm, witchcraft too became almost strictly known as a woman's crime. Although men could be and were accused of witchcraft, one was usually guilty by association. Women were deemed responsible for over 90% of the witchcraft incidents in England. King James I clearly relates the reason behind the prevalence of female witches in his *Daemonologie*:

PHI. But before yee goe further, permit mee I pray you to interrupt you one worde, which you haue put me in memorie of, by speaking of Women. What can be the cause that ther are twentie women giuen to that craft, where ther is one man?

EPI. The reason is easie, for as that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it Easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill, as was ouer well proued to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of *Eua* at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine. (James I 43-44)

So who were these women who were considered witches? What kind of women were they? G.B. Harrison brings up an interesting point in his critical introduction to *Daemonologie*. King James I makes use of two ideas: One, “there are twentie women given to that craft, where ther is one man” (James I 43), and two, “said not Samuell to Saull, that disobedience is as the sin of witchcraft?” (James I 5). This is an interesting connection, especially when one considers that the Bible quote actually states “...the sin of *rebellion* is as the sin of witchcraft” (I Samuel 15.23)—a different meaning entirely. Not perhaps a different meaning for a monarch, but for a husband with an unruly wife, the difference is far more useful. Couple this with evidence from Sarah Beckwith and David Underdown in their piece “The Power of Devils and

the Hearts of Men” “The period when witch accusations reach their peak is also the period when local court records disclose ‘an intense preoccupation with women who are a visible threat to the patriarchal systems’ (Underdown 119). The subordination of women is the very principle of good government in the family and in the state” (Beckwith 151), and the conclusion is clear. These were not merely women, these were disobedient women—women who engaged in socially aberrant behavior that did not support the patriarchy, and as such, had to be separated from each other and ultimately destroyed. These were usually women on the outskirts of society—“witches were statistically those at the bottom of the social pile—the old, poor women” (Beckwith 147)—widows and spinsters—women who no longer held any reproductive value to society.

As previously stated, this must have proved a daunting and frightening situation for early modern men. For if women could not be subjects in their families and communities, how would they possibly be subject to God? As Peter Stallybrass writes, “If Kingship is legitimized by analogy to God’s rule over the earth, and the father’s rule over the family and the head’s rule over the body, witchcraft established the opposite analogies, whereby the Devil attempts to rule over the earth, and the female over the family and the body over the head (190). These women were unwilling or unable to fulfill their God-ordained duties as wives and mothers for men, had little or no reproductive value to a patrilineal society, but as women, were still considered sexually insatiable, “The *Malleus Mallificarum* made explicit the reason for female weakness and susceptibility to devils, specifying that ‘all witchcraft come



from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable” (Levin 30). It was therefore concluded that these women were easy pickings for the Devil, who would offer them great powers in exchange for their souls, often sealing the pact with sex.

Not surprisingly, the powers that these new witches were purported to receive were generally based in the realms of growth, fertility and reproduction. Their powers were largely based on disrupting or destroying the natural order. Their actions were believed to stem from jealousy at their lack of fertility and for revenge against the patriarchy that valued fertility in women so highly. Witches were believed to have the power to change the weather, which would disrupt harvest cycles, the power to destroy fruitful crops, and the power to break up relationships between man and wife. Deborah Willis elaborates:

The witch, moreover, is an older woman, usually postmenopausal: beliefs about the witch may also register anxiety about the changes age brings to the female body. It is as if her body encodes maternal rejection of the human child: her womb is no longer fertile, her breast no longer capable of producing milk, she nevertheless can feed a counter-family of demonic imps. Her witchcraft is frequently directed against the children of her neighbors, and almost always against domestic activities associated with feeding, nurturing, or generation. When animals rather than people are targets of the witches’ magic, cattle and the milk they produce are especially likely to be affected. (108)

In his introduction to *Daemonologie*, King James I expresses fear at the effects witchcraft may have on the men of his kingdom:

I say and proue by diuerse arguments that Witches can, by the power of their Master, cure or cast on diseases: Now, by these same reasones, that proues their power by the Devil of diseases in generall, is as well proued their power in speciall: as of weakening the nature of some men, to make them unable for women: (James I xiii)

In a society which depended on potent men and fertile women to perpetuate family lines, especially where the monarchy was concerned, a witch's curse on one's reproductive abilities or on one's children was tantamount to a death warrant. England had just dealt with an unproductive monarch with their Virgin Queen, Elizabeth—the loss of reproductive power was a very real fear for early modern England. It was how men continued their dynasties and how women defined themselves in society. If a woman's God-ordained role is being a mother, how can she fill that role if she cannot produce children? Robin Briggs writes:

So the fictions of witchcraft dramatized the most basic concerns of early modern people, those about reproduction and fertility, and the most fundamental relationships, those between mothers and children. The witch was the ultimate bad mother, who killed children, caused other women to miscarry, and might even sacrifice her own offspring to do it. (270)

Robin Briggs' own mother, K.M. Briggs summarizes this very succinctly, "Black magic is the magic of sterility" (80).

This early modern fear of sterility is echoed in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Having once attained the crown by his murder of Duncan, as the Weird Sisters foretold, Macbeth spends the rest of the play attempting to secure his own power on the throne by destroying anyone else who might threaten his kingship. The witches have told him that although he himself will be king, the sons of his friend Banquo will someday be kings. Macbeth immediately believes that this means that he will have no children to carry on his monarchy, and herein lies his tragedy. As Paula Berggren states:

The comic world requires childbearers to perpetuate the race, to ensure community and continuity; the tragic world, which abhors such reassurances,

consequently shrinks from a female protagonist. Such women as exist in tragedy must make their mark by rejecting their womanliness, by sublime sacrifice, or as midwives to the passion of the hero. We wonder how many children Lady Macbeth had only because she has dismissed them as an irrelevancy in her life. The curse of tragedy is to be barren; the salvation of the comic is fecundity. (19)

Although I highly disagree with Berggren's assumption that Lady Macbeth has dismissed children from her life, we will return to that issue further on. She states, as was earlier stated in the discussion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that comedies must end in fertility, with the additional caveat added earlier that the female power bases must be eliminated in order to achieve a true happy ending. This must, of course, be carried over into our discussion of tragedy. A tragedy, by extension, ends in sterility, and I posit, with the female power bases intact, and that is the situation found in *Macbeth*. If the witches are a representation of sterility, the fact that Macbeth places such stock in their predictions and embraces them rather than destroying the power base of their coven, means that he has actively chosen sterility over the possibility of new life. Macbeth's tragedy is that he does not divide and conquer the power base created by the Weird Sisters, and therefore destroys his own chances for immortality.

Shakespeare's Weird Sisters reflect the same fears that early modern society had with regard to witchcraft. They fit nowhere in the patriarchal world of Scotland, and as Mary Dellasega observes, "They reject conventionally feminine characteristic roles and they reject patriarchal values—in fact, they reject society altogether and live apart from it, as outcasts, forming their own feminine circle" (9). The circle they have formed, their coven, is located outside the established society of Scotland and as

such they are under no masculine authority. In fact, they appear to have the power to destroy patriarchal structures, as observed by Mark Burnett, “Disempowering abilities are their strength, and this is suggested when the first witch vows to estrange the Master of the Tiger and his wife, undermining the institution of marriage, one of the foundations of the contemporary social order” (9). Their lack of maternal characteristics are reflected in the ingredients of their cauldron, “Finger of birth-strangled babe,/Ditch-delivered by a drab” (*Macbeth* 4.1.30-1). These were women to be turned over to witch-hunters or local magistrates, who, in the best interest of all in the community, would break up the coven and the female power base therein contained. Macbeth, significantly, does not behave in this proper patriarchal manner. At first, as related by Holinshed, Macbeth and Banquo laugh at their visit by the witches, giving no credence to their powers of prediction:

Herewith the foresayde women vanished immediately out of theyr sight. This was reputed at the first but some vayne fantastical illusion by Makbeth and Banquho, in so much that Banquho woulde call Makbeth in jeste kyng of Scotland, and Makbeth againe would call him in sporte likewise, the father of many kings. (Briggs 237)

It is not until one of the predictions coincidentally comes true that Macbeth gives the sisters any credence, and it is from his belief in them that they truly gain power. As K.M. Briggs claims, “*Macbeth*’s witches, whether human or supernatural, can tempt him only where he is predisposed to temptation. Over Banquo they have little power” (78). By extension, the witches only have power over Macbeth because he allows them to do so. It is his striving to make their words true or to prevent them from

being true that starts him on his campaign of murder and leads to the play's and Macbeth's sterile ending.

But what exactly do the witches say to Macbeth that sets him off on his killing spree? What evidence is there textually to suggest that the Macbeths cannot have children? There is *none*. The only statement the witches make regarding future issue is the Third Witch's line to Banquo in act 1, scene 3, "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none" (*Macbeth* 1.3.67). Macbeth has no reason to believe that he cannot have children. His wife, Lady Macbeth is fertile, as she tells us in her famous line, "I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (*Macbeth* 1.7.54-55), and as for Macbeth himself being fertile, as Julie Barmazel observes, "the dominant early modern belief [was] that barrenness was ...the fault of the woman" (119), so we have therefore no reason to believe that Macbeth could not produce children. Macbeth also expresses his appreciation for his wife's hardened resolve to kill Duncan by telling her to "Bring forth men-children only/For thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males" (*Macbeth* 1.7.72-7). Janet Adelman observes, "Her children would necessarily be men, composed of her male mettle, lacking the female inheritance from the mother that would make them vulnerable" (115). The Macbeths are fantasizing about an immortal family line—strong children to carry on their legacy—so why aren't there any? As the head of any institution knows, be it a lower-class family or a kingdom, the best and easiest way to cement one's patriarchal dynasty is to have sex with one's wife and produce children—as many as possible. Macbeth does not do this. Instead, he does the opposite—he draws away from his

wife, embraces the prophecies of the cold, sterile witches, and kills others' offspring for fear they will steal his crown. As Joan Larsen Klein writes, "He exchanges the fellowship of his [badly wounded] marriage to Lady Macbeth for union with the weird sisters. He exchanges his hopes for men-children born to his wife for the grisly finger of a birth-strangled babe and tormenting visions of the crowned children of other men" (243). His murder of Macduff's family is especially notable, as he has no reason to fear Macduff. His fear arises from the witches' apparition telling him to "Beware the thane of Fife" (*Macbeth* 4.1.72), but no reason is ever given. Upon discovery that Macduff has fled to England, out of his reach, he plots:

From this moment  
The very firstlings of my heart shall be  
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,  
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done.  
The castle of Macduff I will surprise  
Seize upon Fife, give to the edge o'the sword  
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls  
That trace him in his line. (*Macbeth* 4.1.146-153)

His goal is to end Macduff's patrilineal line by slaughtering his children and his wife Lady Macduff, notably the only actively fertile woman in the play. Yet no matter how many children or fertile women he destroys, his actions only lead to death for others, not for immortality for himself. His decisions have left him with, "a barren scepter in my gripe" (*Macbeth* 3.1.61). Up until the very end, he desperately clings to the ambiguous words of the witches, blaming them for his "barren scepter", an ineffective phallus, when in reality, it was his own choices all along which led to his sterile fate. Sinead Cusack, a Royal Shakespeare Company actress famous for her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, astutely observes the fruitlessness of Macbeth's path:

Lacking children, the Macbeths' energies redirected themselves into obsessions that travestied creativity: [he] killed other people's children turning the kingdom into a wasteland. But when [he] discovered what it meant to hold a barren scepter, their childlessness doubly mocked [him]. There could be no success without succession. (57)

Critics are always eager to malign Lady Macbeth for her lack of femininity at the beginning of *Macbeth*. Mark Burnett writes, "Implicit in such opinions is the assumption that Lady Macbeth can only be a 'woman' if she obeys the laws of convention, that she shocks because she deviates from norms of conduct, and that she is redeemed because she shows herself as 'feminine' in the final scenes" (1). As an audience, we rejoice to find Lady Macbeth's lost femininity in her insomnia-fueled madness, but if one examines her story, it becomes clear that she actually does "obey the laws of convention" that her patriarchal society expects of her. It is her opening scenes, prior to the murder of Duncan that give her the unfeminine reputation that tends to bleed over into the rest of her story. It is indeed true that she attempts to do away with her woman's weakness in act 1, scene 5:

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! Make thick my blood,  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts  
And take my milk for gall, you murdering 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!' (*Macbeth* 1.5.41-54)

Knowing, upon the receipt of Macbeth's letter, that he is already entertaining the thought of murdering Duncan, Lady Macbeth seeks, not to become a man, but to be rid of the weakness that she considers feminine and to be bolstered with the masculine cruelty necessary to commit the murder. She does not seek to deny her fertility—and her references to her milk and her blood, both symbols of her ability to produce children demonstrate that she still *is* fertile—but she seeks to deny her maternity, which she considers a feminine weakness. It is a bastion of life, not death.

Unfortunately for her, her invocation of spirits goes unanswered. As Joan Larsen Klein observes, “She says she would dash out the brains of her suckling child. She thinks of wounding with her keen knife. But she has no child and cannot murder the sleeping Duncan. She begs to be unsexed, but is never able to assume in fact what she believes is the masculine attribute of “direst cruelty” (*Macbeth* 1.4.41)” (243). Her invocation of spirits and her desire to be “unsexed” put us in mind of the witches, who also engage similar activities considered aberrant by society. The difference here, however, is that Lady Macbeth lacks the power and acceptance of a coven. Aberrant behavior is no longer as significantly aberrant if it is accepted with the support of a group behind it. The Weird Sisters have no qualms about using the corpse of an unbaptised child in a potion, or destroying a marriage, or giving an ambiguous prediction that brought about the murder of a king. They have removed themselves from the society that condemns this sort of behavior and have created their own circle of power where such behavior is normal and accepted. Lady Macbeth is firmly entrenched in patriarchal Scotland and significantly has no women



around her until her mad scene, and even that gentlewoman has no direct contact with her. Klein states:

Unlike Portia or Desdemona or even Macbeth himself, Lady Macbeth was never seen with friends or woman-servants in whose presence she could take comfort. Even when she appeared in company, she was the only woman there. Consequently, once she begins to lose her husband, she has neither person nor occupation to stave off the visitings of nature. All she has is time.(247)

Lady Macbeth's behavior, aberrant or not, is constantly framed by the patriarchy in which she functions. When she attempts to be active in the killing of Duncan:

The recollection of her father stimulates in her a frightened response to Duncan; she admits: 'Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done't' (*Macbeth* 2.2.12-3). Critics quote these lines with an enthusiasm which borders upon relief—finally the woman in the unwomanly Lady Macbeth is glimpsed. In fact, her comment only reinforces an awareness of her oppression by patriarchy: at the crucial moment, the law of the father intervenes, insisting on filial obedience; a dim memory stirs and Lady Macbeth is paralyzed. (Burke 14)

Lady Macbeth is unable to escape the dictates of the patriarchy in which she was raised and now must live. Without the strength of a coven, a powerful support group of women, to support her aberrant actions, her roles must be restricted to the patriarchally ordained ones of wife and mother.

It is Lady Macbeth's restriction to these roles that eventually lead to her undoing. If her husband, as argued, chooses the sterility of the witches over the fertility of his wife, Lady Macbeth has already been robbed of one of her socially ordained roles. She can never be a mother. As for a wife, as soon as the murder of Duncan is committed, Macbeth begins to pull away from her. As Klein observes, "After the murder of Duncan, there is almost no husband to speak of...After the

murder of Banquo, Macbeth is wholly dominated by self: ‘For mine own good/All causes shall give way’ (*Macbeth* 3.4.135-6)” (244). Lady Macbeth constantly tries to be a part of what Macbeth is doing and thinking—to be his ‘partner in greatness’ (*Macbeth* 1.5.11) and a helpmate, but he refuses to let her participate, “Be ignorant of the knowledge, dearest chuck/Till thou applaud the deed” (*Macbeth* 3.4.44-5). He has again chosen his own path, embracing the witches and their words over his wife, denying her her second pre-ordained role, “As soon as Macbeth abandons her company for that of the witches, Lady Macbeth is totally alone. In fact, Macbeth’s union with the witches symbolizes the culmination of Lady Macbeth’s loss of womanly social roles as well as her loss of home and family” (Klein 247). Robbed of both of her socially ordained roles, there is nothing left for her to be—she becomes nothing.

Now completely indefinable in regards to her society, Lady Macbeth tumbles into madness. It is interesting to put together the shreds and patches of the events that Lady Macbeth is reliving in her sleepwalking state. She is doubtlessly reliving moments of extreme guilt, as illustrated in the lines “Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (*Macbeth* 5.1.44-5) and “Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!” (*Macbeth* 5.1.55-7), but more significantly, her words reflect the times when she actually was Macbeth’s “dearest partner in greatness”—when she was his wife and when he still treated her as such, “In her madness, Lady Macbeth searches for her role as her husband’s partner in greatness, for her role as the voice of violence and

comfort, piercing logic and reassuring calm. Macbeth's search for power as offered to him by the Weird Sisters has taken that role away from her" (Alfar 193). Lady Macbeth's last words are not indicative of any guilt on her part, but rather, the caring words of a wife comforting, *mothering* her husband after a horrible nightmare, "Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed" (*Macbeth* 5.1.74-5).

Once her husband abandons her, Lady Macbeth, having no further role in society, literally becomes nothing and has no further reason for being. It is also interesting to discover that in her ramblings, she mentions and mourns for the only other regular woman in the play—Lady Macduff: "The thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?" (*Macbeth* 5.1.47-8) It is significant that here she mourns the loss of a woman who, like herself, has had her societal roles destroyed by Macbeth's futile search for immortality—a woman who perhaps could have been a companion or support for Lady Macbeth—a sister from which to gain the power to endure. Lady Macbeth's fate, however, is to die alone and unseen, the cry of offstage, unseen and unnamed women marking her passing into nothing.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Winter's Tale: Building a Better Patriarchy Through Witchcraft*

Thus far, it is observable that, as Shakespeare presents them, fairy magic is a construct which supports patriarchy, while witchcraft, with its curse of sterility, is a construct which undermines patriarchy. Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, then, is a puzzling case as the patriarchy is undermined not by any present witchcraft, but by the patriarch himself. Leontes, king of Sicilia, needs no prodding by witches as Macbeth does to bring an end to his dynastic line. In fact, it is his refusal to listen to the prophetic voice that curses him. After a mere one hundred lines of dialogue after his first appearance, Leontes has convinced himself that his pregnant wife Hermione is an unfaithful strumpet, and by act 3, scene 2 has condemned her and their newborn daughter to death. Even after the Oracle at Delphi proclaims Hermione innocent, the king refuses to believe it, as Rosenfeld asserts, "When Leontes fails to heed the prophetic voice, it destroys his legitimate issue, and the paternity he longed to prove" (103). The oracle gives no ambiguous statement from which the monarch can glean what he likes. It clearly tells him:

Hermione is chaste: Polixenes blameless: Camillo a true subject:  
Leontes a jealous tyrant: His innocent babe truly begotten: and the  
King shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found. (*WT*  
3.2.133-137)

It is Leontes' refusal to believe the truth of the oracle that condemns his wife and baby girl to death. The news of this reaches the king's only son and heir Mamillius, who "with mere conceit/and fear Of the Queen's speed" (*WT* 3.2.144-5) dies of grief. Although witchcraft accusations are many in *The Winter's Tale*, and some are

justified since the women do engage in aberrant behavior unsupported by patriarchal norms, it is not any ‘witchcraft’ on their parts that brings about the fall of the patriarchal system. It is rather Leontes’ (and Polixenes’, the other patriarch) male anxiety at being unable to control the three women—all of whom are in liminal periods of their lives and as such have powers that the men are unable to understand or circumvent. In *The Winter’s Tale*, unlike our other plays, the women use their power to restore the patriarchy. However, once they have restored it, the patriarchs must separate the women and silence them in order to divide their power. Any group of women who are able to restore a male based power structure when the men are unable to do it themselves are clearly too powerful to stay together, as Schalkwyk affirms:

Among Jacobean plays *The Winter’s Tale* is remarkable for the extent to which both truth and power are invested in women. This is an inversion, a form of carnival or grotesque, that might itself have been designated a form of enchantment. The play stops far short of maintaining such power in the bodies and words of women, however... The prerogative—pertaining to the monarch and the father—of enunciation and endorsement thus returns to patriarchy through the intervention and ultimate repression of female potency, along with the power to command silence. (267-8)

Patriarchy by definition is rule by the father, and as such, needs children, preferably sons, to perpetuate it. It is ironic then, that men must be completely reliant on women to keep their family lines pure. Women, who were believed to be sexually insatiable, easily prone to seduction and as Leontes relates, liable to “say anything,” had to be relied upon to be honest in word and deed regarding the future of their husband’s dynastic line; no wonder men were plagued with doubts and jealousies. As David Schalkwyk writes:

This uncertainly causes Leontes to brood upon the horrific instability of social relations that literally depend upon something as shifting and insubstantial as a woman's word. Babies must look like their fathers because that is the only palpable place to discern the male line. And this line, as the opening scene of the play makes clear, is of crucial political importance. If such a likeness is not palpable, one has to take the mother's word for paternity. (245)

While a husband could be in control of his wife and children, pregnancy was an area where men lacked control. Leontes begins to doubt Hermione when he sees her friendliness towards Polixenes (which he demanded she show) and couples it with the fact that Polixenes has been visiting for nine months. Hermione, who had been silent until Leontes bid her to talk, is so witty and voluble in her convincing Polixenes to stay, that perhaps, since volubility in mouth was equated with openness in other orifices, Leontes is not unjustified in his worry by early modern standards. Men had to rely on children looking like them to establish any sort of legitimacy apart from a woman's word. As Karpinksa states, Leontes "has no guaranteed method of knowing the legitimacy of the children born into the marriage—the swelling of the female body seems to occur separately from immediate sexual contact with him" (11). More frightening is that while she is pregnant, Hermione can make him a cuckold and he has no way to tell. Michelle Ephraim explains, "Polixenes' nine-month visit certainly raises the possibility that Hermione's child is his. But the more provocative situation... is that Hermione has physically consummated her desire for Polixenes while pregnant with Leontes child, thus producing no bastard issue and leaving no perceptible trace on the body" (46). Women literally had their husband's entire family purity in their power, and that kind of power in any woman was enough to have men in high places crying 'witch'.

The three women in *The Winter's Tale* all have witchcraft accusations leveled at them by patriarchal leaders, and significantly, just like the members of the fairy kingdom and the witches in *Macbeth*, they are all liminal figures—they inhabit an in-between stage of life. As Monika Karpinski agrees:

At certain transitional points women are in an in-between stage in reference to patriarchal norms—when they are maidens, they are not quite wives, when they are pregnant, they are not quite mothers, and when they are old crones, men cannot be sure what they are because they are no longer beautifully bewitching or reproductively useful. Women at these three key phases seem to embody a power greater than themselves; they seem to have knowledge that escapes the rational framework of males and that connects with the natural world in an almost uncanny way. (1)

Perdita, Hermione and Paulina all inhabit these liminal spaces and each engage in aberrant behavior according to the patriarch hurling the witch tag, but are they actually witches? As examined previously in *Macbeth*, popular culture saw witches as “trapped in an aging, doomed body, envious of fertility and the substantiation of self that sexual love and child-bearing promises, they turned to demonic powers to counter despair and act[ed] out of spite” (Farrell 161). Our three women are clearly not witches of this type. So what are they being accused of?

Perdita, our maiden, is condemned to burn with her mother as a witch when she is a newborn. Leontes believes that the child is not his, and tainted by Hermione, must be destroyed. Instead, she is abandoned on the shores of Bohemia by Paulina's husband, Antigonus. Antigonus is then famously dispatched by a bear—Nature's revenge for an unnatural act. She is raised in Bohemia as a shepherdess and catches the eye of Florizel, prince of Bohemia and son to Polixenes, who disguises himself as a shepherd and attempts to marry Perdita without his father's consent. Polixenes, also

disguised, discovers the deception of his son and disrupts the wedding and their harvest festival, accusing Perdita of witchcraft:

Female demonization seems antithetical to the harvest dance, but Polixenes molds Perdita into the evil witch: “And thou fresh piece/Of excellent witchcraft, who of force must know/The royal fool thou cop’st with—(*WT* 4.4.424-6). Her youthful beauty’s ‘enchantment’ lures Florizel into the witches’ den of marriage below his class. (Rosenfield 103)

Instead of following his father’s will and marrying an appropriate woman in his own class, Florizel chooses to remain with Perdita, even being willing to forfeit his birthright and as such, ending his father’s dynastic line. Even though Florizel himself makes this choice out of love for Perdita, Perdita still receives the blame, her innocent beauty being likened to witchcraft. However, these accusations are hurled at her while she is significantly appareled as Flora, the goddess of flowers at a harvest festival. Both her costume and the festival itself are celebration of fertility and life. Kirstie Rosenfield observes, “He (Polixenes) calls upon popular witchcraft belief, painting her as the social-climbing, sexually deviant, order-threatening female. Perdita, however, is already firmly associated with the natural order, likened to the fertility Goddess Proserpina, she presides over the rustic feast” (103). This is a woman in the bloom of youth and maidenhood, depicted as a fertility goddess. Polixenes has nothing but sterility and the end of his family line to look forward to because he chooses to disown his son. The fault however, is not Perdita’s, although she receives the blame. Polixenes projects his anger onto Perdita until he realizes her true status as princess of Sicilia and then he has no complaints. Perdita does not equal sterility for the kingdom of Bohemia, Polixenes’ entrenchment in his patriarchal



beliefs does. It is clear in this case that the witchcraft is only perceived by Polixenes and projected onto Perdita. Shakespeare has created her as symbol not of sterility, but of the potential for fruitful new life. As Patricia Southard Gourlay writes, “Her innocent sexuality is life-creating; it is the antidote to her father’s barrenness. When Perdita returns, Leontes welcomes back into his world the creative and fertile power of Venus” (271).

Deborah Willis writes in her “Shakespeare and the English Witch Hunts”, that “Witches were women...because women were mothers” (99). Black magic witches are associated with the bad mother, the malevolent mother, who kills children and uses their parts for spells and who nurses devils from her poisonous breasts. When accusing Hermione of witchcraft, Leontes makes it very clear what kind of witch/mother he believes her to be, as Kirstie Rosenfield discovers in her piece, “Nursing Nothing: Witchcraft and Female Sexuality in The Winter’s Tale”:

Leontes germinates a vision of her as a witch. He stresses the importance of Mamillius’ freedom from breast feeding; the child whose very name suggests his connection with her breast, was not fed from it. “Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him/Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you/Have too much blood in him” (*WT* 2.1.56-58). The male child must be protected from the consuming power of the witch-mother’s milk, while the blood of the patriarch must be kept pure... (99)

The nurturing breast as the font of pollution is another reversal of the maternal image that Leontes uses to describe his innocent queen. It is his anxiety over his inability to control the feminine mysteries of nursing and childbirth that compels him to accuse his wife of dark arts and imprison her, even while she is heavy with child. The stress of the accusations of witchcraft and the threat of a trial and execution cause Hermione

to go into labor early and deliver in prison. This too, does little to help Leontes' anxiety, as Rosenfield goes on to explain, "Leontes can banish his wife to give birth in prison, but once she is there, he cannot prevent the prison from becoming the secret chamber of birthing over which he has no control" (100). Of whatever mysteries Leontes believes his wife guilty, however, witchcraft is not one of them. If witchcraft, again, is concerned with sterility and bringing about the end of a patriarchal line, Hermione and her heavily pregnant, fertile body, is not the field in which to plant this seed. Just as Perdita's maiden body is a symbol for the potential of new life, Hermione's body is the symbol of that potential come to fruition. These women are fertility symbols, not the withered, bitter hags of popular culture. Even after the sixteen years hiatus when the Oracle's prophecy comes into being with Perdita's return to Sicilia, restoring Leontes lost line, which gives her further weight as a fertile symbol, and Paulina presents Leontes with a 'statue' of Hermione which miraculously comes to life, Hermione's reanimation is representative of rebirth and new life. Marina Warner writes, "The animation of statues recurs as a motif both in the practice of magic and in stories about the magic arts: it is the fundamental metamorphosis of lifelessness into vitality, the governing metaphor of generation in rhythms of human origin" (318). Shakespeare uses Hermione as a life symbol twice: first in her pregnancy and the birth of Perdita, and second, with the reanimation of her statue—her own rebirth. It is significant as well that she does not speak to Leontes upon their reconciliation. When she reanimates, she reanimates into a proper patriarchal wife, chaste, silent and obedient and ready to resume her role in society.

We observed this phenomenon with Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, their act five silences signifying their readiness to enter the patriarchal system as proper wives. Hermione, rather than being completely silent like Helena and Hermia, however, does speak to her lost daughter Perdita:

You gods, look down  
And from your sacred vials pour down your graces  
Upon my daughter's head! Tell me, mine own,  
Where hast thou been preserved? Where lived? How found  
Thy father's court? For thou shalt hear that I,  
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle  
Gave hope thou was in being, have preserved  
Myself to see the issue. (*WT* 5.3.121-8)

Shakespeare, perhaps appropriately, does not allow Hermione to speak as a wife, but her speech to her daughter as a mother shows her readiness to fulfill her other preordained role of mother. Her voice here, emphasizes not only the reanimation of herself, but of her family line as well. This is not a woman of the witchcraft of popular culture. This is a woman of fertility symbolism two times over. Not only that, but by her deference to her husband and her loving speech to her child, she shows her willingness and readiness to be reincorporated into the patriarchal society according to her preordained roles. With Hermione and Perdita reunited, we now have two powerful female fertility symbols on stage together.

This brings us to Paulina. Of the three women accused of witchcraft, Paulina is the only one who actively embraces the role, and Shakespeare makes her the heroine of the play. She is not, however, the sterile hag that we have previously discussed, regardless of what Leontes calls her—and he runs the gamut of foul names for her. Already a mother herself (her husband Antigonus speaks of their three

daughters), Paulina acts as Hermione's midwife—an occupation already strongly associated with witchcraft. It gained this reputation due to the exclusion of males from the birthing rooms where the mysteries of childbirth took place. Rosenfield writes:

Women in early modern Europe gave birth under conditions monitored only by other women, therefore childbirth was an inversion of customary gender hierarchies. Pregnancy, birthing, and nursing were instances of temporary but genuine female empowerment...For the birthing woman, her midwife assumes the power of representation, voicing the outcome and witnessing an event which excludes the male. (100)

Paulina attempts to fulfill this role when Hermione is imprisoned and delivers Perdita early. Paulina, as midwife, takes the child to Leontes, who has already disowned it, in an attempt to convince Leontes that his daughter is indeed his. Leontes, upon hearing Paulina declare the child legitimate, accuses her of being one of those women who will “say anything”—“Like other midwives, she has the power to lie about the event she has witnessed” (Rosenfield 100). Paulina, contrary to Leontes' belief, does not lie—in fact, she is almost intolerantly truthful—and significantly, about a lot of things that Leontes does not want to hear. She has the audacity to stand in court and call the king a fool in front of everyone. She refuses to act as the other male courtiers do: “If I prove honey-mouthed let my tongue blister” (*WT* 2.3.33)—she will not curb her tongue or use careful language even when threatened with death. Vociferousness being closely allied with witchcraft, it is not surprising that Leontes hurls a myriad of witch names at her. He calls her a “mankind witch” (*WT* 2.3.66), a “most intelligencing bawd” (*WT* 2.3.67), and a “gross hag” (*WT* 2.3.108). Paulina embraces all these names and never falters in her audacious speech. She refuses to know her

proper place as a chaste, silent, obedient woman. Leontes even threatens Paulina's husband Antigonus with death for his inability to make her hold her tongue, to which Antigonus famously replies: "Hang all the husbands/That cannot do that feat, you'll leave yourself/Hardly one subject" (*WT* 2.3.110-2). In all her vociferousness, however, she never denies the titles Leontes plasters her with. Diane Dixon writes in "Away With That Audacious Lady":

Not merely a mouthy woman, Paulina uses her transgressive words to do good. Such powerful outspoken women have been vulnerable through the centuries to the accusation of witchcraft—and Paulina is no exception. She wonders, "What studied torments" Leontes has in mind: "What Wheels? Racks? Fires? What flaying? Boiling in leads or oils? What old or newer torture?" (*WT* 3.2.175-7) Such means have been used through the ages to silence those who stray outside official systems. (39)

Later in the play, after Hermione's 'death,' Leontes' opinion of Paulina and her vociferousness undergoes a radical change. Where he had previously regarded her as a menace and a witch, he now respects her over his male courtiers as a political advisor. It is in this capacity as advisor that Paulina is able to orchestrate the restoration of the patriarchy and Leontes' family line. Unlike Macbeth who endeavors to bring about the Weird Sisters' predictions through use of his own power, Paulina waits for the Oracle's prediction to come to pass before she reveals Hermione's statue to Leontes. Then, and only then, does she know that all will be well. Her purpose up to that point had been as advisor to Leontes and more significantly, as a 'gadfly' in his ear to keep him from remarrying, as his male advisors have been appropriately advising him to do in order to perpetuate his monarchy and bring about an heir to the kingdom. Rather than listen to his male

advisors, Leontes only listens to Paulina, who exclusively has the king's ear.

However, in the final scene, Paulina's 'witchcraft' does more than elevate her status with the king. Rosenfield writes:

Paulina's shrewishness becomes wisdom, and midwifery takes on a magical aura. The language of the shrew is now the language of prophecy, which becomes a language associated with women. Paulina rejects 'superstition' and 'wicked powers' but casts 'lawful spells'. The witch no longer bears evil and chaos, but presides at Hermione's rebirth. (104)

Paulina's 'witchcraft' has not effectively changed the state of the whole kingdom.

Vociferousness, which previously had made her disobedient and unruly, now makes her a keeper of wisdom. Her midwifery, which was previously a mystery which men tried to control, is now a miracle which men can only absorb and benefit from as Paulina presides at the rebirth of Hermione and resurrects Leontes' lost life.

Witchcraft itself is transformed from something harmful and sterile into something pure, powerful and miraculous and rife with the promise of new life. D'Orsay

Pearson notes that:

As well as being a "mankind witch" and an "intelligencing bawd", Paulina is also a "crone" (*WT* 3.1.77)—surely a misplaced epithet as she is, as the play seems to indicate, no more than 10 years Hermione's senior. But Shakespeare's audience knew "crone" both in its sense of a withered, mischief-making woman and as a worn-out ewe to be culled from the flock, fitting denotations when one recalls the typical defendant in the English trials of the time: old, wrinkled, often senile, and often outcast from the community, venting her frustrations in curses and mischief-making from her neighbors. (201)

Although Shakespeare's audience would have recognized the term 'crone' in the way that D'Orsay explains, the word 'crone' has deeper, more powerful meanings that the audience would have recognized in Paulina's depiction on stage. As the third aspect

of a woman's life, the crone, or widow, or matron aspect is the part which reflects the wisdom of experience—certainly the aspect that Paulina embodies at the end of *The Winter's Tale*, and with Perdita and Hermione reunited with her on stage, the audience would also be presented with the most powerful female symbol in existence:

The text presents the stage as empowering to the female, giving back the words taken from her and legitimizing them through rebirth. The barren widow bears the faithful mother, reuniting her with the maiden daughter. Maid, wife and widow stand in triumvirate, recreating Leontes' lost life and regenerating his future. (Rosenfield 108)

The powerful image represented onstage at this moment is one of a triple aspect goddess. As opposed to dual-nature deities that tend to emphasize 'goodness' or 'badness', the triple aspect deity is comprised of cycles that represent an entire existence. Perdita, Hermione and Paulina represent the full cycle of a woman's life—maiden, mother and matron. (MacLean 15) Hecate, mentioned by Puck in his line regarding the "triple-Hecate's team" is just such a triple aspect goddess, her three phases corresponding to the three stages in a witch's life, as she is the goddess and protector of witchcraft and queen of ghosts. The onstage power goddess symbol recreation is short-lived, however. Almost as though he realizes the enormity of the power symbol in front of him, Leontes, once he regains everything—for which he is truly thankful, "If this be magic/Let it be as lawful as eating" (*WT* 5.3.110-111), completely breaks up the female power base by marrying Perdita to Florizel, reclaiming his lost wife, and strangely out of left field, marries Paulina to Camillo. Diane Dixon posits:

Shakespeare, still caught in the pairing off convention at the end of his romantic comedies, cannot be content to leave Paulina alone in her PMZ

(postmenopausal zeal) power. The relative chaos she releases with her “unbridled tongue” may be contained to some extent as she is married to Camillo. (43)

Paulina’s sixteen year loyalty to Hermione is now transferred as per societal norms to her husband. Even after all her years of loyal service, Paulina is placed under masculine control where she ‘belongs’. The power triad of Maiden, Mother, Crone is subsumed in the patriarchy as Wife, Wife, Wife—no longer a threat to society or to our truly happy ending.



## CONCLUSION

It is surprising to observe just how little has changed in over 400 years of popular culture and entertainment. Nowadays any horror movie that contains a group of powerful women (and it is inevitably a horror movie, not an empowering one) inevitably reveals the group to be a coven of witches. Our fairy “love juice” still exists but would most likely be popularly known as GHB or “roofies.” Just recently, an episode of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* aired an episode in which a pregnant woman and a midwife conspired together to fabricate a conception date to deceive a cuckolded husband. Upon his discovery of the deceit, the deceived man turned to one of the women involved and, much like Leontes, accusingly and significantly called the woman a witch. As long as there are women who challenge the societal norms of any power structure, there will always be those in power who are all too ready and willing to blame their dissention on supernatural means or influences. After all, only the supernatural could prevent a normal, red-blooded man from keeping his woman under control, correct?

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare completely changed popular fairy lore from a female-created and empowered tradition into a system that reflected the prevailing patriarchal norms. By dividing and separating the women's group through the use of fairy magic, Oberon, Demetrius and Lysander achieve submissive, obedient wives at the play's conclusion. In *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters successfully use witchcraft, another female-based power system, to bring about the fall of

Macbeth's monarchy. By allowing the coven to cement their power by remaining together and additionally giving weight to their predictions, Macbeth gives power to their craft and destroys his own chance for immortality. In his quest for power, he spends his time with the sterile witches rather than with his fertile wife and ends the dying with no heir to carry on his reign. Although as demonstrated in *Macbeth*, witchcraft is a power that works against patriarchy, in *The Winter's Tale*, the 'witches' use their supernatural abilities to rebuild the structures that the patriarchs destroy. Once it is re-established, only by breaking up the 'coven' of Paulina, Hermione and Perdita can the men rest easy, secure in the knowledge that the female power base has been successfully split into manageable wifely ideals. Although witchcraft and fairy charms are generally dismissed as harmless superstitions and "antique fables" to our modern sensibilities, perhaps a look at Shakespeare's plays, written at a time where these phenomena were all too frighteningly read can give us a clearer picture of the supernatural perceptions of the day and even more importantly, a clearer view of the most feared power of all: powerful, uncontrollable womanhood.

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